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Oral history interview with John Collier, 1965  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Collier on January 18, 1965. The interview was conducted at John Collier's home in Sausalito, California by Richard K. Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

RICHARD DOUD: This is an interview with John Collier at his home on Muir Beach, Sausalito, California; January 18, 1965. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

JOHN COLLIER: I got interested in photography in the first place because of the fact that I had a career as a mural painter and an artist on the project under Dorothea Lange's first husband, Maynard Dixon, a Western painter. And I decided to make that my career. For medical reasons I didn't go to school and so I devoted myself to the fine arts. Then it became apparent that I had to find a place for myself in society and make a living and after a good many years of investing very deeply in both painting and writing I looked about for some means of exchange that would allow me to operate in society. I also was very disturbed because I was in the midst of the great depression and I was alarmed at the documentary material, particularly material that tended to be social propaganda, made very bad art. And I wasn't at all pleased with painting as a medium for expressing my intellectual feelings about society. So I decided to shift to a medium that was more articulate and I turned to photography because it seemed capable of being able to handle the problem of documentation and understanding without getting involved with a decadent level of fine art. Also photography was a needed commodity, people needed pictures; they did not need my painting nor my writing. And under the pressure of the great depression I felt the necessity of contributing and being needed. And though I was an assistant on a mural on the WPA I didn't feel it was an objective enough job. So I decided I should become some kind of a student of what was going on. Painting was no medium for this kind of introspective examination so I decided to go to my own cultural field, the Spanish Southwest where I had grown up, to try to work out some better understanding of Spanish-American culture. And the first project that I was involved with I prepared for by six months reading in the Bancroft Library at the University of California. I went into the Southwest and made a personally financed document on the Spanish-American sheep camp. And it was on the basis of this document that I was hired by Roy Stryker. I had shown the document to Dorothea Lange, and Dorothea Lange was a childhood friend of mine.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh really!

JOHN COLLIER: And I knew Dorothea Lange from the age of eight. She was not a child then, but I was. And Dorothea was my first introduction to the medium of photography, simply because she came to the family in Mill Valley to make a documentary portrait on assignment. And everybody was bored but me. So she made the document of me and turned it into the family, and so followed the assignment. So I knew Dorothea Lange, I was a photographer and knew about photography. After completing this document Dorothea Lange suggested that I send it to Roy Stryker along with other work. I sent it and forgot all about it. Maybe months went by and I ended up with one photographic job after another, finally reaching the bottom being a printer for Gabriel Milan's, a very cutthroat photographic company in San Francisco. And I didn't do well. One time a phone call came into the laboratory from Washington, D.C. And there was much excitement in the laboratory, and I was called out of my little dungeon where I was tinting gold-toned baby portraits and picked up the phone and couldn't hear what the man said, having lifelong hearing difficulty. It was Roy Stryker on the phone, so I handed the phone to the nearest person, who was the boss. And the boss listened and he said, "There's a crazy guy in Washington, D.C. who wants to pay you \$2,300 a year. You'd better take it because I'm going to fire you." So I took up the phone and I said, "Yes." I didn't hear anything else that he said, and immediately prepared to leave for Washington, D.C. But this was the climax of the concern that I had to do something about direct analysis and observation about what was going on around me at the time of the great depression.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, had you been aware of what Stryker and his people were doing before this?

JOHN COLLIER: Vaguely. But I was more aware of what people like Pare Lorentz had done on "The River" and "The Plow that Broke the Plains."

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. But photography for you was sort of a rational approach to something, I mean it wasn't an emotional type thing.

JOHN COLLIER: It seemed the right medium for somebody who wanted to go out and look astutely at what was going on around him. Painting did not seem to be the medium; writing could be the medium; but photography

was more immediate.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Well I'm interested in what your impression was of this operation when you did go to Washington. Did this seem to be the kind of thing you had in mind, the type of thing you wanted to do, or -?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, I got to Washington and I met many stimulating people. Roy himself was extremely stimulating; naturally the file was very impressive. And I was ready at once to leave for the Southwest. It never occurred to me that I would work anywhere but in my own country. I had no feeling for the East; I didn't like it, it was wet and dirty, cold, uninteresting as far as I was concerned.

RICHARD DOUD: It still is.

JOHN COLLIER: And I still wanted to get back West as fast as I could. And Roy wouldn't let me go; he hung on to me and I did an awful lot of standing around. And finally it became clear to me that I wasn't going to get back to the West, and I never got back to the West.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh really?

JOHN COLLIER: And the work I did for Stryker was - I made one major field trip to New England and then I started off on a very serious assignment of documenting the Amish in Pennsylvania. It started to go very well. It might have been a very important document, but the war interrupted it, unfortunately. I was working from the outside in, and had gone about it very systematically, working in the periphery of the Amish culture and finally making friends and photographing those elements of the life that were permissible. I had developed a very great rapport and was beginning to work on the personality factors of their lives when I was shunted off to a shipyard in Newport News to photograph building a battleship. This abruptly ended my activity as far as documenting that which I was most concerned about, with man's relationship to his environment. I made a few interesting studies under the OWI including the Portuguese in Provincetown. It was a great deal of fun, but there were pressures. It was strictly a magazine-type job study. It did not involve the meandering, fulfilling effort that had been the character of FSA projects in the past. Finally, I was sent to the coal fields of Pittsburgh, not that there were any documents to show poverty, but to photograph the most modern way to get coal out of the ground. And I spent a murky month in Pittsburgh working in the coal mines doing a highly technological job of recording culture underground. It was a very exciting experience. It still was far a field from my involvement. I preferred that assignment; it was a truly typical one, an exciting one. And then I finally got an assignment to go West. The Office of War Information was concerned to get a record of the American Indian, and I had a sort of rapport in the Southwest so I went out primarily to record the democratic processes of the Pueblo Indians. Fortunately, it went the way of most Farm Security Projects; Roy quickly lost track of what I was doing and went ahead and finally did a Farm Security-type job for him. The Indians weren't the least bit intrigued at having their lives photographed at any point, even though I had a lifelong friendship with the Pueblo Indians at Taos. They promptly rejected any part of making a democratic record of their processes. So I never did make it. But at the same time there were important Farm Security Administration projects in Taos County, which included a very important medical cooperative in Cluny; a very typical wartime project under the farm Security Administration. I got permission to do a depth study of the project and they wanted me to do an even deeper project of the Spanish-American culture, so probably the only contribution I made to the files that was anything but industrial was the study of Spanish-American culture. It's unique and stands out. Of course, I studied religion, the role of the Catholic priest, the role of the family, the role of the storekeeper; I made a complete study. There was nothing else like it in the file. But it was made long after the Farm Security had folded. It was a bootleg project. And after I got back from that project I went into the Merchant Marine. And that was the end of my relationship with the government. And I stayed in the Merchant Marine until Roy got me a berth on a wartime project at the Standard Oil, so I got permission from my draft board to go to the Arctic to photograph oil operations in the Arctic. That was my first assignment after I got out of the Merchant Marine. So then I went into the Arctic and photographed oil operations. And it was considered a wartime project that kept me out of the armed forces. When I got back from there the manpower situation tapered off with the result that there was no effort to get me into the armed forces. I was too cold for one thing. I was badly handicapped in hearing and I have a crippled right arm so they weren't interested in me any more. So Roy sent me to Colombia on a three months project to do a lot of working on better relations with the Tropical Oil Company, and that probably was the closest project I have ever done from Stryker that was a Farm Security-type project, because three months stretched out into two years and ended up by making a pinpointed geographic-sociological file on every part of Colombia as a preparation vehicle for better cross-cultural understanding. Probably it was my biggest contribution to any job Roy had done. I think it filled eight books at Standard oil...

RICHARD DOUD: Really?

JOHN COLLIER: It was a file, I think, of something like 7,000 negatives. It was a major project. It does what I wanted to do when I first went to work for Farm Security. It was the final fulfillment of five or six years of struggle. I finally had an opportunity to do a thorough geophysical, geological study of the relationships of the

people to the land. And based on that experience I then went into anthropology. So Farm Security, the whole experience was a tangible stepping-stone to another level, and I have always used it as a platform with which to go on to another level.

RICHARD DOUD: I see. Well you were interested from the beginning in doing a cultural study, a photographic study of a culture?

JOHN COLLIER: I was.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you feel that the other photographers had any such thing in mind, or were they -?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, this is a hard thing to say. They are a very loose-knit group, and I don't know that they all did. They did share one thing in common, though, but they also shared it with all photographers. They were all involved in the excitement of being there, to go out into the field and go to these places, and interesting events and record them. Many of them went into being interested directly in a cultural-social phenomenon. Many of them became involved in this area simple happenstance. I think Walker Evans in particular, if you examine Walker Evans' latest work - he only makes about a couple of assignments a year for Fortune, he has a life job with Fortune, an endowed job of some strange nature - and he continues to do work which shows a tremendous dedication to the cultural scenes. I'm referring to Walker Evans' study on the commuting station of the Long Island railroad that was going to be abandoned and he went at it very clinically, quite in the spirit of working with Agee and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, examining every fabric of the wood and the nature of the stone, and inscriptions on the wall, seeing if somehow he could record the latent image of the culture of commuters, of a generation that left every morning for New York City from that station. It was a very beautiful assignment, and it captured something that happened in the Farm Security Project.

RICHARD DOUD: Well what about Dorothea Lange? Do you think she had this feeling?

JOHN COLLIER: She did, but it was much more objective than that. Dorothea Lange was much more of a pragmatist, and Dorothea was much more involved with the intensity of personal feelings now.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I think so.

JOHN COLLIER: And the group of people who she apparently related to varied greatly. It must be kept in mind that at one point in Dorothea's life when she was a child she was hungry, she was born in poverty and she lived in poverty until maybe she was in her teens. And Dorothea Lange mentioned the other day when Roy was there that this experience made her different from everybody else she dealt with.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JOHN COLLIER: And unquestionably the main thing that could happen on Dorothea Lange's life was an attempt at transference of identification with poverty, with hardship, because prior to the Farm Security Administration, prior to her meeting Paul Taylor, Dorothea Lange was a highly-paid, rather slick portrait photographer of wealthy women, and she made a good living at it. She was a very good craftsman; she did beautiful work. I had never seen any photographs up to that period that showed that Dorothea's in particular had anything to say about anything in her life. She was pretty self-centered, and a little selfish, and indulgent. About that point she looked down from her window on Sacramento Street and saw a breadline of men lined up going to the hall of Justice and something about it triggered some dedication in her. And she walked out of her studio and she figuratively never came back, you know. She went down and made her photograph of that breadline right under her window, you see, and Dorothea became carried away with the necessity of the times. Interestingly enough, her husband, Maynard Dixon had already been deeply involved in this. I thought he was more involved than Dorothea. From the studio at that period he made a painting, a very documentary painting of a stumblebum on the railroad track, you know, with his pack on his back walking down the rails. A very intensely related painting, a very documentary painting of the great depression. And this, I'm sure, affected Dorothea too, and then she saw what was going on around her. I'm a little vague about the wheels of history at that point but apparently she made the motions of getting involved with active work at that point. She met Paul Taylor and did an assignment with him and apparently was carried away with the drama, the excitement, of direct involvement in what was going on, and became an intensely dedicated observer of one phase of the great depression; particularly, the great tragedy of depression and hardship and she did it ably and with a high level of rapport with people. And I think part of this was due to the fact that Dorothea Lange as a child had been very poverty-stricken in the slums of New York.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you get the feeling that she would almost have to have an empathy with these people to the job she did?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, she did largely because of her early life, and this theme Dorothea Lange has sustained up to the time when her last photographs were made. It was the theme in Korea, and the theme in Egypt, and the

theme in India. She gravitated toward this level of humanity that lived in the state of intense physical and social suffering and saw gallantry and beauty and hope in them, and felt it of great importance that these images must be looked at. Now possibly this one statement may sum up better than anything else the dedication of the Farm Security photographers – you asked whether they were culturally-oriented. I said as a group they weren't. But they shared in common a faith that the images should be seen; they were a very enthusiastic, very hopeful group of photographers who felt that what they were doing was going to have, and did have, a great effect on people. They had faith in the visual record that this nonverbal evidence might do something where nothing else would. Therefore, they were social and did a social welfare job, and all the ones that I knew, any of them, whether it be Delano or Lee or Post, they all had this thought in the background, that every photograph they made had some essential and secret purpose and would do something for somebody someday.

RICHARD DOUD: It was never just a job in any sense, then?

JOHN COLLIER: No. It was not a job. It was a devotion that everyone shared, Russell shared it, Ben Shahn shared it, Rosskam shared it, that these images were vital, that's the nub of it. You might say they might have shared a devotion that maybe William Henry Jackson shared a generation and a half earlier when he was documenting the Old West, when he did the geological survey or the biological survey, I can't remember which. He knew it wasn't mythical, that his records were going to be the first records of the Far West seen by the East. And this was a heroic and a very important work. I find that Farm Security photographers in this sense share very deeply with, I am sure Mr. Matthew Brady. Brady's men, I'm sure, together felt that they were doing something of tremendous importance. They were assisting in some vital understanding that could only take place if these photographs were made and seen. And I would say that this was the real core of the spirit of the Farm Security Administration. That they believed that their photographs were effectual and purposeful. This is different from saying, were they interested in culture? They were interested in communication, and they felt that what was going on should be communicated.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Well can you tell me now – you said you weren't there during the really historical period of FSA, you came in later after the thing had already reached its climax, in a sense. I've been interested in why this thing developed. You probably are aware of the fact that when the Historical Section was organized photography was written into the job description in a very minor way. It was mentioned in passing, sort of.

JOHN COLLIER: Well, it must be remembered the physical assignment of people of the Farm Security Administration. After all, we were members of the Farm Security division of Information, we were not alone in this. They had information specialists of every region in the United States who were feeding into the newspapers, into magazines, into government reports the reality of what was going on. I wouldn't call them propagandists, I think they were more fairly considered historians of what was happening. They were the eyes and ears that fed in material into the files and it was very clear what our role was, because whenever we'd get back from any interesting field trip we'd all be shipped across the street to the Department of Agriculture. And we would be pumped dry by specialists who couldn't care less about our photographs. They were interested in our eyewitness experiences.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh!

JOHN COLLIER: And they were interested in conversations, they were interested in our impressions as observers, so we operated as a corps of intelligence for desk-rooted specialists across the street. And they'd always milk us whenever we got back from the field.

RICHARD DOUD: Why has no one else mentioned this?

JOHN COLLIER: I don't know, it was written on our identifications. Our identifications said we were members of, we represented the Division of Information of the FSA, we were reporters. That was our featured job description, that was our identification. It was as plain as day what we were trying to do. It was the basis on which we got our jobs done. It was the explanation of why were making photographs.

RICHARD DOUD: It's a very interesting point that you would be expected to sort of report –

JOHN COLLIER: And the people across the street were really more interested in our human experiences than they were in our photographs.

RICHARD DOUD: This might explain a lot. It's never really made sense that the government would allow Stryker to have his people go out and record –

JOHN COLLIER: Oh yes, it does make sense, because when they sent someone across the street it was strictly under the table. It was not written into our official rules that we would go across the street and tell stories to people in the Department of Agriculture. They represented the in-service appreciation of our role. As far as the government officials were concerned we were there just as an extended arm of the Division of Information to get

necessary press releases, the necessary propaganda illustrations on what was going on. And one of the wrinkles in the assignment was that we were supposed to go out and depth record government projects in favor of success. And Roy paid lip service to this, just as did everyone else. Some photographers made a point of never going near any government project. They felt it was esprit de corps not to get involved in these propaganda assignments. Others always were very dutiful, always jumped at these projects. They would photograph every can of fruit they could. But in general they considered it a bore. People tried to photograph across the street because they thought that there was something lacking in significance in the assigned; and maybe something exciting and haunting on the other side. In other words, one of the troubles with the Section from the point of view of the propagandist was that practically everybody Roy hired had a Fine Arts training. I won't say practically, I'd say everybody on the staff was fine-arts trained either in music or painting. So this set a frame of reference to what was photographed. There were no pedestrian people on the staff from this point of view, they were all artists.

RICHARD DOUD: Did it just happen, or -?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, I don't know how Roy recruited his help, that's the way it was. The only photographer on the staff who was there when I was there who did not have outright Fine Arts training was John Vachon. Jack Delano was a highly-trained musician and painter; Russell Lee had worked for the California School of Fine Arts; I had had fine arts training; Ben Shahn simply affected the whole file as an artist. So, you find that except for Arthur Rothstein, who had a sociologist background, in general everybody on the file was art-oriented. Therefore they tended to try to evade the flood of assignments in favor of photographing between the lines. So possibly you have two elements of the problem, you photographs that were made in the white heat of battle and showed precisely what was happening, including Dorothea Lange's stuff in California, some of Arthur Rothstein's stuff. You find a voluminous amount of material, maybe up to 90% of the file that was all photographed between the lines. They had nothing whatsoever to do with the stated policy of the FSA Division of Information. Now, of course, if it hadn't been this way the file would not be very valuable. It would only have a limited historical value. The fact that all the photographers spent some of their time, some photographers spent all their time, like Ben Shahn and Vachon, photographing culturally between the lines - not that they were interested in culture, but they were art-trained and their instinctive disciplines told them to look between the lines - that they felt the flat records was not going to do it. So they looked between the lines. And the richness of the file is the fact that it is very non-objective. Sure, you find miles of canned fruit in the file, it's true, everybody took the turn at government projects but they tend to be pedestrian and you have two levels of important data, in the file. Something's on the firing line right in the middle of a dust storm and the Okie camps, or you find highly non-objective records of what was going on in America at that time, usually faced in the other direction from the government project. This, of course, insured a kind of eternal value to the file, because it gave the file a massive art content which would otherwise have been utterly missing.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, was there much -?

JOHN COLLIER: There was nothing stated about this. It just went on and Roy, in a kind of non-verbal way, kind of allowed it to go on. He'd bellow at the photographers and he stated that the thing he hated worst about it was the damned artists and he was always trying to give everybody this homespun corn treatment; but Roy in a kind of seventh sense realized the importance of this without ever at any point in his life ever verbalizing about it, to my knowledge. He allowed it, he patronized it, he defended what his men did even when it put him in a bad spot. He was a very loyal man to his photographers. He raised hell with them in person but he always upheld them in public. And many is the fact that the stuff that got into the file was suspect. It wasn't even good propaganda.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Was there ever any sense of using photography as an art, if you could, I mean - ?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, yes, there was. People had more confidence in it all the time. The art drive on the project was certainly a lot higher than the news story drive. Roy himself sabotaged more news stories than ever got out. He was very uncooperative with the practical end of the file, always was. He almost ensured its non-objectivity by goofing on opportunities to get the stuff published. You got stories lined up and PM Magazine would be holding the presses on them, and you'd go on out and photograph for a PM reporter and PM would be calling frantically, "Where are the pictures?" The pictures would be sitting on Roy's desk, and he was just holding them; he'd hold them past deadline, and then he'd mail them.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what do you think he was really trying to do with this thing? Do you think he had any purpose in mind?

JOHN COLLIER: I think he had a great distaste for this part of the project. Really, Roy's only interest in the project was something scientific and very sociological, and very cultural in a folk sense. I mean the kind of shooting script that he would give photographers, at least the kind of shooting script that he would give photographers, at least the kind he gave me, would have driven the Senators mad. I mean Roy's idea of a shooting script was to

send somebody up on government pay to get the smell of burning leaves in New England. The smell, mid you, not the look! The smell! This sent photographers working for the file into screaming meemies. People quit. They just couldn't stand this non-objective treatment. He actually secretly, subtly drove photographers in the mold. Of course, Roy to this day would deny it, because there is nothing, nothing that frightens Roy more than the subject of art. And he always had a running feud with photographers that there was nothing creative in anything they did, that it was automatic, anybody could do it, you just pushed a button and let chemistry do the rest. There's nothing to it, any child could do it. And he refused to ever admit that there might have been some creativity involved in the project itself, even though he created the license and the opportunity for to happen, and he defended the people, he never verbalized about it, he never would admit that it was creative.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, you feel, as I understand it then, that the purpose for which this whole business was organized put into gear, was not served as fully as it might have been.

JOHN COLLIER: Was what?

RICHARD DOUD: That it was not served as fully as it might have been if Roy had -?

JOHN COLLIER: Yes, it was served as fully. The original assignments - I mean money was paid out by the Department of Agriculture for people to go off with their cameras and make exact records of every phase of the project, and make records of precise kinds of social problems which required project planning. It was very normal, the assignments were very precise. And some of the assignments, if you wanted to take the \_\_\_ were very precise. And you would be on loan to any number of Agencies of government. Some would be loaned to Public Health and some would be loaned to War Manpower, and the people you worked for knew exactly what they wanted you to do. And not everyone on the project liked this; Russell Lee did; I enjoyed it; Arthur Rothstein did; and they did a great deal of assignments for research agencies within the government that were on a very serious level and a very responsible level. These are kind of outside the arena of the wandering field trips that went on and on and on. This was an assignment where you were loaned to another group to record certain things that they needed to illustrate. So you had a lot of just very good journalism done by some of the people on the staff, who went out to record certain things that some agency wanted very much. And the pictures were made for them and delivered to them.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, how do you think the thing could have been perhaps more functional or how could it have served a broader purpose than it did?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, the function could be no better than the feedback, and the bottleneck in the whole file has always been the feedback. The feedback was picayune compared to the production.

RICHARD DOUD: I'm sure it was.

JOHN COLLIER: And this was the reason that the project was not more functional because it would have measured up to any function that had been offered. The photographers would have risen to the challenge of a larger feedback. But the feedback was limited.

RICHARD DOUD: What was the reaction of the press? I mean was the press in general favorable?

JOHN COLLIER: They thought it was great, they got a lot of free pictures.

RICHARD DOUD: And the public enjoyed learning about what was going on?

JOHN COLLIER: The pictures were very popular. And the press couldn't get enough of them. But the organization of feedback was poor. It was a terrible bottleneck to get anything out of the files into the public.

RICHARD DOUD: What did you think of -?

JOHN COLLIER: I suppose as high as eighty-five percent of the pictures in the Farm Security Administration file have never been seen.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, I imagine - yes, probably.

JOHN COLLIER: It might be higher.

RICHARD DOUD: Was this due to Roy's reluctance to get them out?

JOHN COLLIER: Well not always; it was due to something that Dorothea Lange referred to as "Documentary cookie-cutters." In other words, there was a very bad thing happening in the file. They sent out thousands of photographs all the time. Don't think the file wasn't used. They just pumped photographs out of that office, and requests came in constantly. They had a corps of girls that did nothing but pull these pictures out of the file and

the lab printed them up. They worked around the clock printing some type of stock print that went out to schools, to all kinds of places. Well these girls succumbed to the cookie-cutter concept along with everybody else. By the time I got to the FSA the "great" pictures had already been created and the pictures got greater every time they were used. So the pictures they were pulling out of the files were the ones that had been used, and they got used because they were pulled out of the files by preference in the beginning. I don't say they were poor pictures. They were excellent photographs. The "name" pictures of the FSA are actually fine photographs. But they represent only a microcosm of the macrocosm. And so Roy got upset about this. He saw that the same pictures were going out over and over, because if they had twenty photographs they were just pulling those over and over. Here was this huge file just sitting there. That's when he called in Paul Vanderbilt. Paul Vanderbilt was called in to lose the great pictures, to reshuffle the file in some intelligent manner, where you went not into a photographer's picket but into regional, geographical, whatnot classifications in which these things would exist, and he was trying to make it hard to find these pictures in the hope that new ones would be found.

RICHARD DOUD: Was he successful?

JOHN COLLIER: To a degree he was, he was so successful they stopped using the file altogether, because it began to be too mammoth. Roy himself, of course, became the greatest victim of the cookie-cutters because he had a collection of all these top pictures. He became the greatest villain in the thing because when he sent out pictures, he sent out even maybe fifteen pictures to represent the whole file. And I accused him one time, I accused Roy that he didn't even know what was in the files. I said, "I know you haven't even made copies of them." He had to lie out of it but I knew he didn't. He only had the original twenty or so great photographs there. And Roy himself doesn't even know what was in that file, even though we had to come back and show him everything we did, every last time. But Roy was saturated up to here; he had become visually numb to the mass of material, and he'd go to sleep looking at pictures. He would dutifully talk things over with photographers but it was obvious that the time had passed. So \_\_\_ I know Roy did not know what was in the files. He had a vague idea. Paul Vanderbilt could remember everything that was in that file with a very intense evaluation.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think it's possible for someone to go into the file today and pick out, oh say two dozen pictures that have never been printed and make them great pictures by repetitive publication?

JOHN COLLIER: I think a person could almost go in and pick a show like "The Bitter Years" of pictures that have never been seen before. When people would first see them they would say, "Well gee, they're not as good as "The Bitter Years"" because they'd be new pictures. But if you had some way of duplicating them enough times they would become as great. It's a very slow thing to make these images stand out, and a lot of it is repetition. You learn these pictures the way you learn tunes. It takes a little while to learn a new tune. But if the tune is a pop tune you know it must be good. So they have a kind of pup photographs around FSA that people knew were good. They didn't have to make good judgments. Those pictures then snowballed till they were greater and greater and greater. I don't say they're not great photographs, I just say there are other photographs probably equally great if somebody would start them rolling down the hill and let them snowball. It might take a different frame of reference according to the pictures because times have changed; but the pictures are there.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, one thing that I want you to tell me about while we're talking about the file - we're talking about the pictures not as individual pictures now but as a collection - I would like to know what you feel the file is today, what value the file has today, and really what should be done with it. I don't think it's sufficient to say, "It's there, we'll leave it there, and forget it."

JOHN COLLIER: Well I think the greatest tragedy about the file today is that we have no statistical picture of it, at all, it was never really classified. For instance, I know from scientific orientation that if you took all the like pictures, and put them together in a pile, of veal that Farm Security photographers were allowed to eat and put them all together they might make a thousand photographs. (note: this sounds silly, but it seems to be what he actually said!) And put all the photographs together in categories, you'd know something very important that you don't know now, and you'll never know it unless you do that, you'll never know it pulling out the individual photographs. In other words, the only, the real value of the file is the statistical impact value. It has a real mathematical incidence of significance in that file. We don't really know what they are. And no one has ever done this. It would take a team of people to do it. I know, being one of the few specialists of non-verbal evidence that this is the way it goes. It's the way it goes in every anthropologist's photographic file. The individual pictures are not every important. All the pictures together in like categories become extremely important, because they have an extra authority to them.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right.

JOHN COLLIER: They become statistics and they have a mathematical significance, and they form a giant image which allows you to say responsibly that this is really the character. Now the value of the file is that so many of the same things were photographed again and again and again, because Roy kept setting up these assignments



over and over and over again – always photographed Main Street, always photograph the park there – there were all kinds of main areas of American communities that were photographed over and over – always photographed Sunday dinner, always photographed people at leisure on the front porches – you know, you could set up a series of categories of the kind of photographs that people were sent over and over and over, always photograph the Fourth of July, let everyone Pearl Harbor time, there were all kinds of main areas that were giving out, broadsides to all photographers, “Get this now, get as much as you can of it happening now, everybody get it.” And Roy was enough of a scientist himself, albeit somewhat home-spun, to recognize that this is very, very important. I’m not certain that the photographers who made the pictures realized how important it was. They probably were sore at the old man because they had to do it. Actually, Roy knew instinctively, as a budding sociologist, what the real importance of the photographs were, and Roy was really paying lip service to the possibilities of the file. Roy made the file with a very long look into the future. He was just bored stiff at the prospect of some old prophet \_\_\_ the \_\_\_ history \_\_\_ of \_\_\_ it. It would take an eon of time, it would take a lifetime to analyze the sharp profundities “Tell us all, what’s s the truth? Give us the news story.” (note: This is pretty muddy. Can’t make much sense out of it.) And that’s the way Roy could have shared that impatience with the hurried look. Now Roy himself intellectually has never come clean about this, but as far as putting the file together – on a making end, his instincts were very, very correct and he encouraged people to keep taking over and over the same documents. Now the value of the file was that these things were photographed over and over and over. They were photographed enough times so any sociologist could come up with a very significant look at America of that period, not because there were one or two great photographs in the file but because there were thousands and thousands of pedestrian photographs in the file. And I said to Roy the last time I was talking to him, “Roy. The pictures that we find to be the most important are going to be the ones that people think of as dull.”

RICHARD DOUD: And this is something we all overlook, I think.

JOHN COLLIER: And it’s the pedestrian shape of the file that holds the great cultural vision. The eye-stoppers, the “Killers”, the dramatic pictures will never finally be the thing that will tell us what was going on. It will be the net impact of the record and some of the record has got to be very mediocre in not how much it is edited, but in the whole anthropological, sociological, historical data that today, tomorrow, or a hundred years from now anyone who wanted to reconstruct that period culturally could do it. And talk about the ethos and talk about the value system, and talk about the levels of culture, the levels of rewards, it’s all there, but you’re not going to get it pulling out a couple of great photographs from an exhibit.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Well now, along the same line, do you think that any government should continue photographing in this sense, or should it be done periodically, or –?

JOHN COLLIER: Probably something can go on all the time, but there are few governments that realize the long look and the importance of just quietly keeping the record.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Well, what is the best way that the file itself could be more or less publicized so people now would realize that there is something there to look for.

JOHN COLLIER: Well, I suppose that some university maybe a few years hence, when the area of non-verbosity gets more articulate and more important to the fields of various scientists, maybe somebody could get a very large grant and go and do a research job on the file. The great value of the file is that it remains an untouched research opportunity. No one has ever used that file for anything but pop records, and that is a waste of the file. You can tell very little; pop pictures are just tearing pages out of a manuscript and pinning them on the wall.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, the big problem, though, is to make – you mentioned a university, perhaps, backing the project.

JOHN COLLIER: Some school will have to be interested in turning their field workers loose on that file in order to sharpen their concept of non-verbal evidence in culture.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, how are we going to make a university aware of the potential that exists in this file if all we have –?

JOHN COLLIER: Pardon?

RICHARD DOUD: How can we make a university aware that this potential exists when all they know is a few popular pictures of it? How can we advertise the diversity and intensity of this whole –?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, the first thing you have to do is find out what’s in the file; nobody knows what’s in the file. I don’t think there’s anybody looking in that file. They look at it and after a few hours they fall asleep, because nobody has the staying power to look for more than two hours in that file. By that time they’ve had enough. I want to point out that if you’re ever going to find out what’s really in that file you’ll have to do it by semi-

automatic process, and recording, and you have to use a team, you have to set up a screening device so that you can come out with some kind of a level, like: 2,000 photographs of people sitting on front porches, and 2,000 pictures of Sunday dinner, and 3,000 pictures of Main Street, United States, and so forth. Any scientist who knows there is that much data on one thing is going to be excited about it, because that much data on one thing is bound to have power, is bound to tell you things about culture you can't get in any other way.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, do you think it's important at all to not only categorize these things but also to somehow systematize to include an equitable amount of photographs from each of the various individuals? Do you think that the photographer's viewpoint when he was taking Main Street is important?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, this has already been done. You see when the file was microfilmed, at least when Vanderbilt reclassified the file there was a big howl about it because his classification system completely destroyed the approach of the individual photographer, tore all the stories apart, put hermits under hermits, and toads under toads, and so forth, and the integrity of each experience has been lost. Now there was a big howl about this.

RICHARD DOUD: Excuse me. Let me turn this over.

JOHN COLLIER: Yes.

SIDE 2

RICHARD DOUD: OK.

JOHN COLLIER: Where were we?

RICHARD DOUD: You were mentioning that people objected because Vanderbilt -

JOHN COLLIER: Oh, yes. Well, he said, "OK, we're going to take care of that." He said, "Everybody take their important stories - because not all stories were important - the ones that mean a great deal to you, arrange it in essay order and you can leave out anything you want and put it in careful order and we'll microfilm it as an essay, in the exact order so that we'll even get a better chance of preserving the integrity of the experience than just filing them all under one person, because this way people will have to see them in the exact order of experience. So you'll have a complete record of your experience." Now I don't know how many Farm Security photographers availed themselves of this opportunity. I took all my important stories and put them together that way for them. But all photographers' work is filed together, and if they didn't want to do it, if they didn't want to bother putting them in order it was just filmed together, so you could get the complete experience by looking at the microfilm.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned earlier that you could tell something about Roy's simpatico or his relationship with the photographer. Would you care to tell me something about how he would operate with an individual photographer?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, he operated very appositionally. He'd start out by impressing upon a photographer the importance of knowing what he was doing, and he would hold a photographer, and hold a photographer, hold a photographer from going into the field. Theoretically the photographer was supposed to reading books, we had crop charts, and weather maps, and if he was going to send a photographer to Iowa he would say, "I want you to arrive there with the corn coming out of your ears, so you'll be able to know what you're to look for so you'll be able to record what's important." This was one approach, sort of scholastic, academic approach. The other approach that Roy had was he had a strong feeling - sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't - if you sent a Westerner to the East you're going to get an image of the East that you would never know about except when a Westerner looks at it; and you'd send an Easterner to the West who had never seen the Rocky Mountains before so he'd then give you the excitement of the mountains, that only somebody who'd never seen the Rockies would ever experience. He used both these approaches. And he then used the utterly non-objective approach and just said, "Well now get your car and get up there in the Nanty Glo region and don't come back for three months." Open end, up to you.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what about Roy editing pictures? A lot of pictures, a lot of negatives were destroyed.

JOHN COLLIER: Remarkably few were edited. Not too many.

RICHARD DOUD: You think those that were killed were primarily on the basis of not being good pictures?

JOHN COLLIER: Oh, they had bad things about them. Some pictures were "dupes" and they tried to keep dupes out of the file, and they tried to take out pictures which were artistically photographically bad; some that were over exposed; we made some bad pictures and you had the privilege of - you edited your own story and photographers killed their own stuff sometimes. Then you have another factor which is important and that is

captions. And the captioning for some photographers was a pleasure, and for some photographers was a terrible chore. Roy tended to be sticky about it and he also made people re-caption. I'm ashamed to say that Farm Security Photographers as a rule did not keep very good notes. They entered the project very subjectively and they had to caption every blessed thing they did. When they had notes they just got their names, locations and then they'd get some photograph and they'd caption it wrong and they'd have a horse on a hill, you know, so they'd say "Horse on a hill in Iowa" and Roy would blow his top and say "If you can't do any better than that, you'll have to kill the picture." Roy tried to get the photographers not to read into the pictures, but to be more aware of content significance, and help other people find the content significance. Well, the thing got out of hand, he had photographers who were Marxist-oriented who'd go to Cape Cod and rig up a pier, photographers who'd been photographing piers up there with seagulls sitting on rotten piers and the caption would read; "Rotten piers symbol of the decaying fishing economy of Cape Cod, wood represents the inferior green-cut lumber from Nova Scotia due to this and this and this."

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JOHN COLLIER: I mean sometimes they went to ridiculous lengths trying to read in and this was in many ways as bad, if not worse than the "Horse of hill" approach. And Roy did try to strike a happy medium of giving thoughtful, intelligent information without all the horsy nonsense about Marxist principles.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Do you think the file suffers because of the captions?

JOHN COLLIER: No. Not at all. I think you find beautiful captions in the file, I think that the caption-writing in the file became poor because they tried to do it all at one time. If they had done only twenty a day it would have been a lot better but a photographer would sit there and try to caption a thousand photographs a week, or something. And they got brainwashed so they wrote bad captions. In other words, you'll find beautiful captions that contribute tremendously to the photographs. (I guess we have to eat.)

RICHARD DOUD: If you don't mind repeating yourself now...

JOHN COLLIER: I was saying that one of the untapped resources of the file as we moved forward into more complex influences in American culture is that the file is historical, much of the file centers around sons of American pioneers, the sod busters. It intrinsically holds tremendous insight into American personality as suggested by the Turner thesis that American personality was not formed by European migration, it was formed by three hundred years of frontier, and lots of prints in that file were made on what was frontier a relatively short time ago. Some of them were made on what was frontier when the pictures were made.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JOHN COLLIER: Russell Lee has pictures of that kind in New Mexico and Arizona. The dust bowl itself was an exodus of American pioneers and the documentary material gathered by Dorothea Lange and her assistants, with her own captioning and her records is a rough record of facsimiles of the American as a frontiersman dislodged, put on the highway, but carrying much of the influence of the original personality. And much of this is a very ethereal, difficult area to get anything on when your principle level, verbal level, that is verbal documents of all kinds - you find yourself having to put it together in highly subjective writings like Mark Twain's, who unquestionably saw the American personality. Connecticut Yankee is unquestionably a great document on American personality. And it's highly subjective and difficult to handle on an abstract, philosophical level; it's less than empirical, it's suggestive. Whereas the Farm Security file holds unquestionably a great deal of very vital evidence about what actually constitutes the American personality as we think of it in North America. Most of the pictures were made west of the Mississippi. And the fact remains a \_\_\_\_\_ or something to come along and dig it out when they get a little better grasp on how to interpret nonverbal evidence.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, do you think that there is any danger that we perhaps have been so deluged with visual material that we can't really interpret the photograph as we should?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, the trouble is interpretation requires a painstaking type of semi-archeological approach of fitting pieces together, but if you superimposed those images you would find what this guy looks like. You can describe him with a high level of accuracy. You might get nearer to him than any other way.

RICHARD DOUD: The thing represents when sort of an archeological resource?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, only because of the past, it is primarily an anthropological-sociological challenge to compute that material. It has never been done. No one has ever approached that file with a scientific look. No one has actually approached it even on the poetic level, they've gone in and grabbed out a few pictures and run.

RICHARD DOUD: Could we make a beginning at this by perhaps grabbing out a greater number of lesser-known pictures perhaps?

JOHN COLLIER: Well, I don't know if it's a question of just looking at enough pictures. I think it's setting up the study target, the computing target that allows things to sink into proper position, that's all. It's just too bad that the file can't attract the right kind of student and the level of people that could use that file is amazing. I refer to you a book called: Stop, Look and Write. Do you know it?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JOHN COLLIER: ...is a good can opener to one group of people that could use that file. Warsack and Keyes' non-verbal communication students could use that file. Any number of otherwise very unrelated disciplines could use that file student-wise very creatively. Students of the American theme could use that file. It should be used in all these courses of American studies. If all students of American studies were turned loose in that file they would come out a lot nearer their mark. I don't mean to say that file is the only file. I say that this kind of file is what we need. Unquestionably that file eventually should be added with some intelligent editing of other materials that are constantly being produced. After all, the Farm Security photographers were no the only fine photographers going out and making this kind of observations. And photographers went out long after the file was disbanded. And since then there's been much material again that has been collected and scattered to the ends of the country and used as badly and even worse than the Farm Security file. And it's a great pity that the custodianship of that file can't see to it that the file continues to grow. Every photo morgue in the country had material for that file.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, could you offer me some suggestions as to how I, as an individual, could help attract the right class of people to do the big job you mention?

JOHN COLLIER: No, I don't know your academic community, I don't know Detroit. I don't know who's in the area. But if I wanted to exploit that file - the trouble is the file is in Washington, not in Detroit. This is one of the cumbersome things about it that you have massive microfilm files. If you had a complete microfilm file of the Farm Security file it's not the same thing as having actual photographs but it's the next thing to it. Then you should go to the different departments of the various universities and let some outstanding students go through that file, in all the various kinds of areas, in creative writing, in poetry, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, all these fields have a great share of that file. And they could do direct field work, that's a file large enough - a field worker would work a whole year on that file and never come out and work almost full time. It is undigested, unclassified data.

RICHARD DOUD: Would you recommend then that as part of our collecting we do get a copy of that microfilm?

JOHN COLLIER: Well I think if you don't you're going to have a very lopsided business myself. If people have to read that typescript and then have to go to Washington D.C. and go through the file down there, it seems to me you would defeat your point. If what you are presenting is a research opportunity to scholars - not only, I say not just the Farm Security material, I think that you, as long as you have access to particular funds to put together a microfilm library, I think you're falling very far short of your mark if you don't find a record of WPA art and get it on microfilm. I think it's nonsense to talk words about pictures if you don't have the pictures. And I think the round of speculation that takes place on "What is WPA art?" would just be so much rot without the record of the artist. I really do. I think you have to make manful effort to round up the documents of that period and get them on microfilm. Otherwise, these reflections are going to be very empty.

RICHARD DOUD: I think you're right.

JOHN COLLIER: Now this may involve a great deal of work. You have to start and it's a search and you're going to have an immense amount of correspondence to see this thing happen. I don't think the idea of having the picture file there, that's beyond your scope. But you could certainly get them on slides. Slides were made of all those things. They can be reproduced, I mean copied, you know. The Coit Tower is intact. They almost burnt the ting, decided it had no art value, and then they kept it as nonobjective art, then kept it as a sociological masterpiece, because the Coit Tower records every evidence of the New Deal. There's a great deal of non-verbal evidence, aside from the question whether it has or has not art content is academic. The point is, the symbols are there, the record is there.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, do you think there's anything else that we should discuss?

JOHN COLLIER: I think you have a major responsibility within the limits of your plant and your funds to support your verbal data as far as you can. That's all. And certainly the unlimited possibilities of microfilm were designed for you. They would add very little to your space and add tremendously to your effectiveness.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right. Well I appreciate that. Can you think of anything else that we should say about Farm Security before we sign off here?

JOHN COLLIER: Well I certainly would if I were custodian of such an organization in Detroit and did have the

microfilm there, I certainly would make the rounds of as many schools as I could of photography to make use of it and to study it and try to get a better grasp of what is documentary photography and get away from all the nonsense and find out what it is really all about. Certainly schools of journalism should study it. I should think that if you work your organization to advantage you would have students flocking to that place. And I think you'll find the biggest mainstay will be the microfilm file and not the written material.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I daresay you're right.

JOHN COLLIER: I think the course of involvement here with the microfilm file is to have enough "sticktoitiveness" so they would read the material. And I think there'll be a limited number of people that will read the material. But a vast number of people will come to look at the microfilm file. The microfilm file should operate as a doorway to the other data both in the WPA art as well as the photographs.

RICHARD DOUD: Well that's interesting. I think it's helpful. Maybe -

JOHN COLLIER: Certainly I think Paul Vanderbilt would agree to that. I'm sure that's the way he feels about it.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I know.

JOHN COLLIER: Did you see him?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. I know Paul feels very strongly; he's insisting that we do get a copy of the film.

JOHN COLLIER: Yes. Another person who is not too far is Arthur Siegel in Chicago.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JOHN COLLIER: You should talk to him. He never worked for Farm Security; he worked for Roy, though, at the Office of War Information. And he knows all the photographers involved and he's an extremely intelligent and alert person.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. Who is he with, do you know?

JOHN COLLIER: He's with the Chicago Institute of Design; it's the old Bauhaus School in Chicago. I forget the proper name for it.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh yes.

JOHN COLLIER: I think it's important that more people in photography are drawn into this thing, you see, because it's a great monumental work of photographers. It's just a damn pity that the custodianship can't go on and the story continue.

RICHARD DOUD: Is Dorothea Lange trying to get something going?

JOHN COLLIER: She talked about it and talked about it and talked about it. It could be done if funds were available. It requires a very large sum of money.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, surely.

JOHN COLLIER: ...much larger than went into the Farm Security Administration. After all, people were being paid nothing, just enough to pay expenses, you know. \$2300 a year for a full-time photographer - very cheap. There were some top-level photographers who were raised in pay to \$3200 a year, but that was a really high salary. But yes, if there was a large enough sum of money given over a long enough period of time and the non-objectivity of the FSA file continued along with an intelligent involvement with what's going on. Now there's two things that have to happen: non-objectivity per se is not going to get you anywhere; it's non-objectivity teamed up with highly-intelligent direction. The non-objectivity is just as subtle as sampling devices. The assigned pictures have got to have the same level of subtlety as the unassigned ones. The non-objectivity sampling process is more astute than the structured process, but only if the people involved are themselves highly directed. See what I mean? They have to be intensely excited. If you have intense highly-directed people using a non-objective sampling system you could get something very great.

RICHARD DOUD: Maybe it's not as easy to find intense people as it was in that intense time.

JOHN COLLIER: No, I don't know about that. I agree with Dorothea Lange that we have many fine young photographers today who would dedicate themselves to work like this. That's not true. There are many fine young photographers who won't even work for the magazines, they won't work for anybody, they're too astute. I don't know that. I know five of them out here in San Francisco who could do that job tomorrow. There's five here

and five hundred in the country today.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it's a shame that something can't get started on this.

JOHN COLLIER: Well, it'll just take a large hunk of money, that's all. These people will have to be supported and filed work is expensive.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I think maybe I'd better bring this to a close.

JOHN COLLIER: Well, I hope you got what you wanted.

RICHARD DOUD: Thank you very much for giving your time here.

END OF INTERVIEW

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