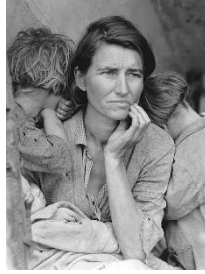


**FLORENCE
OWENS
THOMPSON**
1903-1983



**A
MOTHER'S
LASTING
LEGACY**

You may not know Tahlequah's Florence Owens Thompson's name but you definitely know her face. After photographer Dorothea Lange snapped her picture at a California migrant camp in 1936, the "Migrant Mother" photo became the most iconic symbol of struggling Americans during the Great Depression.

Florence Leona Christie was born in September 1903. At seventeen, she married Cleo Owens. By 1925, they had migrated to California looking for work. When Owens died of tuberculosis in 1931, Florence was left with six children. After a brief visit to Oklahoma, she met James Hill in 1934, and had three more children.

In March 1936, the family were driving north on Highway 101 when their car broke down near Nipomo. They pulled into a camp of 3,500 pea pickers, stranded when rain ruined the crops. Florence set up a temporary shelter while the men took the radiator into town to be fixed.

Dorothea Lange was returning home to Berkeley, after chronicling the plight of laborers near Los Angeles. As she passed Nipomo, she didn't stop, but twenty minutes later changed her mind. Lange snapped a photo of Florence with her children. For the next ten minutes, she took five more photos, each time moving closer. She did not approach the other starving migrants. "I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment."

Though Lange promised not to publish the photos, she mailed them to the San Francisco News. The next morning, they published two photos under the headline: "Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squalor." The following day, Florence's photo appeared above the editorial "What Does the 'New Deal' Mean to This Mother?" Soon the government shipped 20,000 pounds of food to Nipomo. But the Owens-Hill family had already moved on. Eventually Florence settled in Modesto, marrying hospital administrator George Thompson.

In October 1965, Dorothea Lange died at age 70, never knowing the subject of her most famous photo. In 1978, a Modesto Bee reporter identified Florence, who felt exploited by the photo – and resented Lange made money off her image. Ironically the photos were governmental property.

Her relationship with the photo took a final, ironic twist in 1983. Her family requested public funds to help cancer-stricken Florence. The story generated national attention, raising over \$35,000. "The famous picture of your mother for years gave me great strength, pride and dignity," wrote one woman. Florence died in September at age 80.

In the 1960s, the original negatives were discovered in the San Jose Chamber of Commerce dumpster. In October 2005, they sold for \$296,000 – nearly six times their estimate. In 1998, the photo became a 32-cent postage stamp and a print with Lange's handwritten notes and signature sold for \$244,500. In 2002, Lange's personal print from her home sold for \$141,500.

No image in American photography resonates with the tragic poignancy of Migrant Mother. Lange's somber portrait has achieved near mythical status. Much has been written about Florence over the years, but, in many ways, she remains an enigma.