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April 15, 2009

THIS WEEK: "The Bitter Years"

From the fall issue of the *Iowan* – 1964

In 1940 and 1941, the Farm Security Administration sent photographers to Iowa as part of a federal effort to record what had recently been termed "The Bitter Years" in an exhibit mounted by the Museum of Modern Art.

The two principle photographers in Iowa were Arthur Rothstein and John Vachon. The pictures shown here were selected by the *Iowan* from the file contained in the Library of Congress.





BACKGROUND: Photographers Arthur Rothstein and John Vachon (both worked for several years in Des Moines, Iowa)



Arthur Rothstein was born in New York in 1915. He attended the Angelo Patri School in the Bronx, and while a student at Columbia University, he developed an interest in photography. Two of his tutors, Roy Stryker and Rex Tugwell, asked him to help with the picture editing of a textbook they were working on.

During the Great Depression, Rothstein was invited by Roy Stryker to join the federally sponsored Farm Security Administration (FSA) that was established in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The FSA employed a small group of photographers, including Esther Bubley, Marjory Collins, Mary Post Wolcott, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Gordon Parks, Jack Delano, Charlotte Brooks, John Vachon, Carl Mydans, Dorothea Lange and Ben Shahn, to publicize the conditions of the rural poor in America.

In 1940, Arthur Rothstein joined the staff of *Look* magazine, published in Des Moines, Iowa, as a photographer. During World War II, he went back to the Farm Security Administration, which had become part of the Office of War Information. This included taking photographs in China, Burma and India.

After the war Arthur Rothstein returned to *Look* where he worked as Director of Photography until the magazine closed in 1971. He then held the same position for *Parade Magazine*. Rothstein died in New Rochelle, New York, in 1985.



John Vachon was born in 1914. He worked as a filing clerk for the Farm Security Administration before Roy Stryker recruited him to join a small group of photographers who were employed to publicize the conditions of the rural poor in America.

Vachon became a staff photographer for *Life* magazine, where he worked between 1947 and 1949. He also worked for over 25 years at *Look* magazine, published in Des Moines, Iowa, beginning in 1947. When *Look* closed in 1971, he became a freelance photographer. Vachon died in New York In 1975.