

Karl Gehrke:

Welcome back to Dakota Midday from South Dakota Public Broadcasting. I'm Karl Gehrke. Digital technology makes it easy for photojournalists to alter and change photographs. In a 2006 image distributed by Reuters, a photographer copied and darkened smoke to exaggerate bombing damage in Beirut. During the early days of the Iraq invasion, the Los Angeles Times published a photo that was a composite of two photographs taken seconds apart to improve composition, but faking and staging photos is nothing new. In 1936, New Deal Farm Security Administration photographer, Arthur Rothstein, moved and photographed a bleached steer skull at several locations in South Dakota. It was designed to convey devastation during severe drought.

Opponents of President Roosevelt's New Deal objected to the staged photo. Rothstein's photo of what critics called the 'perambulating skull' is included in a new exhibit at the Bronx Documentary Center, *Altered Images: 150 Years of Posed and Manipulated Documentary Photography*. The exhibit is designed to prompt discussion about what is and is not allowable in photojournalism and documentary photography. Joining us now to discuss the Rothstein photo and its background is retired south Dakota State University history professor, John Miller. John, welcome back to Dakota Midday.

John Miller:

Glad to be here, Karl.

Karl Gehrke:

Also with us on the line is John Locke. He's president of the Midwest History Association. He also serves as counsel and senior advisor to U.S. Senator John Thune. John, welcome back to the program too.

John Locke:

Thanks, Karl. Good to be on with you, John.

John Miller:

Glad to be here.

Karl Gehrke:

Well, John Miller, maybe we'll start with you. For those people who haven't seen this photo, how would you describe it?

John Miller:

Well, there's actually two or three photos, which is why it came to knowledge in the first place. As Arthur Rothstein was sent out by the Farm Security Administration, one of the New Deal agencies to document drought conditions around the country, he came to Pennington County, South Dakota and he had been looking for some skeletons of dead animals to show and to depict and to document the devastation of the drought conditions. Also, behind that, they were trying to show that the drought conditions were, in part, at least caused by poor agricultural practices.

So when he came across this skull in Pennington County, he, of course, took a picture of it, but then he took it from different angles. You could see the baked ground and at one point, he thought, "Well, if I could move this skull over a few feet, " I think it was moved no more than 10 feet, "and take it from another angle ... " You could see in the distance, the horizon and some things in the background

and it was the same skull. It was just in a slightly different location and from a different angle and that's what all the controversy arose over.

Karl Gehrke:

John Locke, how quickly was it discovered that Arthur Rothstein had moved this skull around and that it was, essentially, a staged photo?

John Locke:

Well, it's my understanding it happened very quickly. Once the photo migrated out of the offices of the Farm Security Administration and onto the wire, onto the Associated Press wire, it went out to all these newspapers in Dakota, in South Dakota and North Dakota, because they were running a story about President Roosevelt visiting the Dakotas in either July or August of 1936 as part of his re-election campaign. They wanted to put the photograph out there to show how bad the drought was and talk about what Roosevelt was doing to address the drought. But the first editors who noticed that the photograph had been doctored were at the Fargo Forum in North Dakota.

They did a big, splashy front-page story about this photograph being doctored and then other newspapers piled on. But there's a lot of problems with the photograph. As John mentioned, it was moved around several times and we now know after many, many years that the photographer, Arthur Rothstein, was given very specific instructions by Roy Stryker back at the FSA to go out and find very striking images that make the drought look bad. He was given a little instruction card and that's what he did.

I also think it's interesting that the photograph was taken in or near the Badlands, which you can find scorched earth and sandy earth and drought-like conditions any time. So, and then this is one of the things the Fargo Newspaper keyed on was that this is the kind of image that's very common in the Dakotas. Now, the other thing I think we should mention here, and John is the real expert on this, but this took place in the context of a broader controversy over what were called propaganda tactics by the New Deal. One of the more colorful examples of this was this film put out by the FSA called *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

This was designed to make the point that farmers in South Dakota weren't very good at preserving the soil, et cetera. Well, this book set off a big controversy over how farmers in South Dakota were being portrayed and the people involved in that film were also heavily involved in the photography program at the FSA. One of the reasons that I became very interested in this whole issue is because John Miller wrote an article about how controversial that film was in South Dakota during the 1930s. I think it became a cause for Karl Mundt and made him semi-famous early in his political career.

Karl Gehrke:

John Miller, that film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, South Dakota farmers weren't too happy then about the way they were portrayed.

John Miller:

Well, yeah. Of course, it wasn't the farmers you were hearing from. It was from two other people. It was from newspaper editors who, how many of them were Republican, 90%? The thing that got this Arthur Rothstein cattle skull thing in the news and pretty soon, the New York Herald Tribune and other papers were picking it up. The Fargo Forum was a Republican paper and they rightly were looking for misuse of information by the administration, but what they would have called propaganda, the administration would have just called information.

Compared to what you were talking about at the beginning of the program where photos are photoshopped now, images are cropped out, things are changed and new faces and images are put on other bodies, this was a relatively simple kind of technology. The technology was you'll walk over, you pick the skull up, you move it over a few feet and then you take the photograph from a different angle. So to call that doctoring, it was doctoring, in a sense. But you can already see the language being used in this interview, it's not just words describing things. It's words that have inherent emotional connotations associated with it. It's what they would call it today in Washington, spin.

Karl Gehrke:

Now, John Miller, for a little background, the Farm Security Administration, they had this photography unit that went out and documented these images, created these images and Arthur Rothstein was just one of a number of, today, very famous photographers.

John Miller:

Yeah. We're talking Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and others, Ben Shahn, almost all of them are famous. Actually, the name of the organization changed, in part, because of this. It was called the Resettlement Administration as established in 1935, when the photography unit was set up. Part of the effort was, was to resettle farmers off of submarginal land as they called it and put them on better land. But again, this was seen as New Deal social engineering by people who opposed it and so part of the political fallout of all this was that Rexford Tugwell, who was the head of this operation, the Red Professor, as they called him, he was a self-proclaimed socialist, would leave the administration after 1936.

They changed the name of the organization, absorbing the Resettlement Administration into the Department of Agriculture and calling it by the more innocuous name, the FSA, the Farm Security Administration. That's what we know today as the FSA Photography Project from 1935 to 1943. So there were all kinds of politics involved in the way in which this was talked about and the kind of language that was used in it, even in the administrative apparatus that was set up in Washington to administer these programs.

Also, the other thing was the FSA Photography Project was almost put out of business as a result of this photography thing. As John pointed out a minute ago, Karl Mundt made putting *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, that movie, out of business. It was the first big speech in Congress and it was at the top of the list of 20 reasons why he should be a re-elected in 1940. Amazingly, he was successful in putting *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, the first great documentary movie ever put out by the government, out of circulation for 20 years.

John Locke:

I might add too, on the sequence here, Karl, that I think if I remember correctly, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, the film was shown at the White House early in 1936. President Roosevelt was there and watched it and Roy Stryker was there, who was head of the photography section. I think maybe Rexford Tugwell was still there at that time-

Karl Gehrke:

Oh, yeah. He was still there.

John Locke:

... That was before he had been exiled from the administration. He was very interested in the film. He was very engaged in it, and this was not something that was taking place in some distant bureaucracy that he wasn't paying attention to. He was very interested in this sort of topic and he had spent a lot of time on rural life issues and improving rural life when he was governor of New York. So it's not like today where a lot of things happen under the radar screen and the president doesn't really know about it. So he was very interested in this and I think because he was so interested in it, that was one of the reasons Roy Stryker sent Arthur Rothstein out to South Dakota is to get some photographs and other images that they could use to talk about their farm programs.

Another thing I was going to mention, just so people are familiar with these photographs, probably the most famous photographer in this group was Dorothea Lange and probably the most reproduced photograph, historically, in the United States is this photograph called Migrant Mother. This is a photograph of a Okie migrant in California named Florence Thompson and she is sitting there in a shack, a makeshift shack, with her children. It is meant to convey the desperate conditions of the New Deal and it's a very famous photograph. I'm sure if people see it or they pull it up on Google, they'll instantly remember it. But this photograph, too, which I didn't realize until a few years ago when I was reviewing a new biography of Dorothea Lange, this photograph was, I guess, to use the right word, manipulated by Dorothea Lange.

She asked Florence Thompson to move around and asked her children to move around and turn their heads and do various things to make the photograph more impressive or to have a bigger impact on people. Florence Thompson, which I didn't know until I read this biography, was furious about this because she was told by Dorothea Lange this photograph would never be used. "It's just for government archiving and government research," and then it ends up being the most famous picture in American history constantly reproduced. Florence Thompson fought until the 1970s to get some sort of compensation for Dorothea Lange using this photograph, which she said she wouldn't use, so this South Dakota piece is very interesting, but it's part of a bigger controversy over these photographs.

Karl Gehrke:

Looking at these photographs, as you mentioned, that are some of the most famous images that we have of the Great Depression, I'm wondering if these photographers, like Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange, if they were more interested in capturing an aesthetically pleasing image, creating art, rather than journalism? John Miller?

John Miller:

They certainly were artists in what they were doing, but they were documentary photographers, too. They were trying to convey a truth, an essential truth. Just like writers, sometimes we pick and choose certain facts and neglect others in order to convey a greater truth. They were doing it. I think this is a wonderful kind of a question to ask and debate to have, because politics is all about staging. It's all about putting your best face forward. Nobody was better at this, I think, than Ronald Reagan.

But every single president, every single politician, if you think that the photographs you get on the front page of the Artist Leader or anywhere else are simply taken by a photographer who happens by and happens to snap a picture at that time, think again. I would guess that anybody who has seen their photograph in a paper has often then said, "Well, let's do that again. Let's make that second entrance." John, you know this as well as anybody, in politics, that photographs are not simply passive takings of reality out there. We're constantly staging things and the question is, "How far can you go and at what point does it become fraudulent?"

John Locke:

I think the context for this discussion is this very interesting exhibition that just opened at the Bronx Documentary Center, put together by Michael Kamber, in which he's trying to, I guess, expose is the right word, some of these fraudulent photographs that a lot of us are familiar with. The point he makes in his New York Times interview about this is that there's so much reality out there that doesn't have to be manipulated or doctored, just take the pictures and be honest about it. Don't go for the picture that's going to win you a prize or make you famous or whatever.

He talks about some of these war photographers from Iraq and Afghanistan who lost their lives trying to capture reality and give people a real sense of what's going on back at home, so he's kind of angry at some of these photographers who decided to doctor photographs. I think that's a good point, especially in the case of the Farm Security Administration when Roy Stryker and Rexford Tugwell would testify to Congress, they swore that these photographs were not doctored, they're meant to convey reality, there's nothing manipulated about them. But then later on, we find out that they were staged and that's where the controversy comes in and that's why these photographs lose their power when people hear that.

Karl Gehrke:

Well, John Miller, we're just about out of time. I'm wondering for you, as a historian, given how famous these photos by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, these photos from the Farm Security Administration, that today 70, 80 years later, so many of them are staged, as we know now. What does that do our perceptions of what was actually happening during the Great Depression?

John Miller:

Well, first of all, I think it has to be remembered that the Farm Security Administration took approximately 325 images in South Dakota. If one or two of them were a result of moving a sculpt 10 feet around and taking it from a different angle, how many of them were simply straight shots that were taken from an angle that the photographer found? I think John is absolutely right that photographers, it was still the same skull, but he shouldn't have moved it. He should've just took it where it was.

It reminded me of the golf tournament the other day where a guy was putting and the ball moved three different times before they finally called it off. You need to take things straight, but there are a lot of other ways to manipulate an image than to move things around and it invites discussion about what's allowable. Can you tell a person, "I didn't quite get that this time. Would you please go back down the hall, come around the corner and let me take a picture again?" Is that allowable? I would invite us to have a discussion about those kinds of things.

Karl Gehrke:

Well, John Miller, John Locke, we'll have to end that right there. Just quickly, John Miller, I know that we'll just mention that you're working on another project right now, looking for some World War II veterans from South Dakota?

John Miller:

Exactly. All right. This is just coincidental, and by the way, the Farm Security Administration Photography Project was put out of business in 1943. Basically, it was a political thing because the Republicans had enough power at that time to put it out of business, partly because they had been spinning them a little too hard. But I am going to be going out interviewing World War II veterans in South Dakota for the Center for Western Studies and putting them in their archives. So if there's some World War II veterans,

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or if you know a World War II veteran who might like to talk to me, you might give me a call at 692-7680 or email me at john.miller@sdstate.edu. I'll put you on a list and maybe we can get a couple of those and have these interviews done in the next few months. Those will be documentaries in the form of words on the printed page.

Karl Gehrke:

All right. Well, John Miller, again, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us on Dakota Middyay. [crosstalk 00:20:36] Always interesting to discuss South Dakota history.

John Miller:

I appreciate it.

Karl Gehrke:

John Locke, thanks for your time as well.

John Locke:

Thanks, Karl.