

**#93 October 2024 Cameraderie
Twentieth Century Historical Images
Free from the U.S. Government National Archives,
Smithsonian Institution, and Library of Congress:**

Department of Interior (DOI)

Depression Era Photographs:

**Works Progress Administration (WPA),
Farm Security Administration (FSA),
Resettlement Administration (RA).**

Non-Depression Era:

**National Park Service,
War Relocation Authority (WRA).**

Not Government:

National Child Labor Committee (NCLC).



A number of the photographers I have discussed in the past worked at times for the U.S. Government Department of Interior (DOI) documenting the conditions and needs of affected people in the Depression era, and the achievements of the programs for which they worked. This resulted in employment for the photographers during otherwise hard times, which coincided with one of the Government goals—to put people to work, including artists, writers, and photographers—in addition to the workers that built roads, national parks, and other public works. A result of this public employment of photographers was that all their work during that employment belonged to the U.S. Government, was therefore in the public domain, and is still available for viewing and downloading, without fees, by anyone.

Here is a list of photographers that I have already written about who worked stints for DOI documenting the Depression:

Dorothea Lange (#4, March 2014)

Lewis Hine (#10, Nov. 2013)

Walker Evans (#14, Oct. 2014)

Gordon Parks (#21, Aug. 2017)

Ben Shahn (#65, Sept. 2021)

Many other photographers documented the Depression, but not in Government employ, and for this article, I am focusing mostly on Government-employed photographers because their work would be in the public domain and available for free downloading.

Below are the main Government sites where Depression Era photos may be seen, with samples of how I searched for results. I mention a few tangential sites that turned up documenting other periods and other subjects.

The National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/>. This is the general site. I searched it using the search term “Depression Photographs,” and found a long list of hits, including this one: <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2020/06/30/spotlight-dorothea-lange/>. Have a look at it to see some of Lange’s work. Lange also worked for the War Relocation Authority (WRA),

not part of DOI, that managed internment of Japanese U.S. citizens during WWII. Searching the general Archives site for “Dorothea Lange” turned up this page:

<https://fdr.blogs.archives.gov/2017/02/17/images-of-internment/>

The same National Archives search also turned up an article on [Photographs Related to the Great Depression and the New Deal | National Archives](#), within which are photo collections of Lewis Hine for multiple agencies. Several other photographers are named. While some of the photographs are strikingly good compositions, most are fascinating for their historical documentation.

At the Library of Congress website, <https://www.loc.gov>, I searched “Photos, Prints, Drawings” with the search term “Depression Era,” (<https://www.loc.gov/photos/?q=depression+era>) and found a wonderful collection of images of Depression Era murals from all over the country. There is of course much more to be explored at the LOC website.

I searched the Smithsonian Institution website, <https://www.si.edu>, for Dorothea Lange, and found a number of her Depression Era images, https://www.si.edu/search/collection-images?edan_q=dorothea%2Blange&

A Smithsonian search for Lewis Hine turned up his work prior to the Depression documenting the condition of child labor in the U.S. (https://www.si.edu/search/collection-images?edan_q=lewis%2Bhine&) for the non-government organization, National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), which helped raise awareness of child labor conditions and bring about child labor laws.

There are a tremendous number of other sites where Depression Era images may be seen. Here are just a few that popped up for me when I did a search. I am sure there are many more.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Federal_Art_Project_artists

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/meet-photographers-charged-documenting-depression-era-america-farm-security-administration-180964123/>

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/about-this-collection/>

<https://photography.tutsplus.com/articles/how-fsa-photography-changed-the-world--photo-17345>

<https://digital.library.sc.edu/collections/wpa-photograph-collection/>

<https://www.swannalleries.com/news/photographs-and-photobooks/2020/04/five-fsa-photographers-to-know/>

<https://www.archives.nyc/blog/2018/9/14/nyc-work-and-working-wpa-photographs-at-photoville>

<https://photoville.nyc/exhibition/nyc-work-and-working-photographs-from-the-wpa-federal-writers-project/>

<https://daily.jstor.org/the-photographers-who-captured-the-great-depression/>

<https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/depression-era-prints-and-photographs-wpa-and-fsa>

Ansel Adams did a government stint, but not documenting the Depression. He photographed the national parks and other public works for the National Park Service (also part of DOI) in 1941-2. His images were to decorate the new DOI building in DC in large mural format, but were never installed, as WWII took control of the national attention and resources. The images languished for quite some time, until Ken Salazar, Secretary of Interior 2009-2013, directed the images to be printed mural-size and at last displayed in the main hall of the DOI building. Here are two links to DOI pages about the “Mural Project:”

https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/news/pressreleases/2010_03_10_release

<https://www.doi.gov/photos/news/photos/Ansel-Adams-Mural-Project-Opens-at-Interior-Department>

I highly recommend the public art tour of the DOI building where you can see the murals yourself, as well as the other art in the building. Call the DOI building museum to make an art tour reservation: 202-208-4743. You can also contact Mr. Justin Giles, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Museum Program Curator, at 202-594-7032, justin.giles@bia.gov.