

More than 1,000 words

By **William C. Kashatus**

If a picture's worth a thousand words, then Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photograph "Migrant Mother" warrants an entire book. Or at least that's the idea behind Marisa Silver's new novel, *Mary Coin*.

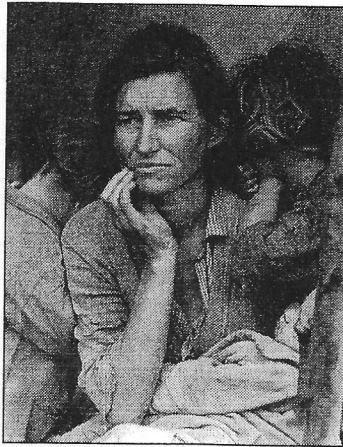
The photo, taken in 1936 at a pea pickers' camp near Nipomo, Calif., depicts the lined and weary face of Florence Owens, a 32-year-old widowed migrant worker, with two of her hungry children resting on her shoulders and a baby on her lap. It has become the most iconic image of the Great Depression.

It's also the starting point for Silver's multigenerational, fictionalized account of Owens, which begins in 1920s Oklahoma and reaches into the first years of the 21st century in California. The real story of the "Migrant Mother" is every bit as compelling, reflecting the human element and surrounding folklore of the Great Depression.

Born in 1903, Florence Christie was raised on a small farm near Tahlequah, Okla. Her parents were members of the Cherokee Nation. At 17, she married Cleo Owens, a 23-year-old farmer. Within five years, she had given birth to three children.

The family migrated west to work on farms in California's Sacramento Valley. In 1931, Cleo died of tuberculosis. Florence, pregnant with their sixth child, was desperate for work. "I'd pick 400 to 500 pounds of cotton from sunup until after it was too dark to work," she recalled near the end of her life. "I worked in hospitals. I tended bar. I cooked. ... I done a little bit of everything to make a living for my kids."

In 1933, Owens moved to Shafter, Calif., near Bakersfield, where she met Jim Hill. The cou-



Florence Owens and her children captured in Dorothea Lange's famous photograph.

ple, Owens' seven children, and her parents became migrants, following crops around California and sometimes into Arizona.

In March 1936, at the height of the Great Depression, Florence and Jim were picking beets in Southern California's Imperial Valley. Hoping to find more profitable work in the lettuce fields, they headed north for the Pajaro Valley. En route, their car overheated, and they coasted to a stop just inside a pea pickers' camp on the Nipomo Mesa.

There were some 3,500 people there. They had responded to a call for pickers, but the crop had been destroyed by freezing rain, leaving them without work.

As Jim repaired the car, Florence and her children set up a temporary camp. It was there that Dorothea Lange, a photojournalist working for the New Deal Resettlement Administration, spotted her.

Lange snapped six shots of Florence and her children. The final one would become the defining photograph of the Depression.

Although Lange promised Owens that the photos wouldn't be published, she submitted

them to the San Francisco News, along with an embellished story. Lange claimed that Owens and her family had been "living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds that the children killed," and that the family had "just sold their tires to buy food."

The News ran the photos almost immediately, asserting that 3,500 migrant workers were starving in Nipomo. Within days, the camp had received 20,000 pounds of food from the federal government. But by that time, Owens and her family were working far away, in Watsonville.

Florence finally found greater security after World War II, when she married George Thompson, a hospital administrator from Modesto. Though her 10 children bought her a house, she wanted to stay in a mobile home, saying she felt more comfortable with wheels under her.

It wasn't until 1978 that Florence's identity was discovered. Acting on a tip, a Modesto Bee reporter discovered her living in a local trailer park. Shortly afterward, the Associated Press ran a story quoting her as saying, "I wish she [Lange] hadn't taken my picture. I can't get a penny out of it. She didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did."

Although the photograph ultimately made Lange a celebrity, she never got any royalties for it. Because she was employed by the federal government, her work was in the public domain.

Florence Owens Thompson died of heart failure in 1983. But her likeness is frozen in a timeless expression of tenderness, poverty, and fortitude.

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