

New Deal

Buried for decades, Kodachrome slides shot by the FSA's legendary photographers

show the Great Depression in living color. **By Russell Hart**





It seems only natural that the familiar images of America's Great Depression shot by the fabled photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) were in black and white, as if their austere tones embodied the bareness and deprivations of 1930s and early-1940s life. From Arthur Rothstein's impressionistic image of a dust bowl father and son pushing their way through a storm to Walker Evans's formal studies of ramshackle storefronts, these photographs—created to sell the FSA's mandate to improve the lot of the rural and small-town poor—have granted us a comfortable distance

"Couples at a square dance, McIntosh County, Oklahoma," 1939-40, by Russell Lee.

from that difficult time. As important as they are in the history of documentary photography, they can seem almost quaint.

Yet a half dozen of the photographers who produced that epochal body of black-and-white work also took pictures with Kodachrome, then a brand-new film. Collected in *Bound for Glory: America in Color 1939–43* (Abrams/LOC, \$35), the best of these images have a palpable realism that makes the era seem much closer. Only 1,616 color frames, one one-hundredth of the black-and-white total, reside in the Library of Congress, a collection that also includes pictures commissioned by the Office of War Information, which absorbed the FSA's historical section in 1942.

At the urging of director Roy Stryker, ahead of his time in recognizing the testimonial worth of color, six of the original FSA photographers shot Kodachrome: John Collier, Jack Delano, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott. Their pictures show migrant workers relaxing in front of a sign-covered juke joint in Belle Glade, Florida; passers-by milling outside a

newspaper office in Brockton, Massachusetts, reading the headlines posted in red and blue on its windows; a craggy country doctor giving a typhoid vaccine to a stoic, red-freckled

Mexico, a community of homesteading dust bowl refugees named after the pumpkin pies that were a local specialty.

Much of the FSA color is in the form of

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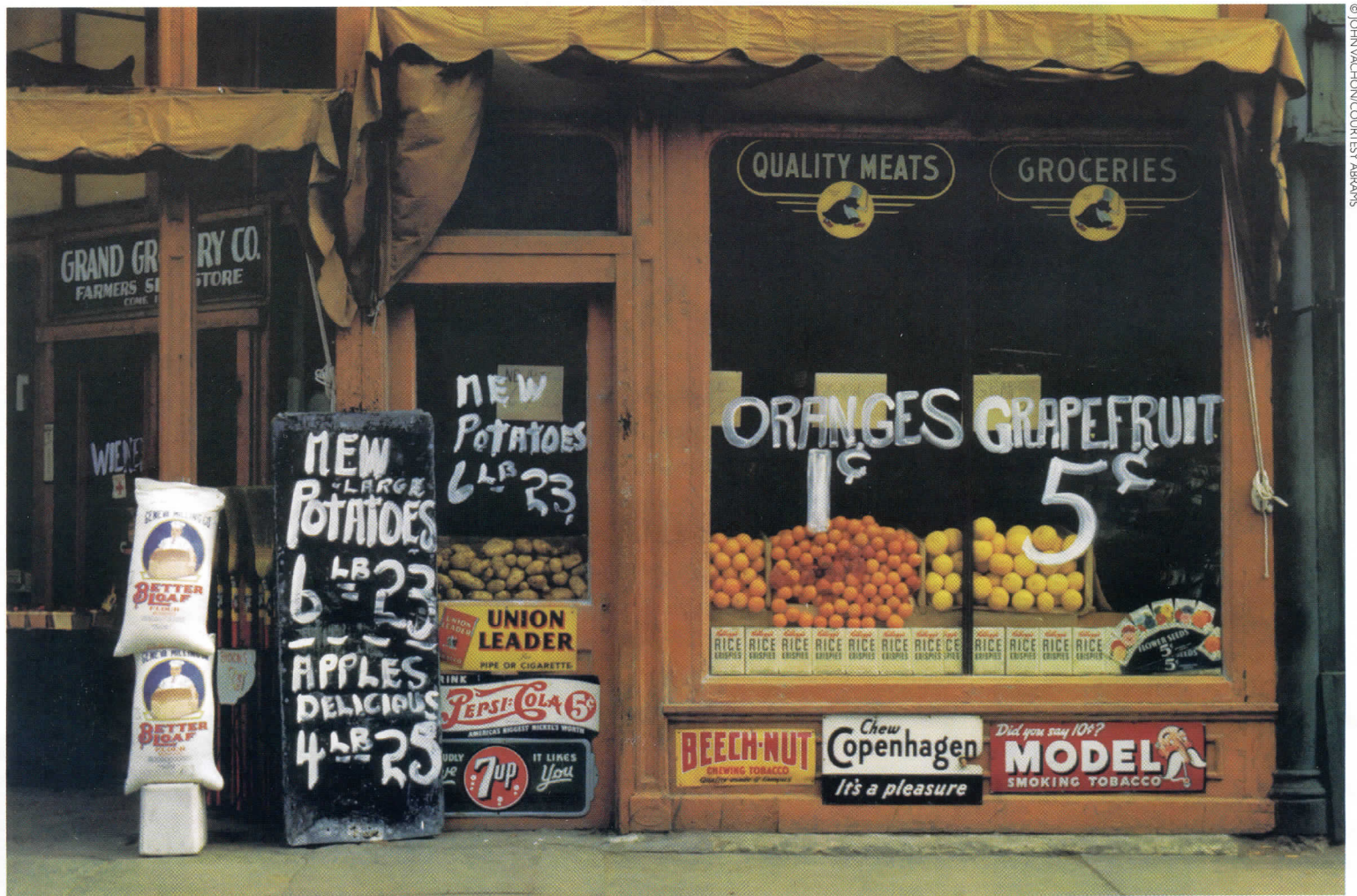
little girl in Texas; and fully dressed children strewn across a bed as they sleep through an Oklahoma square dance, probably the one shown on the previous spread. The book contains a vivid series of photographs by Russell Lee of daily life in Pie Town, New

cardboard-mounted 35mm slides, which may explain why it stayed buried in a massive archive of mostly larger-format negatives until 1978. It was unearthed that year by photo historian Sally Stein, who soon wrote about her find in *Modern Photography* magazine.

"The Caudill family eating dinner in their dugout, Pie Town, New Mexico," 1940, by Russell Lee.



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"Lincoln, Nebraska," by FSA photographer John Vachon.

In 1983, *American Photographer* (the forebear of this magazine's parent) published a few of Russell Lee's Pie Town pictures. But *Bound for Glory* is by far the most complete accounting of this extraordinary, yet neglected, body of work.

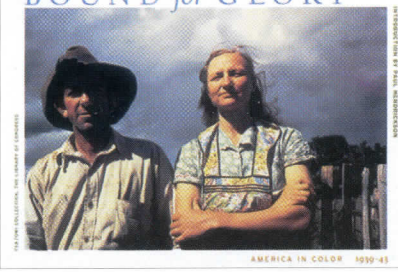
All the FSA photographs are a sort of visual archaeology, as readable as any contemporaneous writings on their subjects. The addition of color increases their legibility exponentially. In one of Russell Lee's Pie Town pictures, a young family sits at a checkered table with the remains of their dinner, including a huge bowl of green pickles, a plate of browned baking-powder biscuits perched on a big red can of Karo corn syrup, and, naturally, a pie, out of which the father has pried the first piece—a rich account of poverty-level nutrition in 1940. In a picture from Jack Delano's series of the Vermont state fair, three sisters of varying ages wear dresses cut from the same red-white-and-blue-patterned dime-store cloth, an

object lesson in home economics.

Few black-and-white FSA photos are as vivid as Marion Post Wolcott's "Crossroads with store, bar, juke joint, and gas station, Melrose, Louisiana." In this study of depression-

era commerce, bright signs broadcast long-gone brands like Jax beer, Nehi soda, and Dental Snuff—a tobacco product claimed to cure gum inflammations, as well as prevent cavities and scurvy. Those were the days. ■

BOUND for GLORY



AMERICA IN COLOR 1939-43

BOOK GIVEAWAY

Harry N. Abrams, Inc.'s **Bound for Glory: America in Color 1939-43** is both a revelation and an extraordinary reference book. It gathers, for the first time, the best of the largely unseen color work of six FSA photographers known until now for their black and white. To win a copy of the book for your personal library, send a postcard with your name, address, phone number, and school affiliation to *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, 43rd floor, New York, NY 10019. Be sure to write "Bound for Glory" on the card. Students and teachers are both invited to enter; the deadline is April 15.