

The F.S.A. Photographer:

The very nature of our file requires qualifications from our photographic staff far beyond artistry and mechanical skill. Alone in the field, the FSA photographer must be able to interpret what he sees from many aspects. He must be a good deal of a social scientist, with some theoretical and ~~experimental~~ much practical grounding; he is the social investigator with a camera as his note-book; he must be a first-rate reporter — not of spot news — but of the major currents of our time as they manifest themselves pictorially in any one locality. He must be able to distinguish between biased information and fact; He must have a wealth of knowledge of a variety of subjects — from rural architecture to tractor construction; and he must be capable with pencil and note-book to almost the same degree as with lens and shutter.

This means that our photographers, in addition to their regular work, are forever reading — reading not only the daily press and the usual books, but studying reports, statistical and otherwise, which may have bearing on the problems of the region they are engaged in covering.

"To do this kind of job the photographer has to be more than an artist, --more than an adequate mechanic. He must be something of a sociologist, something of an economist; he must be a good deal of a wangler, equally at home with a hostess or a farmer's wife; he must have a healthy nose for news coupled with a thorough scepticism of biased information; and more than anything else, he must have a basic understanding for the meaning of his story. This, as far as possible, the script should provide."

Photography has taken a new and important place in modern life in the role of disseminating information. Evidence of this new position can be found in such magazines as "Life" and "Look"; in the improved photo sections of some of our best newspapers; in picture books for youth and for adults; in profusely illustrated reports and monographs. The photograph is no longer merely an illustration. Groups of photographs properly selected, edited, and captioned, are giving a new turn to modern journalism. The camera in the proper hands should become a worthy aid to government agencies.

The Farm Security Administration has recognized this new trend in photography. It has accepted the camera as an essential aid in presenting the problems with which it has to work; and to convey to interested persons the progress made in dealing with these problems. In short, it has accepted the camera as a first-class reporting mechanism.

In order for the Farm Security Administration photographers to do this camera reporting they must be something of sociologists, economists, historians. That they be expert camera craftsmen is taken for granted. That they have a good general background coupled with the faculty for acquiring a working knowledge of a variety of subjects (rural architecture, cancer research, mechanical processes, for instance) is essential.

In preparing for a field assignment, let us say to photograph the work of the Farm Security Administration in the Mississippi Delta, the procedure will be something as follows:

1. The photographer through study and reading, and through conferences with subject matter specialists becomes thoroughly familiar with the Delta country and its general problems. These include geography, the agricultural system, the crops grown, the dominant industries, the living habits of the people.
2. The preparation of a "shooting script" for the photographic survey. This is usually a joint project participated in by the photographer and the Washington staff.
3. The thorough checking of his equipment, and carefully conducted tests in collaboration with the laboratory on the particular film to be used, and the particular developing process to be used in developing the film after it is sent in from the field.
4. On arriving in the field his first job will be to get a rapid and comprehensive view of the area to be worked; and to make contacts with government officials and private

individuals as a guide in finding the best places in which to work; to check the adequacy of his "shooting script"; and to obtain new ideas on the photographic approach.

5. Taking the photograph. It is here that the photographer is put to the real test. He is in the field and on his own initiative. The "shooting script" is prepared in Washington and not in the field. It is, therefore, up to the photographer to adjust the differences which he finds in the script to the actual. Many things conceived in the original outline are not photographable. Angles are found which must be included. The good investigator-photographer makes these adjustments with a minimum of confusion and time.

In short, the photographer is given an assignment, and through independent investigation he is expected to bring back a report with his camera. This often requires great tact and resourcefulness in the handling of people and of situations.

All photographic work must be accompanied by an adequate report. This consists of brief captions for each picture and fuller detailed reports to accompany the "photographic report". For our Hypothetical Mississippi Delta survey each picture would carry the minimum of information: The place taken, the date taken, the photographer, and some short identifying caption. The complete photographic job would be accompanied by a general and more elaborate report based on the photographer's observations and investigations. The photographs have a greatly increased usefulness both to the government and to publishers and authors depending upon the care with which the photographer supports his photographs with this report.

Our photographers are called upon to make photographic surveys and reports for other government agencies. These include many of the Bureaus in the Department of Agriculture, the U. S. Public Health Service, the Social Security Board, the U. S. Housing Authority. This requires considerable ability on their part to adapt their technique and general knowledge to varied situations and approaches in order to make an intelligent photographic presentation of material with which they are not ordinarily familiar.

They are expected to give technical advise in the processing of negatives and of photographs. And to act in an advisory

capacity to regional information people by giving technical advice in the operation of their cameras, and to pass technical opinion on contracts for the making of photographs.

By tests and research they evaluate photographic developments and processes, new equipment, and supplies, and pass this information on to other photographic sections of the government.