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**Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise
Roskam, 1965 August 3**

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam
Conducted by Richard Doud
At their home in Roosevelt, New Jersey
August 3, 1965

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam on August 3, 1965. The interview took place in Roosevelt, New Jersey, and was conducted by Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: I think it would be good to sort of start with some of your background and some of your experience and how you first got associated with this Farm Security...

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I'll give you a brief rundown on my history. I was born in Germany of American parents, and therefore I'm an American citizen from birth. And I didn't get out of Germany until after the First World War where we got caught and we were civil prisoners of war. No unpleasantness, we just couldn't get out. I was sufficiently approaching, I was on 15, I was approaching on military age and they wouldn't let anybody out.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure, sure. It makes it---

EDWIN ROSSKAM: We saw a revolution there, and I lost my father, and came to this country and I learned English as fast as I knew how. (Do you think this is recording, I think it should be a little more.)

RICHARD DOUD: No, this is---

EDWIN ROSSKAM: From the time of my childhood, being an enemy alien child, this is a rough situation to be in, I was kind of driven on my own resources, and I took up painting and drawing. So that when I came here, I quickly finished in high school in six months at the time, and I was learning English-and then took one year at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. Then got out of there and went directly on to art school, and spent, I don't know exactly, four years in Academy of Fine Arts.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, really.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: In Philadelphia. I was a painter. I was moderately successful in painting, showed in the major exhibits, everything from the Academy itself to the Carnegie International, and had a one man show in Paris and all that kind of junk. However, -well, maybe I should say that I also joined the Exodus of ex-Patriots in the 20's and was very much a part of that experience which included everybody from Hemmingway over, I mean, you know-practically anybody in the United States who had any creative talents and any way of getting over there, went over there at that time-either

stayed in Paris or somewhere. In that way I experienced that whole ferment even to the point where I took part in Surrealism and all of that. At that time, I was a youngster, and eventually came to the conclusion, which was sensible then, even though I had a natural facility for painting, I was not a painter.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh really---

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And at that point I got interested in photography. I then went from Paris-I had a chance to go through the sponsorship of the Museum of Anthropology in Paris in connection with the European Press Syndicates, I had a chance to go to French Polynesia. I stopped off on the way at Martinique, got interested in the West Indies, which had some bearing on all the rest of my life, and then went on there and stayed for three and a half years in Polynesia, where I did a lot of photography and a lot of writing. Of course, you must understand that our present concept of photo-journalism, a word which by the way I believe I first brought into current use---

RICHARD DOUD: Is that right?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes. It appeared in an article of mine somewhere and has been used now as a standard trade name. This was all not really known, the closest thing that there was to a picture magazine at that point was a French publication called Druie(?), which used a lot of my stuff, and which incidentally, I believe is still in existence, I'm not sure. It's very much changed, but all of the notion which later on developed in Life and Look, and so on---were brewing then, but they didn't have any form yet.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So I came back from the South Seas not knowing that there was a depression here-right smack in the middle of it-

RICHARD DOUD: Oh boy! (laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I tried to write a couple books, they were rotten, didn't publish them, then I ran out of money and got a job on the Philadelphia Record, a now non-existent newspaper which was in competition with the Philadelphia Inquirer-it was a Democratic paper-the Inquirer was a Republican paper, under J. David Stern, whose empire you may have heard of. And I had given them-rather I sold them the notion, together with my wife-I had just married Louise-to do a picture page once a week with a picture story.

RICHARD DOUD: Aha.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now the idea that I could both photograph and write the story simply would not go down. On the papers in those days, the writers were one bunch of guys and the photographers, carrying these great big boxes, were another bunch. So this wasn't permitted, but I was permitted sub-rosa to put Louise on the expense account as gasoline-things of that sort with a given rate, so that she's also get paid. And we produced this page a week, which a friend of mine, who was then just a co-worker on the paper, wrote the captions for. This was before Life or Look, either of them had ever come up. So these were picture stories. I'm just telling you this only because that in turn led to other developments. After a year I left there and through Richard Butterfield, whom you may know of, who by now I think is a pretty well-known historian-

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: At that time he was the representative of Time in Philadelphia and Life was just starting up and he was trying to get people and things moving in that direction, so I went to see him and he said, "Well, what would you like to do?" I said, "I would like to go to the West Indies; I don't care where; see what there's doing." And the next thing I knew, I received a summons to Life, which was really in no shape (laughter) yet. So I was told to go to Puerto Rico. Well, Puerto Rico had just been exploding in 1937 at this point, and they had the Ponce massacre which was really a very grave unpleasantness and the whole nationalistic troubles-so Life sent me out there to look into that. I didn't mind that, except that they told me to interview the Nationalist leader, accomplice, and that was from their research department and he had been in jail for two years in Atlanta by then. (laughter) Well, we got out there and we did a couple of month's coverage and Life did not like what we produced, oh boy did they not like it! It was a highly critical evaluation of our position in Puerto Rico at that time and among other things it foretold the election of Munos(?) which was already pretty clear to anybody on the inside, and Life didn't like that at all, they were backing somebody else. Well, this was never published, but the pictures are now in the Farm Security File-you see I was a free lance-they didn't have the staff in that sense yet-oh maybe they had some; I wasn't on it anyway. So I came back from there in a couple of months and did a short job for Look and then got in with this publisher who wanted to put out some regional books-it was a journeymen's (?) publisher. And he gave me an assignment for two books, practically simultaneously-one in San Francisco and the other in Washington, which is a little hard to do at the same time-

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. You're right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So we ran ourselves ragged. It was a way to get into the book field and I-when we're off the tape awhile I'll show you the books-the San Francisco book too.

RICHARD DOUD: Good.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You can look at both of these. These are really early photo books of '37. And at that point I went to Washington and looked it over; I HAD NOT BEEN TO Washington very much and I got Mrs. Roosevelt to write the preface to this-it's a story all in itself, a very funny story how that happened-but anyway, I needed the pictures to illustrate from the various government agencies-illustrate the functions of those government agencies that were located in Washington, and that brought me to farm Security and Roy-and Roy took an interest in what I was doing, and apparently as much as he and his outfit had interested me, I interested him, and before very long I was on the job. And so, if you want, how I got into the farm Security, I guess this explains not only chronologically, but also a little bit how the interest developed.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And perhaps it doesn't quite do justice to the fact that I had already had considerable experience in things like layout and picture use. And this was something that Roy could not find, except in people like Ben Shahn, who couldn't be bothered by it.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So he would never let me go out and photograph after that-he had to have me on the inside. So I think that does most of this-now if you want to ask any questions in relation to this, why don't you-

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I'd like to interject here. This may not be the time. We were going to do this when we first started. You were going to tell me about your change in attitude towards

photography-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I'm going to come to that; I haven't forgotten that. We might as well handle it; I think, if you don't mind. Right now, I think I'm kinda going in this direction-

RICHARD DOUD: Fine, fine-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So let's follow it up. Now, Roy hired me...see what's the fancy name of the position, it was some crazy name-did Ben ever tell you how Roy had to wangle the damnest names and classifications for us? Because a photographer in the Federal Government, until Roy came along, was a guy who photographed a building today when it was going up and a building the next week when it was going up-

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was an utterly unimaginative record-keeping job. And the pay of these things was such that none of us would have taken it, even though we were anxious to work at it. As a matter of fact we couldn't have succeeded in doing, and living in the field the way Roy demanded of these people. I know that I got the highest pay at that time on the staff, and I think that I made three thousand something. It was fantastic, you know. Yeh, I don't know-Visual Aid Specialist-or some damn thing like that.

RICHARD DOUD: I think that was the general term.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, he put me on the staff then; we moved to Washington. Now the understanding between Roy and myself was that I would stay a year, and I stayed one year to the day, and got out of there.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh really.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now turn it off.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned how you became associated with Farm Security. Just what was it about this project that you found interesting, or made you think it might be worth your while to work with it, or on it?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, actually I don't know that. I knew too clearly when I came in just how much I was going to find in there. I think Roy's personality had something to do with it; he had always been an excellent salesman of Farm Security.

RICHARD DOUD: He still is.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: the pictures, themselves, certainly had a great deal to do with it-the whole notion of documentation with humanity, rather than documentation that had a kind of numerical quality to it was, of course, was exciting for all of us. There had never to my knowledge or to my knowledge, I was going to say "our" but I better limit it to myself, been photography underwritten that actually tried to create the portrait of a country in a given period. At the time, I think Roy's interest was still mainly in the presenting of that particular period in rural America. The fact that the historical importance of this material would be quite different from what any of us then could possibly expect, I think he couldn't know either. Now he told you no doubt how he came in there, and how he was a history professor or something of that sort, and he always had this historical angle, and if you'll remember the thing was called "Historical Selection."

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And I gather, this was all before my time, that in the very beginning it really didn't know quite where it wanted to go, and it really thought of itself as practically a data-gathering agency.

RICHARD DOUD: That's the understanding...

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes...

RICHARD DOUD: I get.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And then as it grew, it "grewed"! Like Topsy!(laughter) Now when I came in, because of-because Roy saw what I was trying to do with this book here-he was finding somebody, whom he needed, to put this material he had, to work. Then I had done some exhibits for him, but they were, you might say, action exhibits, propaganda exhibits for the purpose of Farm Security.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But the less direct, the less bread and butter use, had not been expanded as far as I know, except for one book and that was McLeish's book.

RICHARD DOUD: Would you care to evaluate that book?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I haven't seen it for a long time, at the time I was impressed with it greatly. My only-for me-the only flaw that it had, was the one that I mentioned to you earlier-was that in terms of using a medium to communicate, it was self-defeating.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Because it was possible to look at that book and read it while standing in a book store, at one standing-therefore the book didn't sell enough to keep it going, and once that happens your means to communication is cut off. And when I mention money in relation to these things, it's not because I'm concerned particularly about money one way or the other, but I am concerned with communication. And if you're not selling books, you're not reaching anybody...

RICHARD DOUD: That's right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So you might as well not have published it. Where were we now?

RICHARD DOUD: I think you were discussing what interested you about the Farm Security files...

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, of course, there had been no previous to this, to the best of my knowledge, no single project that was supported on a major scale, especially by government, that encouraged photographers in this way. I don't know-I did know at that time that the Hines collection had been made and a couple of other collections, but whether they were supported by any organization, I really don't know. I doubt it. The photographers themselves did this. So here was an opportunity to kind of put to use visual material as a language, and that was at that time, my interest. In other words it was perfectly legitimate for Roy to think of me strictly as an editor, because that's how I came in, to use photographs. And he had, of course, any number of regional and other exhibits to put out and this was the bread and butter work. But in addition to that, there were occasionally combinations of pictures and words to be made which in all likelihood were going to turn up more

meaningful than that. And I would say that the one that turned out most meaningful in that case, was the one I did with Sherwood Anderson, Home Town.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This same publisher had been-wait a minute now-did I do that the first year? Or did I do that later? No I think it's the first year...didn't I?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Home Town?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Home Town, yeh.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I don't know dear-I know you left the-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, that's later-that's for the Richard Wright book.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No. Yeh, that was for the first year, that's right. While I was there, I made connection with this-this publisher here, and Capella is his name, and this was part of a series he was planning for the "Face of America" series. And I got in touch with Sherwood Anderson, and he agreed-I guess he got an advance out of it, the publisher-I didn't-I got nothing out of it that time-and(this was part of my job)-

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And then here was the opportunity of putting words and pictures together. The only trouble was-Anderson by that time was no youngster anymore-and he just used to let himself go and he while I asked him for 20,000 words and he probably wrote 60,000. And with a little note attached, "You cut it."(laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: That's decent of him! (laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So I did and the book speaks for itself, I think. I think it's probably of all those books, by far the best. For my money, it's much better than the book I did with Richard Wright later.

RICHARD DOUD: Could I ask you something here now? Your first interest here in this file, you mentioned earlier, was that you were selecting pictures for this earlier publication. Now, when you became acquainted with what was there, were you more interested in the concept of an organization doing this type of coverage, or was your interest in the quality of the individual photographs, or were they that much better as individual photographs than others?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well you can't make a general statement. At that time we had about 60,000 photographs in the file. I don't think you could make a general statement about the quality of 60,000 photographs. Every single photographer was in there, had good ones, mediocre ones and even bad ones.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. This is to be expected.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Ahh. With the possible exception of people like Ben, who withdrew those that he didn't like. Now, Roy did an awful lot of what he called "picture-killing."

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I suppose in a way you have to, because everything couldn't be kept, and especially with a Mini Camera, you shoot an awful lot to get something. On the other hand, the method by which this was done, which was a punching of holes through negatives, was barbaric to me because I'm sure that some very significant pictures have in that way been killed off, because there is no way of telling, no way, what photograph would come alive when.

RICHARD DOUD: That's very true. A lot of people share your opinion on that too. I'm one of them.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes, I-I mean you-it's not because of events, but the historical view is so different from the contemporary view, and at the time that the picture is made it is impossible to foresee what the historical view is going to be.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So I'm sad about that, as far as that goes. But then I can't be as sad as some of the people who were more involved than I am today, because documentation has not proceeded from there. This has been an isolated instance. And then there's been a little in the country here and there, or in Puerto Rico or here, it's always hit or miss. But our history had not been documented, and is not being documented now, and that is a damn shame.

RICHARD DOUD: Yep.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Because here's a medium that lends itself to the making permanent of the lives of a generation in a way that was not available to previous historians. Let me tell you something; it's an aside. When I wrote *The Alien*, which is a book about Puerto Rico, which is fictional. One reason why, and there has been a great deal of comment on this, the documentary detail in it is so starkly complete is because I have photographs of it. No memory can do this for itself. When the March of the Ten Thousand was described in Greece, there were no photographs of it, and today it's a romantic cloud-as long as those photographs remain available of that particular period, you will always know what rural America was like in the time of its trouble. I felt that then; I feel it much more strongly now. I feel much more strongly because I'm cool about it; I was hot about it then.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Well, just what, just what were you doing precisely-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I was making exhibits. I was deriving books and publications; I was filling them. All kinds of people would be putting out articles and I would be selecting their pictures for them, just what a photo editor does.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Making slide films-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Making slide films, yeh I forgot about that-it's a horrible medium and I understand it has teaching value. (laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: So they tell you.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes. Awful things.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what about exhibits. I haven't found too much on this exhibits business.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, most of this exhibit material was within the organization, the different

regional offices, and so on, you know whatever point the Administration wanted to make. We made all kinds of exhibits for sending out into the field. There was a whole shop there that had nothing to do except mount and pack and ship. You know, and spot, and letter. And they would be sending out exhibits-I don't know where, I'll bet Roy must have records of it. There were thousands of the darn things it seems to me-as many as I got hair left on my head. Not too many. (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: They were shown in other places besides the regional offices. They were-there were exhibits of Farm Security photographs in New York-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes, all over the place-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And all over USA.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It all merges in my mind. Not one of them stands out-not that I was concerned with.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Oh, I remember the tone of the exhibits was very, very effective. Like the tone of a whole organization that -here would be a group of pictures that would-as they said-stated the problem, but stating the problem was a very emotional thing because-like what happened to me when we first went to Washington, and got involved in this. We moved into an area of Washington that looked very nice and I've never, you know, I could have passed 10,000 alley dwellings and never seen them, but once the pictures were made or we went into the arena-to actually-with a camera. We had to-with a camera it means you have to talk to the people and you suddenly see an alley dwelling. There it is, these people are alive and living in it, it becomes something completely different. It's there and you-it becomes part of you and you can't run away from it any more once you are actually faced with it. And the next best thing to that is seeing it in a photograph. And then, of course they tried to show what the Farm Security Administration was doing about this, and showing projects and whatnot, so that you got a sort of feeling that something was doing done about all of this and you were affective in it, which made you very enthusiastic and you wanted to do more and more. But, I'm sure that many people who saw these exhibits never had a concept of what on earth was going on in this country, because even the photographers, who were mostly middle class to wealthy people, and I am sure never would have taken a camera and turned it on these subjects ordinarily, since this was the thing that was assigned to them, that they began to get involved in, they started to open up a whole vista to themselves and-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now there-there-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Everybody saw the exhibits that were pit out.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now there-Roy gave me a job, which I suppose affected the latter part of coverage after my coming, say after the first three or four months of my being there, considerably-this was something that was never done in Ben's time nor did Ben need it. But fir instance Marion Post, and some of the others, even Vachon and so on would get shooting scripts from me, which were fairly well researched, long documents. I remember sending Marion out to do a coverage of winter. Well it must have been a twenty page shooting script of that. Now by that time, of course, we were fully aware that our coverage amounted to more than either on the one hand, Farm Security and its effects on the tragic dilemma of American agricultural living at that time. The whole rural scene and before very much longer, finally the urban scene began to come in. When Dorothea did her coverage on migration-I remember doing a number of exhibits, incidentally on the Grapes of Wrath-when she did her coverage of migration, she opened the door to the end of the migration. And the coverage we did on that later, and I was not on the staff then, I went out with Russell Lee

to finish the coverage, was in Chicago and that was used later on in The Voices, Twelve Million Black Voices, because he couldn't do migration without showing, finally where migration went to. Migration went to the city.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh, yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: In the long run.

RICHARD DOUD: What was the connection, if any, between Steinbeck and the Farm Security Administration?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well there, I could only speak of hearsay. I have been told that he was introduced to the problem by a field man in California, a Farm Security field man who traveled around with him for a number of weeks, I gather. But this you will have to check with somebody who knows. I don't know this. I made exhibits on this only after the book had appeared, you see, the book was almost like a threat for Farm Security.(laughter) Well, theoretically, you call this information; this is government information. I don't know and I don't think anyone can describe where information starts and education stops, and propaganda begins. These things are amorphous, they have no outlines and they overlap. However, I will say that I got in farm Security, and this is what I got out of it, aside from any emotional satisfaction of being involved in doing something for people, I'm leaving them out of it. I got my step up into an understanding of the use of photographs as a language. From there it was only a short step to photographs with captions as a language, and then only another short step further to photographs with text so combined, that they complimented each other at all times. My thesis was then, and still would be if I were still producing such things, that the photographs should never be interfered with by saying the same thing in the text that you are in the text and vice versa. There are things you can only say with words, there are things you can say better with pictures than any other way. So the way to say the whole thing-put the things together in such a relationship to each other, that theoretically, at least, you read them jointly.

RICHARD DOUD: They were all pieces-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's right.

RICHARD DOUD: well getting back to the exhibits for just a minute here, I'm interested in where the idea for exhibits originated? Were these things all out of the central office, out of the Historical Section, or-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, the ones we did were. Well we did, we pulled an awful lot of pictures, and made prints for people who made exhibits. Museums, or whatever-

RICHARD DOUD: Did they tell you what they wanted?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: What they wanted, yes.

RICHARD DOUD:I see. Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And depending, there were also quite a few magazines that used these tremendously. The Time for that matter, the New York Times Magazine used us a lot. But they usually just wanted one picture to say something. But you know, you get to a point-this is an interesting thing, I wonder if Vachon ever talked to you about it? Vachon at that time was a file clerk. And he and I got so good, that we could take ten pictures-because Roy pulled this on us-he'd

lay out ten pictures for us, and cover up the captions, and they were pictures of walls taken with a flash, things like that-and we'd call him on it, not just who made it, but where. (laughter) I'll bet we wouldn't do it anymore. So if the two of us were fired at the same time, they would have shut up shop. (laughter) Because we were the only people there who knew where the pictures were. (laughter) The filing system was impossibly bad. It was something geographic and so you couldn't find anything, unless you knew every picture in the file. Incidentally, if anyone is interested in this some day, they would have to look into the very question of the filing of the pictures, which is very complex., very interesting thing, on which people have spent lifetimes. There is a woman in New York who runs the picture section of the 42nd Street Library, who probably knows as much about this subject as anybody else-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Romana Javitz.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I've met her-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And Paul Vanderbilt-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And Paul Vanderbilt, the two of them are at sword's point in their view.

RICHARD DOUD: I understand that-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But this is unimportant. The fact of the matter is, of course, that a picture can be at the same time an evening, a landscape, a child in the grass, and how are you going to classify it? (laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: It's a problem.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This gets worse, this I can tell you from later experience in other fields, this gets worse in motion pictures. Because you have movement in there too.

RICHARD DOUD: What about the system that Vanderbilt brought into this file?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, it's quite elaborate. I think if you really want a judgment on it, you ought to see the people over at the Library of Congress, who are using that system. This system became inevitable, and later on when we became OWI and 60,000 or 70,000 pictures by then, whatever they were, suddenly became several hundred thousand pictures. They came in at such a rate, that we couldn't possible keep track of them. Then, if we hadn't had a filing system, of some sort like that we couldn't have used the pictures. But now the Library has, I gather, so much that they can really tell you whether this thing works or not. I wouldn't know.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, we just used it recently at the Library of Congress. Edwin and I went down to find some pictures, and we couldn't even go into the picture file, they gave us a cabinet full of little cards and the-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: yes, Louise, but that was my particular file, because it was a gift-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, and these were pictures of Puerto Rico that we knew and on the cards, I don't know who made up the cards, whether you did, they did, or what-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think it's your handwriting-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: On these cards there was a whole list of subjects on each card, and then at

the bottom there was a whole bunch of numbers, and you could just by luck might find the one you wanted...So we didn't have-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Louise, you see, if you were after a subject-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: You'd have to look through all of those pictures-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: --that were referred on the card because-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No. No. Because they could do it with a -

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Oh, they have a microfilm gadget.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes. A microfilm, yes you could select very fast. But I don't know how well this works. I have my great doubts about it.

RICHARD DOUD: It's better than just a simple listing of geographic-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Geographic-it's impossible.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It's out of the question.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But from the Farm Security point of view, this is where the projects were, I mean you could look in west Virginia and you could find what was there before, then what was there now-but whatever-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh, that was the original concept-the use of the file changed so greatly-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: That's why they started-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Because they had a limited way of looking at it.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned earlier that this thing just "grewed"; I'd like to have you try to explain to me why or how the thing grew. It's, it of course, started out-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I wasn't there at the beginning, so Ben could tell you more about the beginning than -and then of course, Evans-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Or Rothstein-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Or Rothstein, those were the people who know the beginning. I wasn't there, as I told you, I didn't get there until early in '38.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But Rothstein was actually a student of Roy's at Columbia-

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And he was really there from the first start-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And they as I could gather it, they just went, they just wanted to make records,

and the whole thing later on developed.

RICHARD DOUD: It's hard to understand, though, why a government agency would be allowed to do this sort of thing. I could see where it would be a -

LOUISE ROSSKAM: When Roy Stryker's involved, you're allowed-he managed to be allowed to do anything.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, Louise, that's not fair. The reason for this was not Roy-was not Roy that brought this about, it was Tugwell that brought this about.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh. But Roy-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Tugwell had the historic view, he always was a man of the large view. And he could understand how enormously useful in future times, what the, the kind of thing, the catching of the moment, in a way which-from the layman's viewpoint there's so little arguable as a documentary photograph. And of course, I suppose, both you and I know that, I know certainly, that by selecting any given frame out of time and space, which is what documentary photography is, I can put my opinion down like nobody's business.

RICHARD DOUD: Regardless of what-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Regardless of what's there. That's the record. After all, what is photography? Photography is a matter of selection. As I said in a given place, at a given moment, you point your camera at a particular frame of amorphous reality, select that frame out and click the shutter and say, "This is it." Now the amorphous reality changes later, but that frame stays in the file.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And it is immortal, and it has, because it was a mechanical process, that particular credibility that all the novels in the world could not command. It has an air of fact, and there is something in that, it lacks truth. The reason I'm-I might as well get this in now-that I do not see quite eye to eye as the role of photography, as we see it now, not as we saw it then, or as I see it now, not as I saw it then. That's correct. You see when you write a book, when you paint a picture, when you compose a piece of music, you are taking an empty piece of paper, and empty canvas, and you're putting something on it that wasn't there before. And that something comes out of you. When you are taking a picture, you are following only a very limited part of this process. There is in painting, insofar, and in writing, certainly,--insofar as it is realistic, objective let us say, rather than non-objective,--a selected element, just as there is in photography, but this is not the main element. The main element, is what I would identify as the creative element, which in my terms is not there, in photography in the same degree, and in the same form. Now photography is a process of highly aware selection of reality, that is, documentary photography that isn't done in a studio with lights and everything else. It enables you to comment, to have and form opinions, but it is limited in a creative sense. At the same time I would have denied this, but now I want it on the record.

RICHARD DOUD: That's very interesting. A rebuttal from Mrs. Rosskam?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, the thing that I feel about it-I agree with him basically, but I do think that the very fact of wanting to take a photograph, or be urged by somebody, or be urged by somebody like Roy to take a photograph, like in the case of a person-I was never one of the photographers, but-I took lots of pictures-and then afterward with the impetus of Roy's stimulation, I went on to be

a photographer, and I don't think you would ever think of taking the photograph to begin with if this creative process weren't stimulated in you. As I said about the alley dwellings and later on other things, that seeing just the unseeable that were absolutely not there, suddenly were there, had to be expressed-or I don't know, I don't want to even say expressed, had to be shared with all the other people in the world you know. If you saw the-this is what the effect Roy's outfit had on me personally, because I just came in there as absolutely nothing, just-I mean I was married to Edwin and trotted around, you know. But gradually as I began to see these things and feel them really, I had to react to them so that other people would feel them and see them too. And when I got a camera into my hands, I know that I wanted to take a nicely balanced picture, with a theme, you know, but I wanted people to understand what that woman holding her child, without enough to eat, felt; and therefore I waited till I took the picture-till, the ultimate of her emotions seemed to show, and then quickly got a picture. Well, now that is true I didn't have a canvas and painted it, but in myself the reaction was going on that would have gone if I had known how to paint. I think. But I wanted to feel that, and get other people to feel it, and that's the basic effect the whole Farm Security experience had on me, because I never saw any of these things before, and I'm sure the American public didn't see them. Certainly the ones sitting in New York would never have known the emotion of a coal-mining town where Marion for instance was photographing if she hadn't recorded that horrible gray, grim, dingy place with those people sitting around and dogs starving and what not, you know. It never would have been seen. And that's the thing that-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And the miners leering at Marion!

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, Marion is very-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I could always recognize Marion's pictures, because the men are always leering at the camera!(laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, even the stark quality of Russell Lee's photographs, where he stuck a flashbulb on the camera and went vroom, you know. And all of a sudden a little shack opened up with every little piece of grime on the wall, radio cords mixed up with the electrical cords, and what-not, was absolutely a complete blank, before he put it down, and everybody could see it.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Alright, may I come in and rebut the rebuttal?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Go ahead.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Because I think what you said is exactly what I said. Only you've elaborated on it very considerably. I never said it wasn't a good medium for propaganda; if you had been here before you would have heard it. Well, of course it is. You select out of reality that which you wish and stress it. And then, and incidentally this I think is a false view, most pictures-90% of the pictures in Farm Security have never been used or seen by everybody, except the staff.

RICHARD DOUD: That's probably true.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Very few. You don't take pictures so that people will see it tomorrow. That's true only if you're shooting for newspapers, or something like that. Outside of that, their chances of being used are very small.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, now while you're taking them, you think you are.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I never did that, and never had that feeling. I did want to use them, but I never had the sense that-you move the world with them.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, you 're just as emotional as I am. (laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I guess that takes care of that.

RICHARD DOUD: As a picture user, did you have much of a desire to take pictures yourself?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh yes, I was really bothering Roy to get out into the field; and he wouldn't let me go, because he had more of this work to do than he knew what to do with, you know. Just selecting, as he got better known and the outfit got better known(phone rings), but the demands of the various magazines were so tremendous, it could keep a man busy selecting for them. But this work required increasingly acute judgment on what was suitable for whom and why. If you put it in other terms, it did require a thorough familiarity with the picture language. More and more, Vachon was trying to get out of the file and did, and then after us there were a number of people, as a matter of fact I don't remember who all came in after that. Esther Buby came as a photographer. By the way, have you seen her?

RICHARD DOUD: No. I haven't.

RICHARD DOUD: And have you seen Parks?

RICHARD DOUD: I saw Gordon, yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think Esther worked for us there. Or was that at Standard?

RICHARD DOUD: She was with OWI.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's right, that's right. It's sometimes hard to know where one stopped and the other-

RICHARD DOUD: Well, yeh, it's a gray area-it's not black or white. Well, what were the majority of the requests for? What did people want in the way of publication pictures at that time? Or did they just write and ask for pictures and you decided what to send them?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: They would either write, or come in, or phone-and say, "Look I have to illustrate something that has a gray mood, it better be a landscape... I tell it's an illustration for a sad poem by so and so." So you went and got it.(laughter) So a lot was left to your judgment. Or on the other hand, people would put out photo-brochures and of course the government, itself, is a tremendous consumer of pictures once they caught on to this gold mine that was there. One of the things I would like to take responsibility for is a broadening of our coverages. When I first came, and I became conscious very quickly of the fact that what we had was a picture of a gigantic poor house. Now it's true we were created to document an acute illness of the economy, and what was being done about it in the rural area. But as the objective became more and more to cover rural America, it didn't take very much to say, "My God, the weather is missing, the pretty little houses are missing, the pretty little girls going to school were missing. Where is it all? Where are the cars? There are no trees here." (laughter) And so we began to broaden it. I-when you come in with a fresh eye, you can see a thing like that, you know, so I did have something to do with that, and to a very considerable degree I had something to do with the nature of coverage-what was covered and why, which was then shifted around. Now this may also have been done partly-Roy may have done this partly because climate, political climate was changing at that time and it suddenly took some of the curse off and some of the perfectly legitimate, pretty little New England towns showed up as well as the broken-down ones...

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: ..you know, and I see no reason why they shouldn't .

RICHARD DOUD: Well a lot of criticism has been leveled at this whole business and I think you sort of hit at it yourself that only say a few pictures were used. In other words certain classic photographs came out of this thing that were used over and over-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's true. Well this you can't stop. A photograph in use gets known, and after that God help it. There's that Madonna of Dorthea's with the two kids. You know when I used to have to pull that out when people would ask for it, I'd recognize it by the number.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: When people would ask for it, I would get sick, because I couldn't look at that picture anymore. It was a wonderful picture, but I had just seen it too much.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I knew this, but I just couldn't say "no" to the people who wanted it. They had a right to it. And there's nothing that the editor can do to stop that. There were many pictures that were just as symbolic as those.

RICHARD DOUD: Why does this happen?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't know.

RICHARD DOUD: There's no pattern.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Ahh, I think I gave you the best answer that I know how in the last phrase. There are certain pictures that have symbolic content. That picture of Rothstein's, of the dust storm, and those two little figures and the adult, this is the best symbol that we have in the file of a dust storm. The picture that Dorthea made, because in its composition, in resembles some of the well known Madonnas, had a symbolism that ran back through the centuries. Now she made other pictures which are more moving, but they didn't have that quality.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well this is my personal opinion. I don't know whether I actually entirely agree with it. I think this might contribute to it. Would be very difficult to put your finger on it.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure that's right. Well, one thing that bothered me, I was trying to thrash this out with the Delano's. The dust storm picture, I think that it is a good example, hey felt that when you think of dust storms, you just naturally think of this picture of Arthur's. Now what bothers me is that do I think of this picture of Arthur's in relation to dust storms because I see the picture more, in other words, do I see the dust storm through the picture, or does the picture come to mind through dust storm.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think both is true-

RICHARD DOUD: I think maybe I'm pre-conditioned...

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's right-

RICHARD DOUD: to think of dust storms through Arthur's picture. And-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well is this-isn't that actually-what you have done, just defined, the success of a picture in the terms of what Louise was bringing out before?

RICHARD DOUD: I guess so. Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is what happens. At that point, you know, you can't tell which is which.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't think you can tell the chicken from the egg at that point.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I still think-I don't know, I don't remember really well enough how they were used except I did see at the period after the pictures were made, long after the pictures were made, many, many pictures being used in all sorts of shapes. They were used in books of poems to give the feeling of-what was what's his name's-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: We got that story.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, well, and they were used in articles all over the place-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's right-magazines and news-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: That's it, an awful lot of material-magazines and news magazines and publications of all kinds. That's why I can't remember.

RICHARD DOUD: Aha.

EDWIN ROSSKAM; Because this is a rather complex-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Another-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: One particular magazine that used them a lot -a magazine that's died-I'm trying to think of it.

RICHARD DOUD: It wasn't PM was it? No. No, no, no, no. It was a very staid, sociological magazine-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I remember in textbooks everywhere. Now I deal with textbooks a lot-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And I have illustrated more damn textbooks-(laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And actually-not the famous ones-but many, many pictures that are in textbooks of every part of the United States, taken out of those Farm Security files, and every publisher who has used them and is still using them. Because I work in libraries with junior high school books, and those darn pictures are everywhere. They just used, just recently in a publication that came out of folk music, this one here.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh, they're used all the time, yeah.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Now this one is full of Farm Security photographs; this is the New Lost City Ramblers, and in a year-I don't know how many farm Security pictures-here's one-you know. Now this is just-this came out a few months ago. So the thing is not dead by any means!

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh no.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: It's-

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think at the time these pictures were utilized to extent they should?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, no, no. It was extremely difficult to make people use them properly. Certain editors would catch on, you know, but others wouldn't and then of course-the picture magazines and so on did their best to stay away from us-

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: they wanted to produce their own, which was perfectly legitimate-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But still if it hadn't been for the File, the picture magazines would not have gone off on the tack that they did. Don't forget that this File started very soon after Life magazine started.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It started, I think, a little before.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: So that the whole world of picture magazines in their documentary approach, was derived. I believe, from-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is too much of a statement, you can't prove it and I can't prove it. I doubt it very much.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: --but any number of coverages in Life could have been made by a Farm Security photographer. Rothstein went into Look after he left the Farm Security and started that whole type there. Gordon Parks was a Life photographer and his coverages are like the ones he made in Farm Security. The tone was set.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think a tone was-A tone was set. There were other tones that were set, certainly, too. But what bothers me, what I feel bad about and it has to do with the fact that I am no longer interested in the subject. It's because-well we have just not continued to document our time. So that this has now become an isolated incident.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And so somebody else, like here in New Jersey or somebody who wants to do a thing like that-so all right I'll play ball, but I'm not so interested.

RICHARD DOUD: That's too bad. It really is.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well there was a great deal in the family of-we always used to call ourselves "Roy and Alice's babies", you know, because-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Who did?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I did.(laughter) Well there was some-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I did not! (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: --something in the quality of the comradeship in that group of people that

always will-every once in a while, Alice would (laugh)-have us all over for some of her apple pies you know, and everybody would get together and there was a great deal of feeling of unity among the group of photographers and their wives, and Roy and Alice. And I remember that particularly, since I wasn't a photographer, there was a general-closeness with all-every once in a while Roy would treat everybody like a bad child, you know, if he didn't write his captions or didn't send his pictures or he got balled up somewhere along the line. In fact, it was really like "papa" and, of course, Edwin was a little on the side of this because he was an editor and not a photographer. But the gang of photographers wherever they were around the country would have this feeling of, you know, the country would have this feeling of, you know, "part-of-the-family" all launched on this project and when everybody got together, it was a lot of fun and you just never lost the feeling of, this group of people are doing this job. And nobody else-it really was a club, nobody else was in it-and every once in a while everyone was under fire, because they thought the government was wasting money or something, or everybody was being praised and written-an article would be written about them-and-but it was always everybody, the group of people that were working together. If that-you must remember that spirit-it was really-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Faith?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, there was a nice spirit about the whole thing.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, it was a nice spirit about it, if you like, but this brings out the whole question of, what was Roy?

RICHARD DOUD: Now, before we start that let me turn my tape-

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE 2

RICHARD DOUD: All right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I was going to talk about Roy. This whole project is unexplainable except in terms of Roy. You've got to understand, and so few people understand this, of course you know it, it was not understood, certainly by anybody then that Roy at no time was ever a photographer. People would always think of Roy as the photographer then, and you know, not only did he not take photographs, but his philosophy, his approach to photography, also was I believe, developed by people he had very good luck of falling in with, chiefly Ben Shahn.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And then there was a woman, what was her name? And Ernestine Evans.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: If you can get them to see Ernestine, this is a really remarkable woman.

RICHARD DOUD: I'd like to.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: She lives in New York. She's an old lady now, and I don't know how well she is, but she was a remarkable woman and she helped Roy-she was an editor, and she helped form his approach and his taste. I think Evans had something to do with it, although not too much. And, humbly, I think I did. Also, every photographer did in a way, to the extent they were-well-they were able to express it, not all of them necessarily were, I don't think that Vachon at that stage, at least I don't know how he is now, would have been able to give verbal form to his ideas. He just knew

when to make the pictures.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh. (laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is often the case, of course. But Roy was a magnificent sponge for ideas and he recognized an idea when he saw it. He was an exceptionally shrewd promoter within a political context. He knew how to fight for something, at least if there was nothing to fight, to make a fight, so he would keep the thing alive in people's minds and memories. He knew how to stir up attention; he also knew how to protect. In the process he very often used methods which no doubt you have found out, the photographers objected to. Well, I don't think you could possibly do this kind of job to everybody's satisfaction. I don't think anybody except Roy could have done it. Roy and I differed about a lot of things. But for what he was trying to do, he was able to build this thing from nothing, to something quite large to keep it going for a long time without deviating too far from its direction, through all the vicissitudes of political life in Washington, and this is an achievement.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned luck; this thing bothers me because this is the sort of thing that has come up throughout all of the research on this thing that it was more or less luck that Roy was the one that Tugwell selected. I mean-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was luck!

RICHARD DOUD: It was luck that certain people appeared working for Roy at a certain stage of the game. It was luck that Vanderbilt was able to get the file presentable to the Library of Congress. Is the whole thing luck?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, listen. No, this is not true. No, this is not true; I'm glad you raised it in those terms and I think I better answer that. I think that when you see two people happily married, you can make up your mind that the only reason they met is through luck. In the end, the fact that one walked down the street, and the other one walked down at the same moment and they met-this is an act of fate. So everything is luck if you like-but Vanderbilt had been looking for somebody like that-or Roy had been looking for somebody like Vanderbilt for a long time before he found him. No, the luck, I think, came in at the very beginning at the time when Tugwell with no idea that this was going to develop in this direction happened to have this pal in Columbia who he took with him. This probably on the notion that this guy has something on the ball, he didn't really know what. It was all remember, this was a time when all of these things were brand new, all the social research, the social science that was being applied, you know, it was all new.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And nobody knew what they were doing. They were groping in the dark. So you find somebody who had ideas and had the general coloration of your own and was interested in doing something with pictures, good! Go to it. Although I don't think that pictures were even thought of in the first place. Until he got Roy in there it was going to be words.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Tugwell could have chosen any one of the professors-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Certainly-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But he chose Roy, and he must have had a reason to begin with, and something in Roy's personality.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: The same as Roy took Arthur Rothstein along, out of all other students he could have taken.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Remember, Arthur was not a photographer then. No, he was just a student. So, I mean, things do start-look when everything is as it was at that early stage of the New Deal, experimental and new-everything is also to a certain extent accidental. Because you can't measure against everything-

RICHARD DOUD: That's right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: previous. So that's where the accidental part came in. And it is perfectly true that if it hadn't been Roy, it might have started and died within a short time, as it did here in New Jersey.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think that it was very likely a matter of personality, not one of ours, but the person who was pushing it within the government itself. I think this was just the kind of personality who could put that one over. Now Roy was. Roy had a tremendous love for any of the romantic pioneering aspect in this country. He has the Westerner's -even today, I feel, the westerner's semi-belief in the western movie. (laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: It's almost true.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh. (laughter) He certainly was a believer in the economics of the New Deal and having been involved in the study of this subject before, why, I suppose that had something to do with it, but primarily he was very human, very understanding of his photographers, and although he had times he, to put it in Louise's term, he played the part of the heavy father, he was a father to them. In the best sense of the word he protected them from all of the political wolves. This jungle of Washington is something you have to have lived through to understand what a monstrosity it is. I don't care whether it's Washington, or Paris, or Berlin, or any of the big government centers-is like that. It's like the academic world, full of jealousies and hatreds. And Roy was good in maneuvering through that. And in that sense he was certainly a "papa", because most of the photographers had very little understanding or knowledge of that. He would get into one jam after another.(laughter) And Roy would get him out.

RICHARD DOUD: Would you care to go into some of these people who were working around Roy? What contributions some of them gave-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, when I was there-well I think that was Ben of course, gave a great deal of his coloration and so did Evans-two very different aspects, and two opposite poles in a way. Ben always catching the significant moment and always people-well Evans contributed probably the very best of all the strictly architectural, structural pictures that were made. Dorothea, to me, in my humble opinion, is the greatest photographer America has produced and that includes Weston and all the famous names. Dorothea was kind of a saint. She always over-awed me a little bit, although she certainly didn't attempt to. She had a humanity that far exceeded any of us. She's a great woman. Rothstein was a city boy who could gleefully go out to the West and bring back Roy's romantic view of the West, just exactly as only a Brooklyn boy could see it.

RICHARD DOUD: (laughter) Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Marion had a view-she was a very nice person-and she had a very warn view of

people, and was one of the few photographers who without protest could make pictures that were not necessarily of destitution.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh, she's good.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Let's see, whom have I left out?

RICHARD DOUD: Russell.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh, Russell, he-as many of you know-was a terribly fine guy. He contributed on the one hand what Louise so eloquently named, the thing in which the flat flash is used to eliminate all possible atmosphere, so that the picture becomes a bare, brutal kind of inventory of poverty, or if not poverty, than the picturesque. Then who else?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, Gordon.

RICHARD DOUD: Did you know John Collier?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes. Very well, yes. John, as you know, is very hard of hearing and outside of the fact that he was brought up in the west among Indians, or in the proximity of Indians, by his father who was an Indian Commissioner, this being hard of hearing, I think affected in one way or another, his whole view of life and incidentally, his coverages in photography. I always had a feeling that somehow or another, or something, not quite there, in comparison to some of the others. I think that Vachon is a great photographer.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But Vachon is also-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But a little almost unconsciously. I don't think he could put it to you.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I really don't think he could. No.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: He was pure straight reaction. I don't think he ever thinks!(laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, but not about photography. (laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And some of his early pictures were technically so bad, that some of us-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He had a hard time learning how to handle a camera-eventually, just the technical end, which I have no respect for whatever, because I think anybody can learn that.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But his reactions were always just right. And very off-key; I mean he could catch things that were peculiar juxtapositions and point it up-things that the other people just didn't see-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He was a poet with the camera, that's what he was. He was a poetic photographer, really. I guess he still is.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: One of the best coverages was made way after Farm security, but he never would have been able to make it without having gone through it, and that was the one in Poland.

But it was really that-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Who did he make that for?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: That was for Life, or something, some magazine.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh, I don't think it was for a magazine, I think it was for some kind of an institution-

RICHARD DOUD: UNESCO? Or-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Not UNESCO, but -Ur-United-it was an organization headed by Mayor La Guardia, I guess before he died-International Aid Organization. I forget the exact name just now.

RICHARD DOUD: I have a record of that.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's nice. But anyway, John was always kind of an imp, you know. Let's see was there anybody else at the time? I think I've touched on everyone.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I don't know-I don't think there was anybody else. There was another man that wafted through-but I don't even remember his name-

RICHARD DOUD: There were several about whom I know very little; but I guess they weren't just there for very long for one reason-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: --somebody named Leslie, or something-

RICHARD DOUD: There was a Paul Carter-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Oh, that's right-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Paul Carter was a relative of some sort to the carter who was the head of the Information-

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I never got to know him.

RICHARD DOUD: Then there was a man, it may have been before-Carl Mydans-fairly early, yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I didn't know Mydans.

RICHARD DOUD: And then there's-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: We had some pictures of his is the file-

RICHARD DOUD: No-he went very early to Life Magazine.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, Jack Delano, of course.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Why yes. Well, we didn't talk about Jack, and I think that I mentioned him before. I think Jack is quite a guy, and I think he is in a job now which is-well it's certainly up to him in its significance, but it's unfortunate in a way because it takes up all his time in administration and he is

a creative man and ought to be making things, instead of telling other people.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well it's interesting to compare if we're just talking about the photographs themselves and their quality. The ones made by artists who paint and those not made by the artists who paint, or had painted, and Ben and Jack and Edwin had all been painters. I don't know, but I don't think Dorthea had ever been a painter, but she knows a great deal about painting, and if you're just looking for images, you know, you can always pick out the painters-photographers and the non-painters-photographers and-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't know how you saw-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well-Dorthea is just different, as Edwin said, I mean Dorthea is just a universal artist if she happened to paint instead of photograph, she probably would have been just as good, as a person she's an artist, just to sit and talk to her.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, this is very interesting. Somewhere, I don't know who brought it up before, but a number of these people, quite a large number-for the small size of the unit-had a fine arts background of some sort or another. You know-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Most photographers generally do. Very often do.

RICHARD DOUD: Russell Lee painted for a while-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Sure-

RICHARD DOUD: he never made any great shakes, I guess as a good painter. Jack, Jack had, John Collier painted for the WPA.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Jack certainly did.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think the kind of photographers that Roy needed, he had enough sense to be able to tell whether a person had some background in the arts. He didn't necessarily have to have painted, but his view of what you could do with an image wasn't limited to just what he was doing, there. It was coming out of somewhere...but I think it was...

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But it was very interesting to sit in on the conversation with Roy, right when you were in the middle of forming your ideas about what to do on the next job. Now where Edwin was able to give everybody a definite point of view, of how to approach a-a-well, I can't say a subject-because they never really talked about subjects, but an assignment, "You're going to a certain area and this is where the holes in the file are and how you think and this is the economic pattern and so on" and by the time they got through talking with him-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was all written out-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Or reading his scripts that they knew basically how to think about it, but Roy was entirely different. I had this experience because I couldn't resist getting a camera and once I took a vacation in Vermont, and I said to Roy, "Could I take some pictures for you?" you know, "I'll but my own film and everything." And he said, "Oh, here's some film," and then he starts rambling along about Vermont and really it didn't sound as if it had anything to do with what you wanted to do at all. You started talking about hills, farmhouses and how people build a little extension on the house for the old people, and about pickled limes, the sky and how to get to Vermont 50 years ago, you know; by the time you got through listening to him ramble along, you begin to get some sort of

formation in your mind of what there was up there so that when you get out there (phone rings)-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: (continues after phone conversation) But I'm sure that everybody sitting around, listening to Roy ramble, as it seemed, began to get his mind turned in the direction to be open to a lot of things that ordinarily he wouldn't perceive when he got to a place. Don't you think that's true?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well Roy was able to get people feeling about things. Roy, as you no doubt found out, is not a very coherent talker. He rambles, as Louise says, all over the place. But you come away with a feel. You may not always find that that feel is a real feel; he had certain books that he insisted that we read. Everybody had to read Storm, and everybody had to read about what the gun did to the West (laughter). I don't know what the book was. (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But you know by the time you got through just being around the apartment where he had collected the most fantastic stuff; he had every issue of Sears Roebuck catalogs, you began to understand that everything is important. I mean, just that little sign on the Post Office which was all smeared over with-with kid's scrawlings and so on, that's not unimportant, that's for photographing, you know. Well, I think gradually, over a period of exposure to Roy, you began to want to collect these images too, even though you couldn't possibly see why, but then when you got all of the pictures back and then saw that the quality, the texture of some unpainted farm house in Vermont was interesting compared to the quality of an unpainted farm house wall in west Virginia, you know, all of this began to form a picture and suddenly you saw that, gee, it was worthwhile.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, this is an interesting question which kinda fits in with the general line of questioning that you've got laid out here. I have never seen and I never expect to see the real meaning of the type of coverage that was done here shown in any reproduction of any kind or any exhibit or for anything else. Because the value in these things, of any one coverage-a photographer would go out to Vermont-and stay for three months. What would come back would be somewhere in the neighborhood of 3,000 photographs-well what we kept, probably, let's say a thousand-the meaning of that was in the total thousand.

RICHARD DOUD: Yep.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Not in any one, or two, or six, that was selected. And the only way you'll ever see that is to go there and go through them.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: It's marvelous when you do and if ever-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It's details you're talking about, they couldn't come out in any other way-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yet, there's such a real picture of things and they all have the same meaning. It's not exactly on the surface what the meaning is, when you go through them all, especially when you go from the west to the east or the north to the south, or the cities to the country to the small town, you begin to get a feel of what this whole country is-

RICHARD DOUD: well, this comparison thing is very interesting to me, because one thing that bothers me about the farm Security File is that in general, the impression that you're given through the various exhibits that have recently been put on at any rate, articles that have been written with illustrations, is strictly the poverty, the depression and the miserable conditions of the various-this is a part of the Farm Security file, certainly, but to me it's a very one-sided-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well they never-

RICHARD DOUD: picture-of the thing-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well they never-

RICHARD DOUD: picture-of the thing-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, they never really finished. If they could have been gone over-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: There is no finish--

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I mean they would have gone on and on and on-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's just what I said.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: --then the war came and there was no chance to-now instead-if you had gone right on into Standard Oil, there we were much freer to photograph all the other things we never got around to photographing in Farm Security. And I think the Standard oil File is definitely a part of the Farm Security File.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I understand that they've done away with a lot of it.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I don't know what they did with it, but there for instance when we went out to Montana, and stayed there for quite a long time, we photographed everything; we stayed in one little town for three months. Cut Bank, Montana. It is just two streets, and nobody could believe you could spend three months there.(laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: because we didn't just photograph, we interviewed, we wrote-well you saw one product like that-this book here-there's a year in that book.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And we could have done much more if we had the money, you know?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You can always do more. But the only thing is that when you think the thing historically, then it has the absolute imperative that it be continuous.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: That's what is a shame.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That is it, it's very discouraging.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what bothers me too-I have seen the farm Security File to know that there is more to it than poverty.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Of course!

RICHARD DOUD: I mean it's all wrong-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I don't see-

RICHARD DOUD: I don't think that it was all-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Of course not-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I don't think anybody has gone back and really made use of it lately as they could. And if somebody would go-could take all the way from the end of Roy's career in Pittsburgh where they-I've never seen the pictures from Pittsburgh, but there-oh Corsini, you forgot. Oh, he was in the OWI.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Of course.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But, anyway, way up then, all the way back to the beginning, I think you would have seen the unfolding of the whole idea documented-this country in whatever form-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: well, I think there's one thing that I think you can say. That no matter how restricted it later might become, as long as Roy was active, somewhere documentation of this kind was going on. It isn't now.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You see none of us are willing to play "papa" to this, and it needs a "papa", someone has to represent, someone has to fight for it, someone has to keep it going. Nobody who wants to produce is going to do that.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Somewhere you've got to have that spirit "don't leave anything out, everything counts," and also the skill to be able to handle people, and he's a real teacher. You know I've seen teachers that-I know I'm not a teacher myself, and the art of teaching is not to do something, but to-

RICHARD DOUD: yep.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: To see others do it.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: not to tell them too much what to do, but to somehow underneath-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He has another quality, Louise, and I think this is in a way more remarkable-and that was the quality to be able to learn from other people.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, well-that was remarkable.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He couldn't only teach, but he could learn. He could recognize himself how much Ben knew that he didn't, and learn.

RICHARD DOUD: This is a remarkable quality that I'm afraid so many of us don't have. Well, in the production of a file such as this, how important is the laboratory? I don't know too much about the lab. Who was doing that?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I can tell you all about that. It was obviously necessary that a laboratory of this sort produce not only an adequate result, but a foreseeable result. In other words, if that photographer is taking pictures out in the field and not going to come in for months, he has got to know that he is shooting for a certain development, so that his things come out properly exposed. And if that development is not always the same, then he could be very disappointed later because there might be nothing on his film, or it might be all over-exposed or something, so that in a situation like this it becomes necessary to create a lab which produces to an absolute standard. It has to do the expected, so that the photographer in the field when he sets his exposure meter to 16, it's about what we were shooting at in those days, he knows what he is getting.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Outside of that the lab was capable of making adequate prints. I think any photographer who wanted a perfect print, probably somehow when Roy wasn't looking would wrangle his way in there and make his own, but they were on a level with the usual commercial labs that are available to the magazine photographer today in New York. I think the new ones have ways that were partly learned from us, for all I know. Because they also have to be standardized.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Of course, they could make prints out of slides, any kind of murals, things of that sort.

RICHARD DOUD: Speaking of murals, I wanted to ask you about the big mural in Grand Central Station.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I will briefly admit fatherhood to this thing. (laughter) I had left the outfit and I had just done a book with Dick Wright, and I don't know what the hell I was involved in at the time, and one night when we had all been out and had been drinking quite heavily (laughter), a phone call came from Washington into our home and it was Roy and he said, "Ed, you once said to me that you could make a photograph any size. You still think that's true?" I said, "Yes." Well he said, "You better be able to prove it." (laughter) "Come on out here." "I don't want to come out there." "You're drafted, come on." "All right." Well, what they wanted-I had once said to Roy, in some unguarded moment that, given the equipment, I could take any photograph he wanted and make it the size of the Empire State Building, which is perfectly true, provided the viewer is far enough away, which you would have to be anyhow. It took me great knowledge, to know that. So he got me involved in this Treasury Defense bond thing which covered one whole side of Grand Central Station, ten stories high and 120 feet long, and so we had to build a lab for it and so on and I took all of the Farm Security photographs, I remember the war had just really begun, it was shortly after Pearl Harbor-no, it was before-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: It was before-the Defense Bonds-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was before, the defense Bonds, that's right. Well, anyway, there was this security craze, that I couldn't get a picture of a battleship (laughter). The only battleship I finally got was a copy negative from Time magazine, this big. And that was a battleship from the front, which was large enough so that the openings of the 16" guns were 8-10 inches across, half the size of the battleship.

RICHARD DOUD: Wow! (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Just fantastic.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was fun, logistically, because for instance the gray side of the battleship has no differentiation at all, the grain was without exaggeration this size.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh!

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And you couldn't see what in the hell you were pasting next to what.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So it was done by numbers and etched lines on glass. See, we made glass negatives of these composites. The composites were not very good to begin with and by the time the assistant Secretary of the Treasury, and everybody else got through with it, they were even worse. But anyway, it was fun making so big a photograph. And in that sense it was an experience. Again they killed by wife in the process.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh. Well we tried to document the production of this. We have the whole documentation.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Where is that thing?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: With you mother in Philadelphia. We made a book of it for Edwin's mother-I don't know if it's anywhere else, but she has it if you want to see it-I don't think it's worth it.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Ahh....(ugh)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, anyway as each stage went on we photographed it, and from in Washington where they built a big shower bath, just to wash these tremendous prints---

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You see, paper only comes in certain sizes-it comes in rolls. At that time, I think it's changed now, but at that time 48"or something like that-was about as big as you could get. We had to lose an inch or two on each side, so that that was their size and then-the height could vary of course, but then we found that we could only project so much, because we had only so much space to the ceiling.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So this created a limit there and that gave us the size of our unit, and that had to be pasted on, and then we were further reduced because the doors of the Grand Central Station were only so big, and once this was mounted, still had to come through doors. (laughter) So, as I said, the logistics were fun. It was amazing when they put this dumb thing up, except for one spot it fitted everywhere and at that one spot it was about that much off, so we sent a guy over with an air brush and fixed it. (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, anyway Edwin was photographing the process of putting the prints up on the scaffold they made, so they had, I don't know, a 60 foot ladder or something?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: And he wanted me to go up there and hold the side lights, you know, the flashgun that gives light from the side, while he was way down there somewhere and he gave me a signal when to flash my light, and then he kept his lens open so that he got the lighting that he wanted. Well I went up on the top there and put the flashbulb in for the second shot, after he had made one, and I was just putting it in and about to turn it around when he gave the signal and the thing went off or something-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, you know why-I set it off!

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, anyway it went off in my face and it was such a shock I had to hold on to this teetering ladder-I don't know how I lived all these years-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't know, I don't know-this thing had to be put up in sections just big enough

to go through the doors, and they were all attached together with wing screws, and every day a man would have to go, and change the tightness of these wing screws, according to the temperature and the humidity.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: It was just fantastic-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And when they put it up, I remember these men up in those bosun's chairs, or along these ladders and scaffolds-I was scared to death because they had to work on those high places and they were all kind of drunk, and I was sure that I would have a couple of dead ones. But everyone came through fine! (laughter)

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But it was really quite a feat-

EDWIN ROSSKAM; And just as we finished, we were about to open and Pearl Harbor happened and they just simply put the word "WAR" right over the word "DEFENSE," you know. And left the word "DEFENSE" underneath.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: But the photographs were all out of the File, except for the battleship and-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And the ones of the soldiers-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Oh yes, of soldier and sailors. They insisted at the last minute that they have the soldiers.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh, you know. They kept telling us more things-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: and there were three sections-one was-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Agriculture, Industry and the Family.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Yeh, that's right and of course that picture of Rothstein's-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, that isn't -there was one-that central panel consisted of a Rolle shot of a group of kids, I don't remember if that came from Rothstein or not, I don't think so and then there were in the back the mother with the child by Rothstein, against the sky, which was a Mini negative-and that went to 40 feet. But I don't really want to make anything of this thing. I have no respect for it, except that it was-

LOUISE ROSSKAM: It was use of the Files-(laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: It was use of the Files, so it was a fun thing, if I can use that?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I mean nobody had done it before. As the Secretary of the Treasury, Odegard, said to me at the time, (I don't know if it was Under secretary or Assistant Secretary), he said, "Look Rosskam, if this thing works out well, we will have a good mural. If this is a flop, you will have created the biggest flop that was ever made." (laughter) But he would make sure that I would be the one who created that.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I remember that Roy was hovering over this the whole time like a mother hen, and the night that it actually opened, and some dame sang the "Star Spangled Banner" and everybody was there. When it was all over we took Roy into that Jenson's restaurant there and I -

Roy is a very temperate man, really, I had never seen him drink-well he drank about five Irish Whiskeys in a row,(laughter) because he was worried.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, we lived in the damn station for months.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Months and months. We hardly went anywhere.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: The installation of the thing-it was fantastic.

RICHARD DOUD: Aren't you glad you didn't do another one of that size?

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Nobody could convince anybody to do a thing like that-(laughter)

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was so bad.(laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: Well, to get out of this for a while. I think it's this sort of-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I think it's ample for that.

RICHARD DOUD: I would like to know a little bit more about your relationship with people like Sherwood Anderson and Richard Wright in the book field, whether-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well I'll tell you how this thing with Sherwood Anderson worked. I then, after the Sherwood Anderson book, I didn't get any further, but I did like the idea of producing that kind of book, so I went to Viking, and submitted to them the plan of doing this Negro book with Richard Wright, although I had at the time no knowledge that I would get a hold of Richard Wright, but I think he was one of their authors, I think that's how I came to go to them-no, he wasn't either, he was a Harper author. But I know somebody, who the hell was it, who knew him. I hadn't known him.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Later I talked to him-photographs were then still something kind of startling and new and exciting, and then I got him excited. I personally don't think he could have done a better job on the text-I'm fond of this text. The book was exciting in one sense that I was off the staff at that point and I got Roy to allow Russell to come out to do the end of the migration on the Negro part of Chicago. We had a fascinating three weeks there. Dick Wright really knew that stuff cold; he knew where everybody was, and he knew everybody in the Negro world of Chicago. And I don't know if many white men had the opportunity to see it the way we saw it. Man, that was an experience. We did everything from the undertaker to the gangster. There were a lot of people that we saw that we didn't photograph, although we photographed some of them. One gangster we photographed didn't seem to like it. It didn't happen to appear in the book. It's in the File, I guess.

RICHARD DOUD: Did Farm Security have an active agency, let's say, for this type of outlet? Were they actively trying to publish as Farm Security?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No. No. No. It was simply-look, here were these pictures-they were made with tax funds, therefore they were everybody's property. This is true of anything produced by the government. You can't copyright a government product.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh. Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Any-therefore any-any user could come to us, and we would have to give him

the use of that product at cost to us. Now, how Roy established those costs, I couldn't tell you. I think it was so much a print, so much a square foot of enlargement and so on. Now, that as far as the official lines was concerned, was everybody. Everybody had a right to them, if they had a right to exist at all, just like they do in the Library of Congress. But, Roy saw very well that the more use in respectable media, especially in the area of what you might call "art", whether sowed by Dick Anderson or Dick Wright or whoever. The more we could publish that way, the more standing he would have from which to protect, again, to enhance his operation. Legally he was required to do it anyhow, and so there was nothing in the world to stop him from encouraging this use, although it wasn't part of the policy.

RICHARD DOUD: I keep thinking that it should have been part of the policy which-because it wasn't, it seems to me a weakness-brings me to the weakness of the File.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yen.

RICHARD DOUD: What do you think? What were the weaknesses of this thing?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh, I don't know if I could just sit down and call them off-I think an awful lot of the weaknesses there were inherent at the time. I think that Roy got as much use out of that-the kind of use we were just discussing-that it was possible to get at that time. You know to find a publisher who was willing to put money into-it's expensive to produce a photo book.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure is.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And there hadn't been many. It really took some convincing, I can tell you. I tried it. (laughter) It took money, and it was a thankless thing because the amount you got out of it was nothing in comparison to what you put in. I mean, you know, in each of these books, I worked for six months, or close to it.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: I think royalties were-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Nothing! What the hell, what do you make with a book, a couple of thousand? Now that's one reason it was not used that way more. And also, the photograph wasn't recognized. Look, Life was just beginning, the use of the photograph was in its infancy; it was very difficult to convince people to use it right. There were a few editors who caught on, but they were always the same ones.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: The St. Louis Post Dispatch we had no trouble with, but most papers couldn't understand it, certainly most magazines were suspicious of it. It was competition.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And so far as the exhibit thing was concerned, except-exhibits are very expensive to the agency that produces it, this was a hard thing to justify out of our budget. This other thing was paid for by the person who was using it. It's a different thing, you see. There was no expense to the government.

RICHARD DOUD: Spending government money is a different story.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I mean the money had already been spent in making the photographs, and all

that was spent was this time in the laboratory and for that we got paid.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, how could this whole operation have been better? In the operation itself, in the coverage of America--?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: well, I'll tell you what I personally think, is I were to set up a documentary outfit today. Which is the only way that I could answer that, or even then if I had the vision then, which I certainly wouldn't have had, because some of the instrumentalities didn't exist. But if I were to do it today, and I were to set up a documentary outfit, it would contain photographs, movies and especially sound.

LOUISE ROSSKAM: Well, you're leaving out something that it should have contained then and the way Edwin worked in Puerto Rico, his operation did contain-and that us some consulting social anthropologists. Now that's a very different concept from the farm Security File-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You see when I set up this thing in Puerto Rico which I will tell you about a little bit later, maybe I should in connection with this.

RICHARD DOUD: I think so.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I had a humility, which I probably wouldn't have had in relation to the United States since this is my home. I recognized within myself that I didn't know enough about my subject. Therefore I got a hold of some anthropologists to help me set this thing up. And their advice was invaluable; we had no such thing on the File. Roy knew all kinds of people and he would talk to them, it was strictly on a person to person basic over coffee, but not systematic. You see what we did in Puerto Rico was a very different thing. Do you mind if I talk about that thing right here?

RICHARD DOUD: No, go right ahead.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Do we have enough tape?

RICHARD DOUD: I think so. We'll start-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, anyway, I have more tape.

RICHARD DOUD: All right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Unless you are getting very tired of this?

RICHARD DOUD: No. Are you?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I'll tell you what, let's cut it off for a while.

RICHARD DOUD: All right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Before we interrupted, I think we were talking about what could have been done to improve the farm Security historical operation. Of course, this is easy to talk about in retrospect. I personally feel very strongly that if you are going to document, you should document by all media available to you, that are capable of documenting. Now at the present time this would certainly include sound to a very large extent, and I don't mean only what you can pick up in the way of song and so on, which in a way was done by the Library of Congress in a rather staged way. But conversations on the street, the sound of industry, the sound of the theater, the sound-all the

sounds-well there is one man alive who does sound in the way I think sound should be done, and that is Ben's friend,--what's his name?-He has a little show in new York now-a radio station-a little show, practically nobody hears, Schwartz-he did New York 19 and some of those records, it's fabulous stuff, he just always has his recorder on, and he's always recording everything when a cabbie gets in an argument with him, he puts on the record (laughter) and eventually he gets a marvelous collection of things from which he then selects what he wants.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, instrumentality for that was simply not available at that time. Because even when I did Towboat River which was done later under Standard Oil, an outgrowth of the operation, also under Roy, there was still in the United States at that time no tape, there was wire, but it was very unsatisfactory. So it would have been a little difficult, but there was--there were, damn it, there were Dictaphones, there were things with which you could record sound--this was not done--nor was it within our concept, and I don't think Roy would have found it very easily to adjust to that concept. And when I did this under his tutelage, in a way, he liked it--but he never followed it up--nobody else ever did sound. It never occurred to him to send out photographers with sound recording equipment.

RICHARD DOUD: I think he realizes it now.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He does?

RICHARD DOUD: This was a missed coin, yes. He's mentioned it.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Then, of course, there were movies made in connection with us, you know?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But they were rather epic productions, and this is not what I mean by the use of movies, for use in the same way. I think there would be a way with really keeping the historic in mind, of going out with a motion picture camera, covering the country, almost like we did the stills. There would be no immediate use for this material, but it would be just fabulous later on. (laughter) Now this, of course, could only be possible if very considerable funds were available. You could shoot the 16's for all you wanted, even so it would be a costly operation. And the filing of that is a major headache. Then of course there's another way, another direction all together in which this thing can be expanded, and perhaps this was the most possible at the that time. And that would have been the collection of material, possibly even printed in the newspapers, something like that, and at the same time supplement this with what you were covering, But that's all on a scale on which we never really operated. You probably are aware how few of us were on the staff at any one time. It was never a big operation and that was one of the things in its favor.

RICHARD DOUD: I think so. It never got top-heavy.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh, I think--when we got into OWI, it got monstrous. You just couldn't handle it. And, of course, at that point, the main function became my function. At least functions, the use functions--not coverage any more. I don't even think we covered it at that point, except directly on assignment like a magazine--go out and get so and so's portrait. Things like that, it wasn't Farm Security any more at all--it was just OWI. Anyway we'd hire, Roy hired people on a free-lance basis, so much a day. But--have you seen--have you been in New York--have you seen the file at that 142nd Street Library?

RICHARD DOUD: I haven't seen the file. I had been there to talk to Miss Javitz,--

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I suggest that you look at it, because I think this thing will probably open up your eyes to the possibility-this is a thrilling place. Her notion of what belongs together and why is fabulous-she is an extraordinary woman.

RICHARD DOUD: I hadn't given that a thought. I thought perhaps they were the same pictures I had seen in Washington, I didn't think about the possibility -

EDWIN ROSSKAM: There are millions of pictures, physically millions-she finds the oddest things interesting, she clipped them out of the newspaper, preferably with a source given, but if not, without it. At least an artist can come along and utilize that material.

RICHARD DOUD: That's a good point.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You see that way-we didn't think that way. We thought only in terms of what we could produce, nothing went into our files except what we produced, except insofar as we photographed it. For instance, Roy would insist that people keep an eye out for an interesting sign. You noticed how the signs go all through the Files?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Very fine articles could be done on American signs just out of that file; but it was always us photographing, it was never using material that could have come to us simply by collecting. We could have put a couple of people on the staff just clipping interesting pictures. There's no end to it. I don't know where the end of these things is, probably it's a lucky thing we didn't extend it too far. I am interested in your comment that what is now shown is always the poverty. Let's understand something: poverty, desperation are dramatic. It's much easier to take an interesting picture of the dead cat on the ash can, than a picture of a live cat asleep.

RICHARD DOUD: That's true. Very true.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is one of the reasons, it was always difficult, and I can tell you from the assigning side, to get most of the photographers, not all of them, to photograph anything we might call, "the positive" side. They were always looking for drama and drama is a fluke. Well you know it's like this, picturesque is somebody else's poverty.

RICHARD DOUD: I know Delano was telling about the trouble he had to do an assignment on chickens. That it was the most unphotographic thing you could think of. (laughter) He had to do something on chickens.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: He didn't do very well with it either.

RICHARD DOUD: That's a good point, though, you know.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: The human drama-well, look, you take this poor woman who is standing pregnant, looking out in a kind of hopeless way out a doorway, a photograph by Ben, if you remember. All right, if it had been Mrs. Vanderbilt standing there, it would be very hard to give that picture the same emotional content.

RICHARD DOUD: True. Aha, that's right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And this was Roy's problem. I don't know to what extent he recognized it, but when I came to be editor, through Roy-became involved in the assigning, I had to insist-I didn't, he insisted then, you know, but I got blamed as I should have been, because I knew that we were lopsided. We had to get a broader coverage. Now the thing that I would try to bring home to these people was to say, "Look, if I am to illustrate the good and the bad, I got to have the good to make the bad count. If you don't give it to me, how am I going to get it?" (laughter)

RICHARD DOUD: It's pretty hard to take a picture of it, really-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It's hard to take an interesting picture, I think Marion Post was more able to do that than anyone else...Make it interesting. Her coverage of winter, for instance, which is in the small town book Hometown, taking pictures of the various small towns. It had a quality that really was really lyrical.

RICHARD DOUD: It's very nice. She's very good at that.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And I think we failed of course, completely, in covering the big city. This little bit we did because I happened to push Roy towards it in the end-it's nothing in comparison to what there is when you consider that then already the great migrations to the cities was in full swing, and anybody could see that in a very short time, the bulk of our population was going to be urban.

RICHARD DOUD: This is sheer speculation, but do you think that would have been the direction, had the File been allowed to go on?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I'm sure; I'm sure of it. That was the uncovered subject. Now we did get some of the lyrical stuff as I say in a little town and so on, and also in the countryside, gradually, but in the city we only got the slums, because we'd just started.

RICHARD DOUD: Yep. Well this may be considered a fault then-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, a fault only in one sense. It should have been covered by somebody, actually I see no reason why Farm Security should particularly cover any more of the city except the end of the migration.

RICHARD DOUD: That's true.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But some agency should have done it. Actually I suppose what-for the thing to be really properly on its feet, it should be in a -what you might call a neutral agency, it shouldn't have been, as it was by accident, because again by accident, because Tugwell happened to get in that-in the Resettlement and then the Farm Security Administration and it should probably be in something like the Library of Congress, which services everybody. It is entirely neutral. It isn't urban, it isn't rural, it isn't for this and it isn't against that. But the archivist's point of view isn't any good for this either. One thing that makes this File what it is, is that it has a certain underlying passion. These people-all of them, they share this to different degrees, have an impatience and an anger with the poverty that they found around. A concern with the people who didn't have what they should have. This gave the whole thing a quality.

RICHARD DOUD: I'm glad that you brought that up. I was going to ask you what was there that held those people together?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is it. This is entirely Roy's selection of people. It has to do with whoever he selected.

RICHARD DOUD: How much accident went into that? Could he tell before he-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh, you didn't get hired by Roy on a minute's notice. You hung around him, you went back home wherever you lived, you came back; maybe you got hired for a little job. He got to know you before he really hired you, by the time I got there anyway.

RICHARD DOUD: It was no accident then?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No.

RICHARD DOUD: I wondered because-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, because all of these people today, there isn't a one of these people today, even now, with whom I couldn't automatically and instantaneously establish a contact of common understanding. We may have gone way apart-and some of them are photographers today and I'm not, or some of them are on a magazine or what have you. But we do basically have underneath have this thing of which I am talking to you about, a concern with people; and that's what we were hired for.

RICHARD DOUD: I think it comes through very well in most photographs.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think so, yes.

RICHARD DOUD: Taken as a group, I-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, sure, sure this has got to come through where-if photography is what we discussed earlier, then it must come through.

RICHARD DOUD: Let me put on this tape before we start anything else-

END OF TAPE 1
SIDE 2

ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH EDWIN ROSSKAM (TAPE 2)
AT HIS HOME IN ROOSEVELT, NEW JERSEY
DATE: AUGUST 3, 1965
INTERVIEWER: RICHARD K. DOUD

EDWIN ROSSKAM: EDWIN ROSSKAM

RICHARD DOUD: RICHARD DOUD

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I'd like to get back on to this-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Are we on?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, we're on.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: OK.

RICHARD DOUD: --onto this business of the influence of this whole thing at the time. We sort of talked around the use that was made of these through various media, the news, magazines, book

publications-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well. There was another influence that I think is tremendous. It was an influence on photographers.

RICHARD DOUD: That was what I wanted to know.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: As a result of this activity, as it became recognized, all kinds of photographic organizations sprang up all over the nation, were then and still are active in trying to carry on the general spirit of our coverage, Of course they couldn't carry on the scope.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Nor did they have the File. The thing is not organized but that quality of the photography and the approach to the subject, I think, became characteristic of a certain kind of American documentation and remains so today, photographic documentation of course.

RICHARD DOUD: This interview will continue after a short interruption.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Where were we? Yes, on the photographers. There was one particular organization which later on was much attacked but which I think did a great deal of developing of talent. They were called the Photo-League in new York, which I think was directly influenced by the farm Security approach to photography. They are now out of existence. There were of course, other influences that are harder to measure but there is no doubt about it that this thing was being noticed all over the place, because if it hadn't been, Roy could never have gotten the opportunity at Standard Oil to do what he did there, you see? Later on with the steel company in Pittsburgh and so on. Even the approach to industrial photography was affected, and I personally think that you would have a hard time today picking up anything so prosaic as a big company annual report which in a way isn't affected by the approach to photography that was developed at Farm Security.

RICHARD DOUD: Mrs. Rosskam's earlier statement that this set the direction for Life and all, wasn't entirely right but it wasn't entirely wrong.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, I just didn't want to -I thought it was a little bit too pretentious and too general to claim we had accomplished all that.

RICHARD DOUD: Too general, yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think they affected us as least as much as we affected them.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Which is an inter-relation.

RICHARD DOUD: Well what about the effect of all this on people? Do you think that these photographs were serving the purpose for which they perhaps were originally intended? Were they making people aware of the problems, and of what Farm Security was doing to solve the problems?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: They were helping. They were helping. They weren't doing it alone. I mean, here was the press, press releases and all the government techniques of information. Here were books being published. The Grapes of Wrath did not exactly hide the migrant problem. Then we came in on the tail end of that and used it photographically later. It gave a tremendous boost to all the stuff

that Dorothea did. It had a-well, considering how little this cost, it probably did a remarkable job of influencing people. In other words, for the amount of money spent, it had a tremendous effect.

RICHARD DOUD: A question came up some time ago. Someone made the statement that the farm Security or then the resettlement Administration photographs played a great part in getting Roosevelt reelected in '36. Do you think that-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This I wouldn't have known. I couldn't measure. In the first place, I wasn't with the outfit in '36 and as far as I personally was concerned, I wasn't aware of the photographs. I may have been affected by some of them without knowing where they came from but-

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't know. When I came to Roy I had just vaguely heard about him, that's all. I was asking around in Philadelphia. "Where could I go to get these government photographs that I need for this book?" One of the people mentioned him. That's how little I knew.

RICHARD DOUD: This may be a good indication then of how narrow the spread of these things was.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes, but that was very early.

RICHARD DOUD: I know. But here was a man who was interested in pictures and really didn't or wasn't that aware of the Farm Security project.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well I had-that's true, but remember I had been away and I'd been involved in other things and when I did get involved in photography, I worked on a newspaper where there were other pressures. And you know to what extent you are tied to local things.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And you just don't become aware of national things. There was somebody around who knew. So, I went there immediately and was captured by it. And I know very well I had been affected by those pictures without knowing where they came from because one of the things that we had a lot of trouble with was these newspapers and magazines wouldn't give us credit, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So, how in the hell would you know whether you were looking at a Farm Security picture or not, unless you were trained to look at those pictures. I could tell now.

RICHARD DOUD: Now, did this business of, sort of free or flagrant use of this stuff and the captioning of this stuff by local newspapers and all, was this partly responsible for part of the trouble that the photographs got into later on?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh sure. Well there is of course the famous story of the head of a skeleton cow. It's a ridiculous story. I mean, he didn't do any damage. He carried it what? Twenty feet?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It is silly to have done it but it certainly didn't change anything in the situation.

Now look, when you go out and you use a photograph which is incontrovertible in the people's mind, here is a mechanically produced thing seen through a lens and this is what it saw. You do that, and you show one grim picture after another of the situation, you are going to make somebody mad.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's all there is to it! Ha ha!

RICHARD DOUD: Well, there was quite a cry. This skull, I think, was the best known example, but there were several others which sort of started the witch hunt in Congress concerning fake photographs. Do you know of any cases where Farm Security actually faked?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: actually, only that one. No, I do not! Categorically, I do not! I do not even call this a fake.

RICHARD DOUD: I don't either but-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Carrying a thing a few feet is not fake. However he shouldn't have done it. It was not fake. No, I think no such thing. I will say that sometimes people might go so far as to call somebody over to join a group or something like that. It wasn't all necessarily candid. You know what I mean by candid?

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly. But did it pretend to be?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Many of them don't. Many of them are very obviously posed groups. Like this is a posed group. Anybody could tell it is a posed group.

RICHARD DOUD: But-why shouldn't they be?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes, but I mean actually I if that's allowable, then moving the skull isn't wrong either. Incidentally, I think one of the best groups I've ever seen photographed is this one. But no, I know of no fake photography on Farm Security. I do not. Let me make that quite, quite clear. The editorializing was in the selection and this is unavoidable no matter what you do, if there is a human element. There is no such thing as objectivity in human affairs. This is an illusion.

RICHARD DOUD: True. This is sort of an aside but did you have something to do with getting Jack Delano in this business with farm Security? He sort of credits you with having helped him make the contact.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It is possible. I don't really remember. I got him the job in Puerto Rico, not the one he is doing now but I set up a similar file in Puerto Rico, made the first few thousand photographs together with Louise and then came back to finish the River book and then import jack to continue.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: So there-I am responsible. Whether I am responsible for his being brought on, I just don't remember. As you heard me say earlier, I'm not sure whether I met him before he came on-oh, I think I was responsible, yes.

RICHARD DOUD: I think he credits you with it.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But not, I didn't know him, only because I'd seen pictures of his. I think I was

responsible for his hiring because Roy had some pictures of his and I said, " My God, you've got to hire this man." But I didn't know what he looked like.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Ha ha ha! Well, I wouldn't swear that's how it went but I think so.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned earlier that after the end of the year you left this organization and later on you-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, while I was gone, I did this book with Dick Wright.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Then I got pulled back in and it was still Farm Security but already it was doing war work and did that bloody mural.

RICHARD DOUD: Why did you leave? You made a contract but you could have stayed, I'm sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I had no ambition whatever to be anybody's editor.

RICHARD DOUD: I see, yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: You see, I could get stuck in there beautifully for the rest of my life and I had no intention of sitting in an office and shuffling photographs! No, sir, that's not for me. It wasn't then, and it wouldn't be now.

RICHARD DOUD: I just wondered if you left because you wanted to leave or-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh no no no, there was no question about it. I left because I wanted to leave. It was understood in the beginning. Roy wanted a certain job done and it was done.

RICHARD DOUD: Well you didn't have to go back.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No.

RICHARD DOUD: But you did.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It was pretty hard to refuse. Also, look, this was a different thing. War was in the air and you felt you had to contribute what you knew how to do and this at least I knew how to do. I could be of some use. It was a different thing. There was a change in the whole climate of thinking that had taken place by that time.

RICHARD DOUD: How long did you stay then after you went back?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Oh let's see, that was in '41, wasn't it? Yes. I think I stayed about two or three years. Do you by any chance remember when Roy left?

RICHARD DOUD: I think he left at the end of '42 or early '43.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well I left just about the same time. He went ahead of me a little bit.

RICHARD DOUD: It was in '43, I'm pretty sure. They shifted to OWI in about July of '42.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well it was a matter of weeks between us and then he hired me to come with him at Standard Oil after he got that set up. We didn't leave until he had that set and there I didn't become an editor. I made it a condition that I be a photographer or I wouldn't come and that's the whole point. I mean, here I was all this time wanting to go out and do this thing and all he wanted me to do was use it. I didn't want to do that. When I got to Standard Oil I did plenty of using too, but mainly I photographed.

RICHARD DOUD: A couple of questions here sorts of towards the end of this Farm Security before I go into-I want to hear about your Puerto Rico project. You talked some about both of these questions I have I mind now. One is the value that all this material has today and the other is how could it best be utilized?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now, you mean?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. It must have some value.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: It has tremendous value. It has an ever-changing value. Anything that is-like this book here on The River is already irreplaceable in content like those photographs. A lot of what's in those photographs, you can't get anymore. It is not only valuable, it is invaluable. You could not set a value on it. It is, I think, in the proper position at the Library of Congress if only the Library of Congress had a decent way of distributing its materials. It has a lousy lab. It has no way of really making the stuff useful. When the Museum of Modern Art wants to give an exhibit, it has to get them to lend them the negatives and have the prints made. That, of course interferes very greatly with the use.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: If there were a laboratory added to it then the use would be trebled. This is more trouble than most people want to go to. I don't know whether at this particular stage, much more use could be made of it. Let me ask you, did anybody else think of other uses that could be made now?

RICHARD DOUD: Well John Collier came up with the best idea to get the thing under way at least. This has nothing to do with the ultimate use but is certainly a step towards making it available for use. It's a rather philosophical concept, if you know John Collier, you know what I mean. Somehow a collation of the material of the darn thing. As John said, " It is the incidence of the object or the number of times a certain type of thing was photographed." That is some sort of index to its importance at the time.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Catalogue this whole thing.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes, but I think John doesn't realize that the few people left who use photography, and they are shrinking by the day, aren't going to look through a catalogue. I think that it would be a nice thing but I don't think it would have much effect. Everybody knows it's there, you know, that deals with photographs.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: This is now a famous thing. It's-you know people talk to me with reverence because I was associated with the damn thing, which is ridiculous. I mean it was work, you know. We

didn't think of it as anything special.

RICHARD DOUD: I think his feeling was for this thing to have any meaning is for sociologists or anthropological studies or just a straight historical study. There should be some sort of collation of-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well how would you do this? This would mean reproduction of all of the pictures.

RICHARD DOUD: It would mean going through certainly and categorizing each picture and making some sort of a file card that could-an IBM card perhaps where you could pull out say there were so many pictures of this in relation to so many pictures of this-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: By subject matter only? I can tell immediately that John has never done much editing. We don't illustrate that way, you know you may illustrate a discussion of the revolution with a picture of a clock on a table. It depends on how these things go together.

RICHARD DOUD: I'm not sure he's thinking of this in terms of illustration but just making a study of the times; a written study perhaps. But he thinks that the weight of a certain group of pictures would have relevance perhaps if they could all be brought together as a group of pictures.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, I'll tell you, I think a publication, if somebody were to finance it, which would do for that file a little bit the kind of thing that the show that Steichen had put on in the Museum of modern Art and which is now available in book form. What's it called now?

RICHARD DOUD: Family of Man.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Family of Man, yes, that kind of thing would be a nice thing to have and a lovely thing to put out and if you told people do a publication on this if you would append such a thing, it would be a very great service I'm sure. I don't know whether it would particularly increase the use. It might sell that book quite a bit.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And put it in the homes of people who were concerned and that's fine. When a thing becomes history, the use is limited; it's tremendously important but it isn't very frequent. The number of people who DO history aren't so many, what the hell.

RICHARD DOUD: Right. Well can you think of anything that we might say about this project before we move into some of the outgrowths of this business-your work in Puerto Rico and what came out of that?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yes. I think we out to go into this now pretty much. I'm not particularly interested in discussing a few of these questions here, "What was the general reaction of the press?" and so on. You know what it was as well as I do. The influence on photography, I've discussed. The influence at the time is questionable. I wouldn't know. Well, I think I'd like to touch on one thing here, one question here a little bit, which is out of order now, I'm sorry, but it might be of some interest. It says here, "From a photographic standpoint, what was characteristic about FSA photographs?" I think there were two things. One of which was very influential and that was that they were not taken to be dramatic as such. When a photographer for Life goes out he goes down on one knee and takes everything there. There was a period when you honestly thought all the photographers were two feet high. They photographed everything from the umbilical view of the world. This was the devilish invention of the Rollerflex that caused this. Hold it down here. It's the belly-button view, and also because it makes drama! You know you take it from above, take it from

between your legs, you take it from below or stand on your head. That kind of thing was not there. We took them because they were to us worth taking and it generally was pretty straight. We didn't go in much for filtering, filtering skies, Rothstein did but not much. We were not out to-the public relations angle was missing from our approach.

RICHARD DOUD: I see. Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: And it was in Life Magazine from the first moment. So I think in this sense it meant something. The other, and this is I'm sure was true and we touched on it before and I don't know what to do about it and that was that no single photograph with us was an objective, ever. The coverage was the objective and as a result of that the only people that have ever seen any story, any subject covered in Farm Security are the people who went to the File and spent six hours going through and seeing this mass of material move past them like a panorama. You see, when you work for a magazine for instance, you may produce lots and pots of pictures but essentially you are working to give the editor five pictures he can pull out of there to make a story with.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Well, we weren't doing that, because this is an untruth to begin with.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, that's right. You were shooting for the File-

EDWIN ROSSKAM: That's right, that's right and this is a big difference. It isn't a very useful difference and it's a shame, but it is the only way photography can be kept honest.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, a rather wasteful, expensive way of doing it.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I don't know how else you can do it. Well I think that takes care of that. The rest of these I think we've all touched on.

RICHARD DOUD: I think so.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Now, I think what I am going to talk about now for some little time is my view of what the Farm Security File has done to later photography. Its effect upon-even up to the present upon photography and the use of photographs and the whole use of documentation afterwards. Well, as you know, Roy went to Standard Oil. He brought to Standard Oil a number of people that had worked for him on Farm Security. Some of them worked almost full time, some of them only occasionally. He also hired some new people there. None of us were on a staff. We were all contractors in a sense or freelancers if you like although he liked to call it contractors. We were paid on the basis of so much a day plus expenses. The allowance for expenses was very generous. It was really a marvelous job. When I came over there, Roy said, "Well, what would you like to cover?" He was sending people to Africa, Arabia and the North Pole and I don't know where. Not the North Pole but Alaska. I said, "I want to stay right here. All I want to do is cover oil from the geologist to the sharecropper." And when I put it that way, it, I think, opened up the thing to him because I don't think at that time he had thought of going all the way to the sharecropper's level. If I made any contribution to Roy, I think, it was in that kind of eye-opening that it consists. I got that opportunity together with Louise and of course, we did a tremendous lot of writing. See, when photographers go out on these assignments, whether it is in Farm Security or-when they worked for Roy this is how it operated: they would send their pictures back undeveloped. They would be developed in the lab and then either contact prints or small prints of some kind would be sent to them weeks later for captioning which was sometimes very hard because even if you did keep notes, it was hard to know

just where what and when and why. Well I would write at least once a week these long letters which were later on duplicated by some of the photographers which were called general captions. This was already happening in Farm Security and developed more in Standard Oil. This was the background material in which these pictures could be understood, because I found that this was an extension of what we had been doing really. I found that captions alone don't do it, unless you know this within the framework of history or development or what's going on around that section, you don't know. It's just little fragments, you see. So, we would go out and we had an apartment at that time in New York and I don't think we saw that apartment one month of that year. We were on the field all of the time. We had no kids so it was a lovely life, sure. Oh, this was one of the nicest periods of our life. I suppose this took place because at that time there was some kind of write-off possible for a big company and actually they were getting all this for nothing. This was part of the public relations department and the big brass couldn't understand why in the hell they should photograph little towns in Montana. When that question once came out, I put them together a little thing about that little town. It so happened that little town had a-this gives you an idea of how things work-had around it a little refinery, little tiny one which was based on oil that had been found in limited quantities through the area. The oil was refined in that small refinery and went right back into the combines of the wheat growers who had been there in the first place. This was a whole story in itself. We had covered it in great detail, everything from-covered photographic and otherwise-the town council meetings to the brawls at the nearby bar. But anyway, this was an elaborate coverage and for the first time in our lives, we were all well paid. For the first time in our lives we were all respectable too. Working for the government in the field is not respectable but working for Standard Oil is respectable. Ha ha ha.

RICHARD DOUD: Like working for Dupont.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: Yeh. Sure. We lived beautifully. It was so different from before, None of us could ever understand it. One time we were in Pittsburgh and Roy came to see us. He was in Pittsburgh too. We had a nice room in the William Penn Hotel which was the best hotel in town. Of course we carried an enormous amount of baggage which you can imagine. We had to be prepared for all climates and all-well we had twenty-two different cases. He had one look at this room with all this luggage in it and he said, "You get the hell out of here. What if the Vice-President comes to see you? You've got to represent. Don't you dare take anything less than a suite!" Ha ha ha. Roy Stryker. Well, we obliged. Ha ha ha. We traveled all over the country and we did cover oil as far as we could from the beginning to end because nobody could cover all of its implications in modern civilization because you'd have to cover all of civilization. There is really no end. It was interesting, and we were happy. Of course the approach was subtly modified. This is interesting. When we were in government, as I told you before, our primary concern was people. We weren't changed by joining Standard Oil but suddenly when we took a picture, we thought twice," How does this fit in the Standard Oil File?" You can't help but do it. It happens to you. So, that the nature of the file is somewhat different. Anyway, we had that by that time done the coverage of this not only in the pictures-this-I'll tell you how that happened. That book happened because-I am pointing at the Towboat River-this happened because we did a little article for the Lamp with photographs about a ride on one of the towboats. It was enormously successful and quoted all over the nation. That's when I gave Roy the idea of really covering the river and got an opportunity to do it and later on to do the sound too.

RICHARD DOUD: pardon me, do you still have the tapes of that?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: There are no tapes. There is nothing but these little sound disks.

RICHARD DOUD: Are they still in existence?

EDWIN ROSSKAM: No, I think I threw them out because they were almost-most of them were unlistenable to. I don't know where they are. They might be around still but I doubt it.

RICHARD DOUD: That's a shame.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: I think Dan Melcher has them, the head of Publishers Weekly. Anyway, we were in Pittsburgh and it was a particularly-it began in Pittsburgh-gray day and this was in the days before Pittsburgh was reformed and it was so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face and a call came from Roy. He said, "They called you from Puerto Rico. They say if you can, set up another file like the ones we had in Washington. The pay will be lousy. Do you want to go?" I looked at Louise, I told her what it was. She looked at me and I said, "Yes." We went from a beautiful salary to practically none, but again it was a job that had a certain dignity. Even while working for standard Oil it did not have that. Not in the same way. It had responsibility but not dignity within ourselves. The objective was wrong.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: For us anyway, we thought of it that way. So we went to Puerto Rico and we spent I guess about six months setting up a file very much like Roy's file. We had all of the experience of the filing part and the laboratory part-all that was being set up for the information department of Puerto Rico in the office of the governor and at that time it was Tugwell. In other words, Tugwell called and said, "Who have you got who can do this same job for us here?" And I got it. Again we made the first few thousand photographs and then I had to come back to finish this book. It was at that time that I was responsible for having Jack and Irene sent to Puerto Rico-

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: --to continue with the file. When I returned-this time, the first time I went to Puerto Rico-I told you that I was sent there through Butterfield working for Life-I go to know Munos just slightly but we hit it off. We both liked brandy. And then we-when I went back there with the Director of Information for Tugwell, could not see my notion that it was at least as important to inform the people of Puerto Rico about their government and their problems as it was to inform the continent. The attitude at that point was, "We're in a terrible jam, please give me, give me, give me." This attitude of course later on was thoroughly changed but that was all this guy could see. He didn't want to get into these political complications on the local scene which was plenty hot. He wouldn't touch it. So I went with the idea to Munos, who still knew me, and he liked the idea. So, when I came back, I came at the request of the governor of Puerto Rico to set up a very small unit to train personnel for the production of educational visual materials for the people of Puerto Rico. That's when I took Jack and Irene out of where they were and got somebody else for that job and the three of us began in this little basement this enormous job of training personnel in making everything from movies to booklets in a place where nobody had ever done anything like this before. We spent, I guess, about a year and a half like that. Munos again called me in and he had had a number of conversations, we were close, he said, "Look, you've been talking about a big education program-". We, by that time had been putting movies on, out of jeeps and so on. This had all been tested. We put out some publications. We trained some artists who had left the country because they couldn't live off what they earn there because they could get a job with us. So we had been operating on about \$50,000 or \$60,000 per year. He said, "Now, I want a million dollar project!" Wow! So, I wrote him a million dollar project. It didn't turn out to be that much but by God it did turn out to be \$700,000 and then it became a rat race. It became impossible to keep up with because we didn't have enough of the people with enough skills. The field operation deserved much more attention than I could give it. Also, I had no background for this. So, I imported my own

boss, a man who now runs it. He was a field man and an educator to run the field part and we would just run the production part. Now the purpose of the whole organization was-by this time you must understand the Whopera(?) movement in Puerto Rico was thoroughly in control and it became clear that the older people, that is the adult people in the countryside, in the rural areas, had no education at all to speak of. When the United States came into Puerto Rico, there were almost no schools so these people who were of that age, simply had no schooling-maybe a year or so. Something had to be done not only to make them understand their own situation in relation to the Island because they really thought of someone in the next valley as a foreigner.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But also the Islands situation in relation to the rest of the world, the United States and what all this meant. Also, and chiefly, to arouse their interest in doing for themselves all the many things which as colonial subjects they had for so many hundreds of years expected(?) to do for them. And it was called the Division of Community Education for that reason under the Department of Education of Puerto Rico. Well, without going into this in too much detail, I am naming only the part that is applicable here. We produced a tremendous amount of material. You saw some of the booklets and maybe before you leave I can find you some of the posters. I haven't any movies handy. I also have a lot of photographs and things. But here this same approach was being applied to a need in a place that happened to have a need. It is ridiculous to pretend that there are no places in the United States where we have that need, because there are.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right.

EDWIN ROSSKAM: But there is nothing being done like that. This is an application which could be made, you see. Now the photographic file in Puerto Rico is a direct child of Farm Security. It was made by a man that was instrumental in helping make the other with the same philosophy and the same approach with just not all the same errors about laboratory and technical equipment and so on that we had made.

END OF INTERVIEW

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