Using Portraits

Ansel Adams called them the FSA photographers “a bunch of sociologists with cameras.” Others called them “poets with cameras” or “crusaders with cameras.” Alan Lawson suggests that the celebration of people in FSA photographs represented a search for a “coherent national character” that transcended divisions of class and religion. The FSA photos made a substantial contribution to the “cult of the people” which emerged in the 1930s and was part of the New Deal democratization of American culture and a national yearning for stability and harmony in a turbulent era. Jack Delano, an FSA photographer, defined the purpose of the photography project as a “search for the heart of the American people.” He also believed that the sentiment that united the FSA photographers was an effort to register “the pulse of the nation through its people.” Ben Shahn, another FSA photographer, noted that, “the poor who were rich in spirit” maintained “a transcendent indifference to their lot.” The cult of the commoner was that they were poor in substance but rich in spirit. The FSA photographers were beguiled by the “common man” and their photos gave common people voices. Bernarda Shahn recalled her husband’s “glee that these people are so real and are so ordinary, and that in each one, in his ordinariness, is so markedly unique.” William Stott contends that the FSA photographers searched for the “look” that encapsulated adversity, and fortitude, pain and grace. Stryker attributed the birth of the larger FSA photography project to a personal dream to create a pictorial encyclopedia of American agriculture and to preserve what was rapidly disappearing:

- Kinship with nature
- Neighborliness
- The spaciousness of the country

Other commentators have said that the efforts also sought to capture the following:

- The mythos of American yeoman
- A sense of rootedness in the land
- A sense of renewal
- A simpler, safer, peaceful way of life
- The pastoral ideal
- The rugged individualism of the farmer and rural family
- That the individual could rise above disaster
- The individuals have within themselves the qualities to regenerate
Stryker also described the images as “dignity versus despair.” One commentator remarked that, “With haunting permanence, the documentary venture of the 1930s fixed an ambivalent image in place. The dignity of the poor, closest to nature and simple virtue, graces the FSA photographs, but so does the indignation that such poverty should exist in a land of such rich resources.”

There are many photos of individuals. Students can analyze the photographs of individuals and write an essay about the different ways individuals are portrayed. What was the photographer attempting to capture? Was the photographer trying to give a message? Are there different conventional ways of taking a portrait or family photo?