

# The photographic work of russell lee essay examples

[Design](#), [Photography](#)



## **Introduction**

Dust Bowl is a phenomenon, which shows how Mother Nature can be rough and devastating. This is the effect of strong wind blowing strongly low on the ground. It has a lot of dusts and dirt that makes it very dark that you could not even see a thing (Burns). Others even think of what they have done why it is happening, as why is it so dark and so strong that it makes their houses shake while inside the horrifying dark bowl of dirt. People did even think that it was the beginning of the end. It was a scare that dusts entered people's eyes, nose, and lungs that made them suffer with difficulty in breathing. The Red Cross started giving out dust mask to the people who were affected, especially children. And as they normally end up dusting everything, people tried to put some wet blanket in the front doors and windows. They also put on the window shields, but not all dusts were forbidden to enter their homes. They were not able to stop the smallest particles that pass through cracks and thin holes. This kind of phenomenon was unexpected at first; farmers used and abused the land to earn much profit out of this gifted land. It made them greedy that they never thought of something might happen as an end result of their bountiful harvests (Burns).

This made the land dry making their harvest into sufferings. Whirlwinds normally happen during hot dry days. No one noticed that these winds grew thicker, faster and stronger than before. Locals were not prepared for what is going to happen. Topsoil's that took thousands of years to develop only took minutes to be blown away. It was terrible as dusts were everywhere; doors, windows, inside their houses and even in their foods, which they end up dusting. They thought that it was just a rare phenomenon without having the

idea that it is going to be a battle for decades. Mother Nature was beginning to take back what was taken from it, getting back to those people who did not thought of what might happen once drought comes in. Farm animals began to suffer as well when the soil is not producing any crops and grasslands were so dry that thousands of cattle began to starve.

## **Russell Lee's Role in Photography**

“ Farmer pouring feed into trough for pigs, windmill and farm buildings in background. Baca County, Colorado” (Lee, 1939)

Russell Lee took the photo on September of 1939. This photo shows that even though drought has started, this farmer was still trying to live his normal life, as if nothing is happening despite hard times that he and his family experience. The background shows how this land is being affected by drought that eventually led the scare of having the Dust bowl. Farm building was starting to fall down as the dryness of air made it brittle and tested its durability. Baca County, Colorado was one of the affected areas of this horrifying drought. It portrays the period when people need to work harder than the usual as they are having hard time harvesting their crops and feeding their farm animals. This photo also wants to portray that this farmer is thinking on what he can do to survive his family from devastating act of nature, thus, he and his family are not the only ones who were suffering from this problem. It also portrays how animals are being affected and how unfortunate they are not to be aware on what is going to happen in the next few hours, days, or weeks. They may die suffering along with the people who also suffered from dust pneumonia. This kind of scenario may also have been

the reason that some families who were trying to survive decided to move out to another place to see if there will be some better life waiting for them. It shows how the sun burns down the soil and everything on top of it. Farmers were so helpless that they don't know how to stop this problem. The photo also shows that the only thing to survive is to live with it, and do the best that you can.

### **“ Migrant boys in back of auto. Muskogee County, Oklahoma” (Lee, 1939)**

This is another photo by Russell Lee taken June 1939. This pity looking children seem very tired and worried. The photo would like to portray that these children are in pain. Not physical pain, but emotional which they are thinking what is going to happen or if there is anything waiting for them. Their parents decided to move out to a different place in exchange for hope that they will live better without any trouble, safely and far from danger. It tells that they are in the back of auto because their family brought everything that they can to survive to their new place. So, for these poor kids, it's totally fine for them to travel sitting at the back of the auto even if it means traveling would be a sacrifice as long as they obey what their parents' want. The boy seated on the far left seems to be the toughest among the three. It shows that this boy can lead over his two brothers in case something worse happen. The boy in the middle seems to be helpless and in need of more emotional support for he doesn't know what is really going on. It shows that all he knows right at that moment is they need to move out with his family and that there is a possibility that danger will or is currently happening. The boy in the far right looks very careful. He seems to

be the one who is going to be their youngest brother's helping hand, who is willing to be the shoulder that can be leaned upon. On the background, it wants to portray that those are the basic needs of these three boys to start their new lives in their soon to be new home.

### **“ A government official talking to two farmers” (Lee, 1939)**

The third photo was taken August 1939. It shows that these two farmers are in need of help and assistance from the government regarding what is currently happening. These two farmers may have lost their crops and having problems on how they can cope with the challenges that they are facing. This photo wants to show how the government was trying to extend help to their constituents and discussing things that will surely help them bring their livestock back. That was the time when not only the people are facing the problem on how to survive, but also the government who extensively works to help not only by giving them food assistance, but also emotional assistance by reaching out to them. Being exactly where the people are would help government official to decide on what will be the best solution and alternatives that would somehow suffice their needs. The photo still shows how dry the soil is, and next to the people the land itself is also in bad need of help. As an act of nature, the old “ Garden of Eden” turned into dead sand. Dead as the sand in Sahara dessert, and dry as the crops that made these two locals in trouble. The way they listen to the government official, it shows these farmers portray that they are hoping for a better outcome of the grievance they are trying to input to the government official

while he is attentively gathering the information so he can help forming the right solution.

### **“ Women and children socializing outside wooden house” (Lee, 1940)**

Russell Lee took these women and children having a light moment together June 1940 in New Mexico. Despite problems and hard times, this photo portrays that people still live their lives as normal. It seems like these groups of people are aware what is happening in their society, but along with their problems, they still stay positive in a way that they know there is something better will happen tomorrow. Looking at the three children seated beside their mother, it shows by the look of it that they are watching on something that entertains their young minds. This photo would like to tell the audience that if these children were able to survive during their time, given that their way of living was not that wealthy, it means that citizens nowadays has more capabilities to face the problems and challenges. If we are going to compare the way their lives were, we would realize that we are so gifted that many of us did not experienced what they had. On the other hand, women on the photo show the typical housewives that time. They don't usually work for a living and it is their husband who works, as he is the head of the family. The wooden house also portrays the simple living of these people along with the challenges that they had. It also sends a message to the people of new generation that no matter how hard life is, we all should stick together as a whole and to stay positive for our family, while not forgetting to think for the right solution to survive in this world.

## **“ Migrant man working on headlight of auto” (Lee, 1939)**

The fifth photo that I chose was taken July 1939 in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

This piece, though it just shows a man and his auto, wants to interpret many possible things. One thing is that this man obviously had an important reason why he is migrating to another place. Maybe the reason is he was trying to get out of the phenomenon caused by Dust Bowl. Possibly yes, but where is his family? He is just trying to fix his auto's head light so he can move ahead to his destination and it is possible that he doesn't have a son or daughter that's why he's alone. But where is his wife then? Many possibilities are in this photo, his wife maybe one of the unfortunate people who were taken by the dust bowl or maybe his wife already moved out ahead of him. We can say that this man is heading a long way because he was working on his auto's head light and wants to make sure that it will work properly once he hit the road even if it takes him until midnight traveling to his destination. He still not leaving his house yet and showing that his auto is loaded up with things that he needs, it is possible that he has no plans of going back to this place. The way he ducks his head, it looks like he was reflecting and wondering if he was part of the dust bowl phenomenon, he may have also thought if he can survive in this place if he's not going to migrate to a different place. A lot of questions might be rolling around in his mind while working on his auto, questions like “ What went wrong?” “ How am I going to start my new life to a new place?” and finally, “ How long will this is going to happen?”

## **“ Men talking. Weatherford” (Lee, 1939)**

Here is another photo taken by Russell Lee on May 1939 in Weatherford, Texas. This photo shows how Texas was in 1939 when farmers were harvesting huge size of vegetables, like for instance, cucumber that has the same size of a small car. You can see that there is a photo on the trunk of this auto showing gigantic sized vegetable. This portrays that these men are having a quite serious conversation about an important matter. This photo wants to tell its viewer that when there's something wrong, it can be solved if people will spend quality time to discuss it. It is possible that these groups of men are trying to think of some ways on how they can harvest such unbelievably sized vegetable again after the Dust Bowl. It is also possible that they have the photo of huge sized vegetable on the trunk so that they can be inspired to work harder so they can achieve that kind of result again, or they wanted to keep this photo so that they can also show off their accomplishment as a farmer.

## **Conclusion**

These amazing photos were crated and took by Russell Lee, the documentary photographer who was born in Ottawa, Illinois in 1903. His photos were so unique that it captured a lot of people and realized how the world was in earlier year. Being obsessed in photography then became the first instructor of photography at the University of Texas in 1965. His work of art molded and influenced other people to realize how lucky they are. In 1939, he took Migrant Child Returning Home from Fields, Prague Oklahoma that was portraying child labor problems in America during his times. His



works were so renowned and it inspired a lot of photographers to follow his path. He came popular during his times when he was creating a fantastic job in capturing moments that also captured people's heart. Nowadays, not all photographers are able to do what he did as an artist, he was not just taking photos but he serves as an example on how we can help our countrymen in a form of photography.

The situation when drought burned people's hope and dreams was one of the most capturing moments of Russell's photography life. It helped him a lot, not only to take an ideal view for documentary photography, but it helped him spread the information. Those photos act as pieces of information that opened people's eyes about the true situation that was happening during their times. Lee's work of art was not just patronized and recognized, it was even idolized. In fact, in 1936, Lee was offered a job as one of the brains in the photographic documentation project under Farm Security Administration. He worked with other famous photographers like Lange, Evans and Rothstein. Their compilation of works were very remarkable, in fact, it was called "the greatest documentary collection which has ever been assembled." He even collected a total of four thousand photos of miner's working condition when he worked for the Department of Interior. He was also able to complete series of photos focusing on a Pentecostal Church of God in Kentucky.

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