

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1989

## Review of Documenting America, 1935-1943

John E. Carter

*Nebraska State Historical Society*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Carter, John E., "Review of Documenting America, 1935-1943" (1989). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 467.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/467>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

is an important contribution to that body of work. Where other efforts have focused on the powerful content of the pictures, this book deals with the context of their creation as well.

Because so many of the pictures stand well on their own, it is easy to forget that they were created as part of a greater whole. This book's purpose is to reestablish links between the image and the photographer, the photographer and his or her intention, and the photograph and other photographs taken at the same time.

To arrive at this integrated understanding the editors assembled three major parts which, at first blush, fit together uncomfortably. The first section is comprised of a substantial introduction and two essays. The introduction provides a brief yet satisfying overview of the evolution of the collection and serves to introduce the complex task that the authors and editors have set for themselves.

The two essays, by Lawrence W. Levine and by Alan Trachtenberg, establish an intellectual environment within which to understand the pictures. Levine relates the photograph to the purposes of the historian, while Trachtenberg establishes the photograph within the context of its use. Both essays contribute to the understanding of the nature of photography as well as to the specific photographs to which the authors address themselves.

The second section contains series of photographs by fifteen photographers. Each of these series is introduced with an explanation of the assignment that produced them. Here the book's design serves its purpose well. Pictures are arranged so that they interact with one another. Each individual image is dramatic and evocative in its own right yet juxtaposed eloquently with others in a way that amplifies the impact of the whole beyond the sum of the parts.

The book ends with a technical appendix dealing with the organization of the collection after it found its way to the Library of Congress. While not as intellectually thrilling as the first two sections of the book, the appendix makes the important point that bodies of work do not die upon arrival at a final repository. The efforts of curators and archivists continue to shape the

*Documenting America, 1935-1943.* Edited by Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan. Essays by Lawrence W. Levine and Alan Trachtenberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Photographs, appendix, works cited, photograph negative numbers, index. xi + 361 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

The work of the photographic section of the Farm Security Administration has not suffered for want of attention. Countless books and articles have proliferated in both the popular and scholarly press. *Documenting America, 1935-1943*

collection—not in content but in access.

In the end the book accomplishes its purposes well. It is an important contribution both to the understanding of the work of the Farm Security Administration and to the nature of photographs as historical evidence.

*Documenting America* is beautifully produced, and the pleasure of simply looking at the pictures is worth the price. This work should find a welcome spot on the shelf of many a reader.

JOHN E. CARTER  
Curator of Photographs  
Nebraska State Historical Society