

Edwin and Louise Rosskam: Documentary Photographers

Presentation by Gary Saretzky

Abstract

In 1935, Roy Stryker came to Washington, DC, to direct the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration). The project developed a 100,000+ photo archive that documented social and economic conditions in the U.S.A. and known to its photographers as “The File.” As Edwin Rosskam wrote later, Stryker hired these artists “to make a dent in the world.” The goal was not just to record facts, but to make a difference: “every one of us had been hired not just for the talents he may have possessed, but for his commitment, his compassionate view of the hard life so many people were struggling against.” Inspired by the FSA project, both Edwin and his wife Louise Rosskam completed photographic assignments for Stryker that are now in The File at the Library of Congress. The documentary photographs in the File were used in magazine articles, exhibitions, and several books edited by Edwin Rosskam. The Rosskams continued to work for Stryker after he left government service to head a documentary photography project for Standard Oil. This lecture traces the arc of the Rosskams’ careers from their youth in Philadelphia to their final home in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

Bio

Gary D. Saretzky, archivist, educator, and photographer, worked as an archivist for more than fifty years at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Educational Testing Service, and the Monmouth County Archives. Saretzky taught the history of photography at Mercer County Community College, 1977–2012, and served as coordinator of the Public History Internship Program for the Rutgers University History Department, 1994–2016. He has published more than 100 articles and reviews on the history of photography, photographic conservation, and other topics, including eight journal articles on the Rosskams, among them “Louise Rosskam: Documentary Photographer,” *New Jersey Studies* (Summer 2019). In 2000, he interviewed Louise Rosskam for the Monmouth County Library Oral History Program.