

Ginnie Graham: Family stories of Dust Bowl, Great Depression survival left at Gilcrease Museum

By Ginnie Graham Editorial Writer Oct 27, 2019



Burials on the roadside. Starvation. No clothes. Lost businesses.

These are among themes in handwritten notes left at a Gilcrease Museum kiosk at the end of a current exhibit of Dorothea Lange photographs.

It's a reminder how much the Great Depression and Dust Bowl are Oklahoma stories. The state was hit with that double whammy leading to a diaspora of Middle Americans to coastal and urban cities.

That migration changed the course of the state and country, leading to stereotypes and attitudes felt to this day. It awakened our nation to the need for agricultural conservation, public social programs and a government role in economics.

Lange is among the most famous to document the plight of the poor to drum up national support for relief programs. Her image of “Migrant Mother” became an enduring impression of that desperate era.

Gilcrease beautifully showcases Lange’s work including the five images of the “Migrant Mother” series. Work from other Great Depression photographers are displayed with context about the cultural, political and economic struggle.

As Woody Guthrie’s voice sings about how this land belongs to you and me, going through the exhibit hits a familial and familiar note for native Oklahomans.

My own Oklahoma ancestors were farmers and lucky to have lived near water, something many people take for granted. Their land was able to weather that years-long drought.

They weren’t wealthy but understood their fortune. My grandfather often told me about the occasional migrants stopping by for a meal or the necessity of eating potato soup for weeks.

With a tanking economy, absence of social relief programs and ongoing weather crisis, many Oklahomans were forced off their farms and into homelessness. They faced tragic deaths, hunger and poverty. It had a far-reaching domino effect.

Stories of individual loss and survival are being left at the Gilcrease. The museum asks patrons to leave a note about their family stories.

Those histories have the same effect as the photographs: distilling a national crisis to unique, personal experiences.

It was an idea developed at Gilcrease by Education Specialist Angie Williams, Curator of History Mark Dolph and Alison Rossi, director of learning and community engagement.

“Though this is a traveling show, we knew that its focus on the Great Depression would have special resonance here in Oklahoma, and we wanted to provide visitors with the opportunity to share their own family stories from this period and to incorporate those into the exhibition,” Rossi stated. “There has been an outpouring of visitors’ responses.

“Reading visitors’ family stories has been a powerful experience for our staff and other visitors. Whether heartbreaking, joyful or humorous, their stories, along with the photographs of Lange and her contemporaries, are all a testament to the resilience of the American people and demonstrate how families and our culture at large were shaped by these trying times.”

Among the personal anecdotes:

“My great grandma Ollie buried my Grandpa Luther’s baby sister on the side of the road when they were going to California. I don’t know that baby’s name, but I wish I did.”

“My father was one of 14 children born to sharecroppers in Liberal, Kansas. He was small during the Dust Bowl but remembers his mother sitting up all night changing damp cloths over the faces of her sleeping children in an attempt to keep the dust out of their lungs. Two daughters and a tiny granddaughter died from ‘dust pneumonia’ within weeks of each other despite these efforts.”

“My grandfather’s family were well-off ... They had a mercantile in Stigler, Oklahoma, when the Depression hit. Nobody could pay their bills so the store folded. Family moved to California and worked as migrant labor and lived in tent camps. Much of the family is still in California.”

“My mother’s family stayed in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. She said they would make water gravy to have with their bread. She was sent to her grandparents because they had food.”

“My grandmother related two stories about growing up in the Depression, both related to food. First was the pea soup made at her schoolhouse. People didn’t have things to add, so it was just peas. Second, they had a family cow when she was young but lost it to illness before she was 10. That was the last milk she saw in childhood.”

“My dad and his five siblings grew up on a farm in Kansas. He said they went shoeless in the summer ... He recounted to me the story of when his dad converted to the use of a tractor. Someone from a rendering house came to the farm and shot and took away the team of horses. He said his mother had the young kids stay in the house when it happened. It still choked him up and me to hear about it.”

“My mother always told us how she only had two dresses. My grandmother repaired all their socks, shirts, blankets, etc. or repurposed for towels. Nothing went to waste. A great lesson.”

“My Mom was born in 1929 and told stories about traveling to California in the mid-1930s, babysitting her younger brothers and sisters while her parents picked cotton in Arizona, fruit in New Mexico and vegetables in California — all while staying in the labor camps along the way.”

“There was a mark on the siding (of homes) to let homeless men know a helping hand could be found down the road. My grandmother would feed the men a good meal in exchange for some yard work.”

“Even being so poor for so long, they still managed to help others. In their area of living, if you left the porch light on, it meant your home was open to a passerby needing a free meal. So even during difficult times, they would help others and make sure they were fed.”

One patron posted a typed, full page of a family’s history, complete with photos.

It starts out: “My grandfather ... died of complications related to pneumonia and malnutrition in 1939. My grandmother gave birth to his fifth son a couple of months after his death. She managed to care for her children for 2 years.”

The page is filled with a son's memories. It reads like a love letter to a mother who just couldn't keep up. She chopped wood, milked cows, churned butter, picked cotton, mended clothes, swept a dirt floor daily, plugged holes in the walls with paper and made sure her boys said nightly prayers.

She used dominoes to teach her children math. They only attended classes 67 days because the weather made it too hard to walk to the schoolhouse. Two boys went without shoes in the winter but got excited upon finding a ratty pair discarded in a dump.

The boys had long hair and wore hand-me-down clothes, sometimes with the pants reaching only their knees. They worked with her picking cotton and had to haul water in buckets to their home.

“We were happy in spite of the poverty, hunger and cold. Mom always read to us at night and sometimes opened up the old trunk and go through the family pictures of better times, explaining each picture to us boys.”

The cow stopped producing milk, and the work wasn't consistent. Eventually, an Uncle Charlie took the oldest boys to an orphanage in southwest Oklahoma: “It was a very sad parting between Mom and her four sons. My youngest brother stayed with our mother.”

It is likely whoever posted that note made two trips to Gilcrease: for the exhibit and then to contribute the narrative. The trauma still echoes within that family.

Our nation is confronting similar problems including climate change, generational poverty, climbing national debt and a growing class divide. Behind every big issue are individual humans paying a toll.

The family stories are important; lessons from that time ought not to escape our collective conscience.

Those family stories hanging at the Gilcrease are important; lessons from that time ought not to escape our collective conscience.

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"Dorothea Lange's America"

Through Jan. 5 at the **Gilcrease Museum**, 1400 N. Gilcrease Museum Road

10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday

Third Sunday of each month is free to patrons.

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