

## News Release

# Stories of 1937 Sugar Beet Harvest through the lens of Photographer Russell Lee

By Elizabeth Tollefson on Tuesday, October 1, 2019

Images of history, viewed through the eyes of a photographer, tell the human story. "Roots of the Red River Valley," a pictorial history of the 1937 sugar beet harvest, will be on display at the University of Minnesota Crookston from Monday November 4 through Saturday, November 9, 2019. A gallery opening will be held on Monday, November 4 at 7 p.m. in Bede Ballroom, Sargeant Student Center. Daily hours for the gallery are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. each day except Wednesday, November 6 when it will close to the public at 5 p.m.

A special Thursday Commons presentation about the pictorial history will take place on Thursday, November 7 at noon in Kiehle Auditorium. Parking permits are not required. Add the event to your [calendar](#).



More than 80 images by photographer Russell Lee, known for his work with the Farm Security Administration, will be available in Bede Ballroom, Sargeant Student Center from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. throughout the exhibit. All are welcome to view the historic images without charge and free parking is available in Lot G near the Kiehle Building.

The exhibit evenly distributes the photographs into three distinct categories: the migrant worker, the farmer, and the factory. Images, selected from the Library of Congress, give the viewer an opportunity for greater understanding of the lives of people and the importance of sugar processing in the Red River Valley. The photographs were all taken in Polk County, Minnesota, near Fisher and Crookston, and at the first processing plant built in 1926 and located in East Grand Forks, Minn.

"This exhibit is impressive on several fronts and definitely worth viewing. First, the photography draws me in as a viewer, to ponder the history of farming and the immigrant worker in our area," says Mara Hanel, executive director of the Northwest Minnesota Arts Council in Warren, Minn. "Their relationships, their families and homes. Listen to an [interview on the gallery](#) by KRJB radio with Ken Mendez and Lauren Wallace.

"The artwork tells a story and promotes dialogue around the images depicted. Second, the size and clarity of the enlarged photographs is impressive. Third, images depicted have strong compositional elements, which speaks to the trained eye of these artistic photographers," she continues. "I would encourage a visit either while the images are on display at UMC or talking with UMC staff about bringing this showcase to your own community for display."

Learn more about the Roots of the Red River Valley gallery and sugar beet history [here](#).

### Background

Russell Lee, born in Illinois, attended Lehigh University in Pennsylvania graduating with a degree in chemical engineering. He left his work in chemical engineering to take up painting, which in turn, would lead to his keen interest photography. His life's work recorded the lives of the people and places around him, documenting the ethnography of America.

During the Great Depression in the mid-thirties, he was employed by the federally funded Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographic documentation project under the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. He joined a team under the direction of economist, government official, and photographer, Roy Stryker that included other notables such as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and others. .

With his camera, Lee traveled the United States documenting the human story of segregation, the Great Depression, WWII, life in internment camps, and much more. His work with the FSA is what brought Lee to Minnesota's Red River Valley in 1937.

After settling in the late forties in Texas, Lee would become the first instructor of photography at the University of Texas in 1965.

### About UMN Crookston

One of five campuses that comprise the University of Minnesota System, the University of Minnesota Crookston now delivers 34 bachelor's degree programs and 24 minors on campus as well as 16 degree programs entirely online. These degrees are offered in the areas of agriculture and natural resources; business; liberal arts and education; and math, science and technology. With an enrollment of 1,800 undergraduates from more than 20 countries and 40 states, the Crookston campus offers a supportive, close-knit atmosphere that leads to a prestigious University of Minnesota degree. Visit [umcrookston.edu](#).

### About UMN

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### Photo:

The photo is by photographer Russell Lee and taken during harvest in 1937

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