Taking a Deeper Look

Documenting History
During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated New Deal programs putting artists to work for the nation, including the Farm Security Administration. Dorothea Lange was a photographer hired by the federal government to document the experiences of migrating workers traveling along Route 66 to California farms. The hitchhikers image card is a Lange photograph. One of her most famous images, “Migrant Mother,” became a symbol for this period and had a dramatic effect on people. It demonstrated the suffering some Americans were experiencing. Lange took 6 pictures of this family at a California pea farm in 1936.

Questions:
1. Compare the two photographs. They were the first and last images of a photo shoot. List the objects you see in each image. Which do you think was first? Which was last?

2. Compare the body language and facial expressions of family members in each image.

3. Which image reveals more about the experience of being a migrant farm family on the move—the first or last image? Why? Historian James Curtis suggests that Lange posed the family in the last picture. What message was the photographer trying to convey? Should a documentary photograph be posed to help bring national attention to a moment in history? Why or why not?

4. In the novel The Grapes of Wrath, why did John Steinbeck call Route 66 the “Mother Road”? Consider that after the pea harvest is finished, this family will need to move on. If they had a car, Route 66 would make the trip from farm to farm much easier.

Resource