

Power and Light: Photographs by Russell Lee

National Archives Museum Exhibition Proposal

Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery, March 16, 2024—July 6, 2025

September 19, 2022

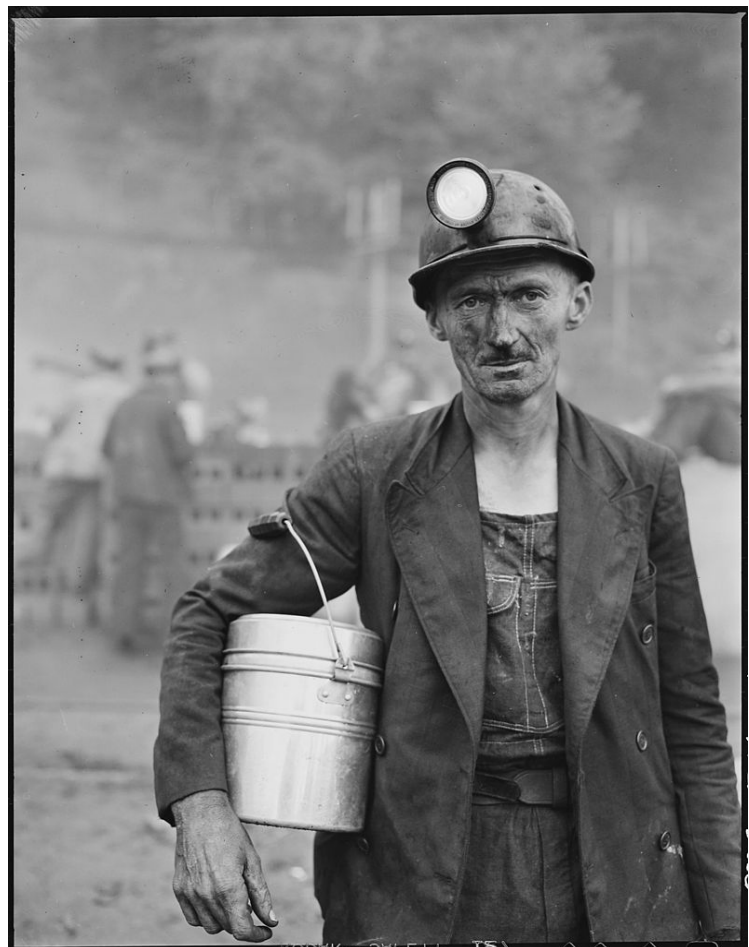
Introduction

The National Archives Museum (NAM) will mount a 3,000 square foot exhibition of Russell Lee's photographs of coal miners, commissioned for a 1946-47 government study of the coal industry. Despite the critical nature of the industry, coal mining happened far from the awareness of many Americans. The lives of miners and their families, their lack of resources, and dangerous working conditions were largely invisible to the public. Lee documented their plight, but more importantly, he revealed their humanity and resilience. The Medical Survey of the Bituminous Coal Industry, with photo illustrations by Russell Lee, resulted in many reforms.

Power and Light will bring this historic and timeless body of work to a contemporary audience, illuminating the lives of people who made a significant contribution to the growing nation. Through these images, visitors will learn that the coal industry in the post-World War II era was surprisingly diverse, employing Americans of many races and ethnicities in mining communities throughout the United States. The exhibition will acquaint contemporary viewers with working class communities all but invisible in government archives, making a powerful statement about the stories we choose to remember and the people we choose to honor.

Background

During WWII, labor strikes were banned. Miners and other laborers agreed to work overtime for reduced wages to help the war effort. When conditions failed to improve after the war, 350,000 coal miners joined a massive wave of strikes across the nation. Fearing a threat to the post-war recovery, the federal government seized ownership of the mines. In negotiations with the miners union, the government agreed to survey the health and safety of the miners' working and living conditions. In the course of the survey, Lee traveled to 90 coal mining areas from West Virginia to Wyoming, capturing intimate portraits of the miners and revealing images of their living and working conditions. The National Archives holds the



Harry Fain, coal loader. Inland Steel Company, Wheelwright, Floyd County, Kentucky

complete series of over 4,000 photographs along with the notebooks in which Lee recorded his extensive notes and captions.

Themes

Lee's task was to document the strengths and weaknesses of the industry, but his personal fascinations took him far beyond the assignment's mandate. The exhibition will reflect these themes. **Family** was one of Lee's primary interests. He got to know at least one family in each community, dined at their tables, and observed their daily activities. His rapport with his subjects enabled him to capture unguarded and intimate moments. Some of the most affecting images in the series are Lee's photographs of **children**. These images evidence their ability to find joy in play regardless of their circumstances and the way that suffering and hardship marked their faces. Images of **home** and **community** appear again and again, reflecting their centrality in the miners' lives and the effects of economic disparities on both. Lee's regard for the miners' **resourcefulness** is evident in many of his images and their detailed captions. For one photo, Lee noted upgrades one miner made to his home. "He installed running water in his kitchen at no cost to the company." Finally, visitors may be surprised to learn about the **diversity** of the workers in this industry. Lee takes us into the homes of Black, Latinx, Japanese, Italian, and Greek miners.

Sample Images

Family



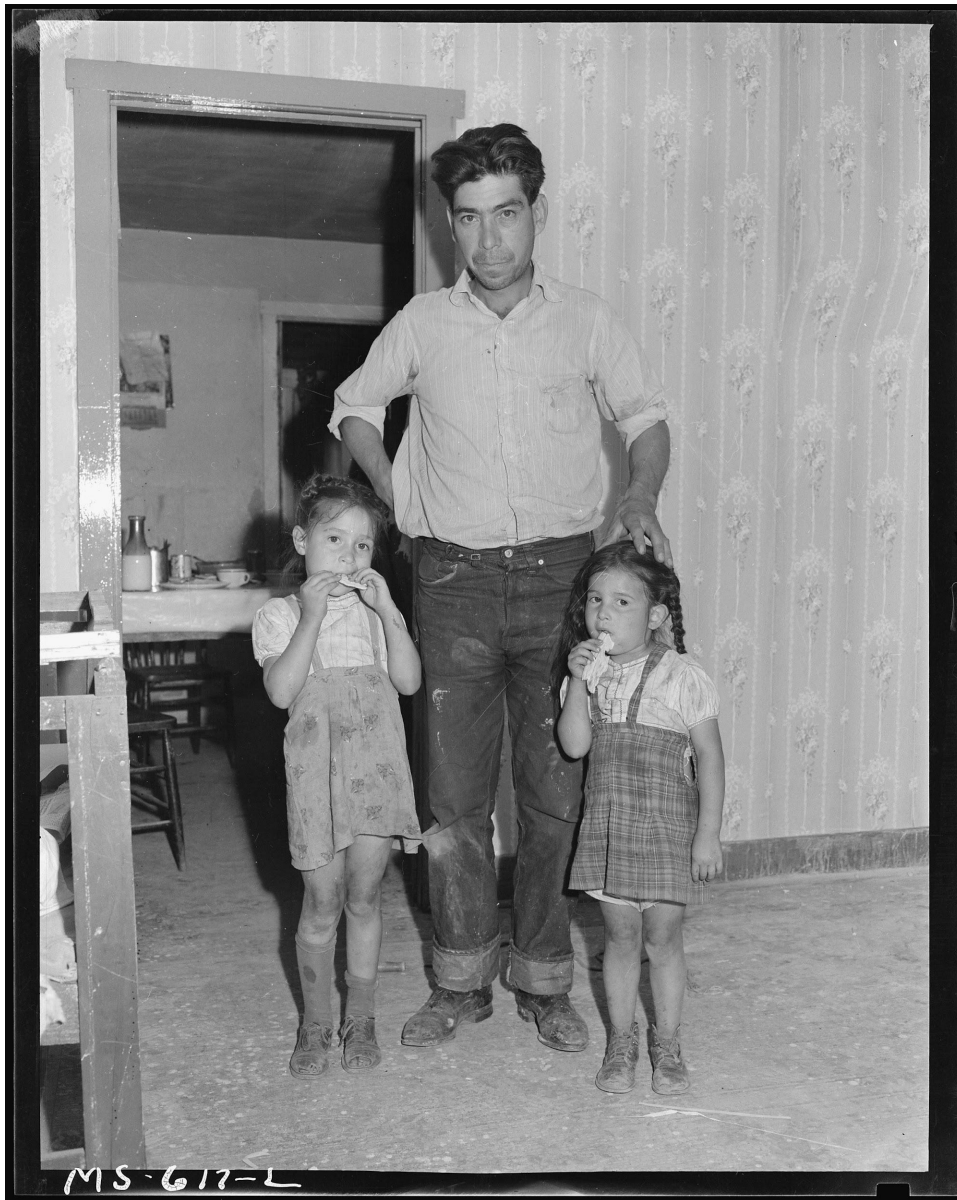
N. Orinick, miner, and family standing in front of their garden. Louise Coal Company, Louise Mine, Osage, Monogalia County, West Virginia.

Children



Children of miners on the fence in front of the Howard house. Gilliam Coal and Coke Company, Gilliam Mine, Gilliam, McDowell County, West Virginia.

Home



Joe L. Montoya, miner, and two of his children. Royal Coal Company, Royal Mine, Carbon County, Utah



Miners' wives and children on the front porch of a typical, fifty year old house. Kentucky Straight Creek Coal Company, Belva Mine, abandoned after explosion [in] Dec. 1945, Four Mile, Bell County, Kentucky

Community



Healing "laying on of hands" ceremony in the Pentecostal Church of God, Lejunior, Harlan County, Kentucky.



The company store is as much a gathering and visiting spot as it is a shopping place. Gilliam Coal and Coke Company, Gilliam Mine, Gilliam McDowell County, West Virginia.

Resourcefulness



Children of miner living in company housing project. Note the homemade baby buggy made of a powder box. Union Pacific Coal Company, Reliance Mine, Reliance, Sweetwater County, Wyoming.

Diversity



Quarters of Japanese miner who lives in company housing project. Hudson Coal Company, Hudson Mine, Sweet Mine, Carbon County, Utah.

Audience

Though it will surely attract new visitors who are photography and art lovers, this show is for a general audience. Visitors need not have a particular interest in art or photography or knowledge of art history to engage with Russell Lee's images. Lee's images are immediate, powerful, and accessible. Importantly, the diversity of the individuals in Lee's photographs will allow viewers of many backgrounds to see themselves in the Archives. This show provides an opportunity to expand our audience by reaching out to various communities and inviting them to discover that NARA's holdings represent them, their lives, and their history.

Approach

NAM will explore design approaches incorporating large scale images, theatrical lighting, video projection, and a soundscape of music and environmental audio, to create a dramatic visual and immersive experience. The FSA photographs have been exhaustively exhibited. This show will present new material in a uniquely immersive and attention-commanding environment.

Conclusion

Power and Light will commemorate Americans rarely found in history books, archives, and exhibitions. Viewing these photographs adds complexity and nuance to our understanding of U.S. history. Lee's compassionate images and detailed notes bring the miners out of the shadows, reveal their strengths, and tell their stories, helping us better appreciate who we are and how we got here.



Gonzalla Sullivan, miner, with his two children and another child who lives in the neighborhood. Koppers Coal Division, Federal #1 Mine, Grant Town, Marion County, West Virginia.