

Permanent Collection work:

Marion Post Wolcott

A Member of Wilkins family making biscuits on corn-husking day, Tallyho, North Carolina, 1939

gelatin silver print

Gift of David B. Devine

6.348.1986

Essay written by student, Ellen Caldwell, Spring 2001

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Marion Post Wolcott's

"A member of Wilkins family making

biscuits on corn-husking day, Tallyho, North Carolina, 1939."

Although her photographic career only lasted seven short years, first freelancing in New York and then working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), Wolcott quickly established herself as one of the first female journalistic photographers of her time.¹ Her work has had such an influence that in 1990, Wolcott was the first woman to receive the National Press Photographers Association's (NPPA) Joseph A. Sprague Memorial Award, awarded to a photojournalist who "advances, elevates, or attains unusual recognition for the profession of photojournalism by conduct, initiative, leadership, skill, and devotion to duty."²

¹ Stein, 44.

² "What a Time She Had," 2.

While Wolcott was in her early twenties and freelancing in New York, the FSA began to send photographers out into remote rural areas in order to collect photographic documentation of the harsh conditions of the Great Depression. This documentation was used to provide evidence which might ultimately help to justify the “New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate” these conditions.³ In 1938 the FSA hired Wolcott, and she subsequently set out with her camera, film, and a car loaded by the FSA with survival kits as she began her photographic journey through Georgia, North and South Carolina, West Virginia, Virginia, Vermont, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Kentucky.⁴ The subjects of her photographs range from sprawling landscapes of the corn fields in West Virginia and a baptism in Kentucky, through ritzy clubs in Florida and juke joints in Mississippi and Florida, to FSA housing projects in Virginia. Because of the relationship Wolcott was able to establish between herself and her subjects, she was able to capture a vivid sense of vitality amidst the survivors still laboring through the later effects of the Depression. By juxtaposing these images of hardships with those of increasing normalcy and even extravagance, Wolcott was constantly forcing the viewer to see and realize the extremity of the dichotomies between the upper and lower class at this time. It was this keen social awareness that allowed Wolcott's “coherent documentary pictures [to] celebrate ordinary, enduring Americans and fathom the hidden costs of racial bigotry, cowboy dreams, and our tendency to make the dispossessed invisible.”⁵ Having collected an estimated 15,000 photographs for the FSA between 1938-1942, Wolcott is most revered for her ability to convey the severe realities of the Depression and also to personalize the vast array of emotional and physical hardships of the people with whom she immersed herself.

³ Hendrickson, 3.

⁴ Hendrickson, 83.

⁵ “Looking for the Light...,” 93.

In a photograph that Wolcott described as *A member of Wilkins family making biscuits on corn-husking day*, Wolcott has documented a rural kitchen scene in Tallyho, North Carolina in 1939.⁶ Although this image is not typical in conveying the Dustbowl hardships commonly found during the late Depression, Wolcott presents this middle-class, domestic scene as an image of normality. The picture is framed by the glossy wooden walls of the kitchen and the tables on either side, which seem to push the woman further into the corner of this domestic sphere. The woman pictured has her back turned completely to the viewer and seems to be concentrated on the task of making and baking the biscuits for corn-husking day. Although it does not seem that the subject has gone out of her way to accommodate the photographer, Wolcott takes the photo at such an angle that the viewer can see not only the biscuits arranged on the pan and dough bowl at a slanted angle, but also the full array of kitchen utensils and ingredients laid out on the shelf above the subject's head. These images of the hovering kitchen supplies and constricting confines serve to reinforce the intertwined role of the woman and the cook, since she is literally weighed down and surrounded by these images of food, preparation, and consumption. To further cement her identity within this gender role, Wolcott has even noted that the woman depicted is single-handedly preparing these biscuits for what is presumably a large group of male farmers. By displaying the woman with her back turned towards the viewer, Wolcott taps into the anonymity and larger universality of this domestic scene as if to point out the viewer's accessibility to this woman's role in that this could be any woman, any place, any time.

Because Wolcott was working in the 1940s, when some families were beginning to experience gradual improvements in their conditions, Wolcott used the life of this

⁶ Stein, 25.

agricultural family as just one piece of evidence in order to offer literal documentation of the way in which the FSA's relief was helping, along with the way in which the nation was slowly healing from the Depression. Out of her thousands of photographs, this image illustrates Marion Wolcott's ability to enter a new town and place, and then capture the overall feeling of the people and locations she visited. In doing so, she was able subsequently to add these single images to her huge collection of photographs so that the FSA eventually used this array of images effectively to illustrate the wide-spread and lasting effects of the Depression.

Annotated Bibliography

Hendrickson, Paul. "What Made Her Stop," Life, May 1992, 80-89.

This article was written by a man who unexpectedly found Wolcott's photos and whose life was dramatically changed and inspired by them. He has now written a full book about Wolcott's work as well. He offered a personal view with interviews and all into the actual process of Wolcott's photographic journeys as well as her somewhat sudden turn away from photography.

"Looking for the Light: The Hidden Light and Art of Marion Post Wolcott," Publisher's Weekly, 30 March 1992, 93-94.

This is simply a book review about Hendrickson's book. It did offer some detailed descriptions and catch phrases which seemed to embody her photographs and work as a whole.

Stein, Sally. Marion Post Wolcott: FSA Photographs. Carmel: The Friends of Photography, 1983.

This book was the rebound edition of Wolcott's photographs. It was very helpful in a number of ways, the first being that it contained the image I was looking for, with a caption and date that the de Saisset did not. It was also interesting to see which photographs Wolcott chose to put in a book (though I'm not sure how

much of a choice the FSA and government gave her). By the time I found this book, I had already gathered a lot of information about Wolcott's life, but the introduction confirmed the factual evidence and dates.

“What a Time She Had!” News Photographer, April 1995, F2-3.

This is an interesting article which was actually published by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA). Because of this, the article was printed in commemoration of the work Wolcott did in order to celebrate the award they gave her in 1990. Though there was not a lot of factual timelines and other such information about her life, this article offered a more personal view into Wolcott's experience as a photographer, woman, and a person.