

From Henry's Desk

Dorothea Lange

Several months ago, I was watching a program on the History Channel. The program focused on the 1930s, the Great Depression years. Dorothea Lange was the subject of the documentary. Lange achieved some fame as a result of her many photos of individuals who were directly affected by the poverty and deprivations of the economic depression. When discussing Lange's life, the narrator mentioned that Lange had polio as a child. She was left with a withered leg and a limp. With this information, I searched the Internet and discovered that there were several books about Dorothea Lange. I purchased one that included a biography of her life and many of her photos. *Dorothea Lange, A Visual Life* edited by Elizabeth Partridge, and published by the Smithsonian Press is filled with most of Lange's most famous photographs.

Lange was born in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1895. She had one younger brother, six years her junior. At age seven, she fell ill to acute polio. The residual polio damage involved a withered right lower leg and a noticeable limp. Lange viewed her handicap as a determination factor in her life. She stated that her handicap shaped her very personality and was one from which she could never escape. In later years her limp might have been an asset in helping to disarm people on first encounters with her camera. She felt that her limp might have helped strangers be more accepting of her when she was photographing in the field.

When Lange was twelve years old, her father left the family and Lange, her brother, and her mother went to live with her maternal grandmother. This matriarchal family lived together until Lange left home at age twenty-three. Her mother was self-conscious about her daughter's limp and encouraged her to attempt to walk more normally. As a result, Lange was even more self-conscious about her limp.

After the marital separation, Lange's mother began commuting from New Jersey to Manhattan where she had a job at the New York Public Library. As a result, Lange was enrolled in a public school in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. She was the only Gentile among all Jewish children. She was essentially a loner as a child. She went to an all girls' high school in Upper Manhattan and this situation was slightly better. When questioned upon her graduation as to her plans for the future, she stated that she wanted to become a photographer. At this point in her life, she had never owned a camera. She did enter a teacher's training program, but also began working in a photographer's studio. Her interest in photography grew and she left the teacher's training program. She was mostly a self-taught photographer.

At the age of twenty-three, she left New Jersey with a friend to travel the world and utilize her photographic skills. She ended up in San Francisco and opened a photographic studio where she specialized in portraits. Her business was successful. She did marry and had two sons. When the bread lines appeared during the depression years, she began photographing the pathos of the people affected severely by the Great Depression. These photographs are a realistic and artistic witness to the human drama of this time in our country's history.

Perhaps Lange's most famous photograph is "Migrant Mother," taken in 1936. This photo is of a tired and worn female migrant worker. She is holding a small child and there are two other children leaning on her shoulders. The photograph needs no explanation. The majority of Lange's photographs are expressive and gripping with human emotion. During World War II, Lange photographed the plight of some of California's Japanese Americans who were displaced to camps.

Lange was diagnosed with inoperable esophageal cancer in August 1964. Despite this death sentence, Lange completed two major projects during the last year of her life. The first was the completion of her collection of photographs of *The American Country Woman*. This collection demonstrated Lange's great respect for the traditional woman. Her other project during that last year was preparing a review of her work for the Museum of Modern Art. Lange died on October 11, 1965

Lange was likely a sentimentalist. She once said, "Sentiment and sentimentality, they are difficult concepts to manage." Many of Lange's photographs include the subject's feet. Was her inclusion of feet in her photographs an expression of her own sensitivity about her own polio damaged right foot? What did Lange say about her own handicap? She said, "I was physically disabled, and no one who hasn't lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means. I think it perhaps was the most important thing that happened to me, and formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me."

I think that many of us with residual damage from polio can identify with these words. How much did polio impact on your life? Was it the most important thing that happened to you? Has the event of polio in your life formed, guided, instructed, helped, and humiliated you?

It was certainly an event that changed my life. Because of my experience with polio, I am sure that it guided me to seek a medical education and profession. At a young age, polio instructed me in the hard reality that good innocent persons could suffer unexplained adversity. Many times the self-consciousness of my handicap caused me to feel the shame and humiliation of being crippled. Did polio "help" me? Perhaps my experience with polio helped me to have some insight about putting others at ease. These are all hard questions. Probe your own feelings in answering these questions for yourself.

I think that Dorothea Lange was like many of us. She was marked by a distinct limp from childhood polio. She was a lonely and self-conscious child. She set a goal for herself and she accomplished that goal. She had an intuitive understanding and could identify with the sadness and pain of others. Her photographs reflect the genius of her sensitivity. Viewing her photographs is a lesson for us all.

Reference:

Dorothea Lange A Visual Life edited by Elizabeth Partridge, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1994.

All quotations of Dorothy Lange are taken from interviews recorded in this reference book. Exact page numbers are available upon request.