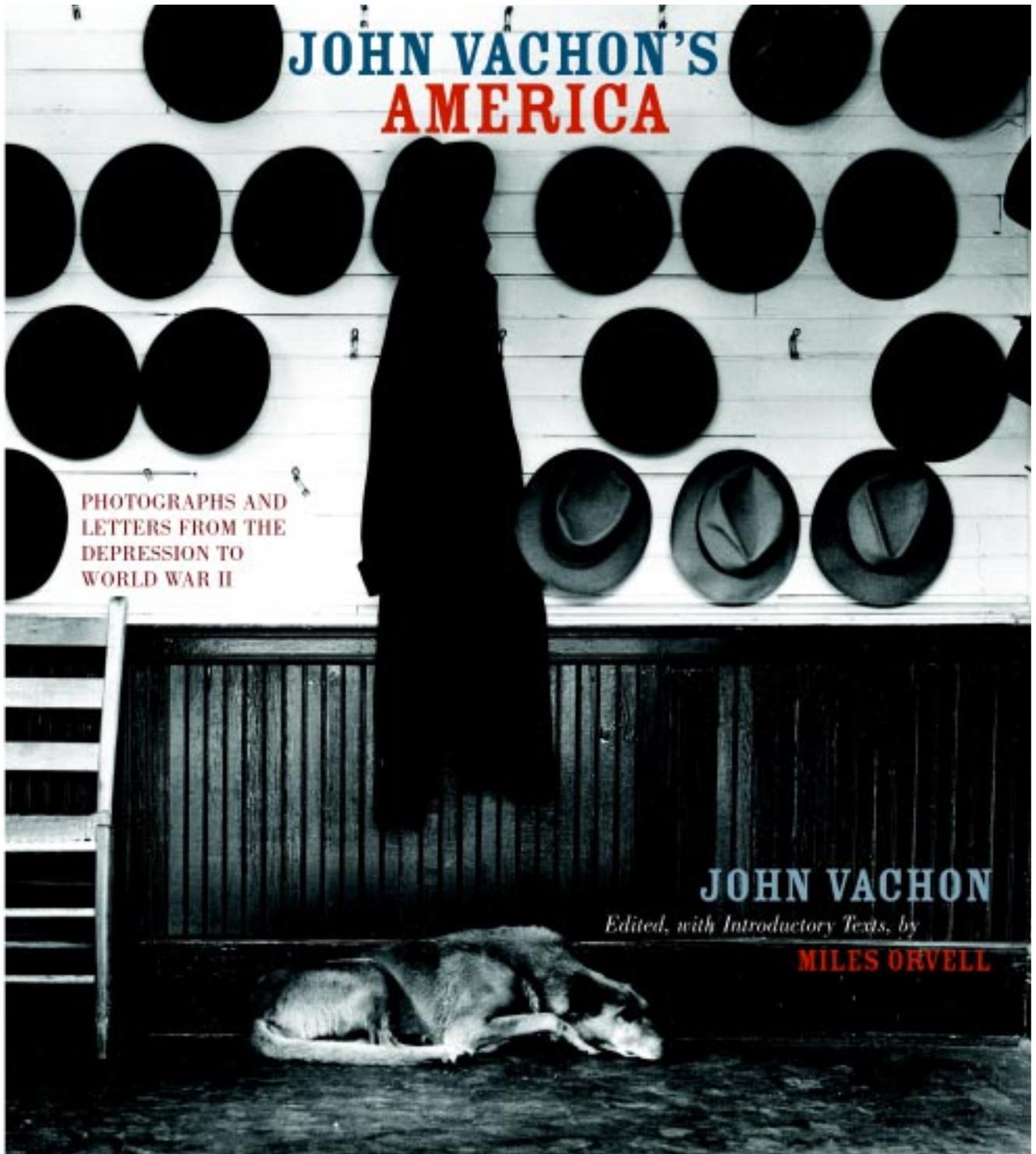


Excerpted from



PHOTOGRAPHS AND  
LETTERS FROM THE  
DEPRESSION TO  
WORLD WAR II

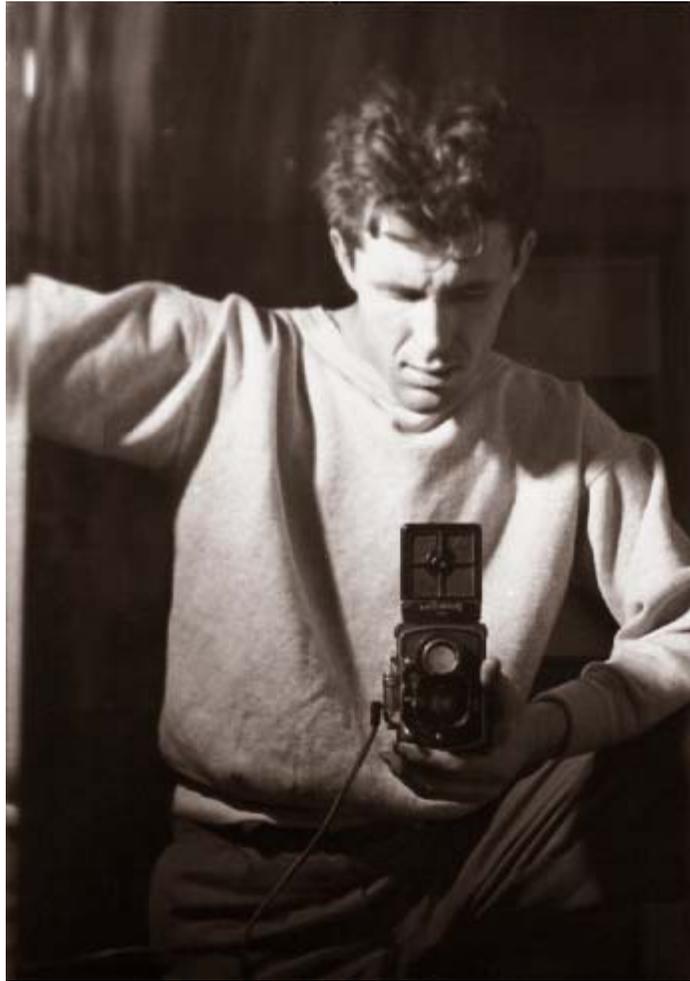
JOHN VACHON

*Edited, with Introductory Texts, by*

MILES ORVELL

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**FIGURE 19** | *John Vachon*, self-portrait, 1945

**DURING HIS LONG TENURE** as a photographer in the FSA group, Vachon took many thousands of images, only a tiny fraction of which could be reproduced here. Selecting a representative sample was not an easy task. Although Vachon's photographs have been published previously in several gatherings of FSA images relating to a specific region or theme, the selection here presents the first overview of his work from the FSA years.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, I offer here a broad range of themes—from the rural farm scene to the urban street, from the industrial subject to the portrait, from everyday observations of the social scene to more formal landscapes—and I include as well a range of Vachon's styles—from candid images to posed, from the subject-centered straightforward composition to the more complex abstract ones. What comes through again and again are the empathy and compassion of Vachon's way of looking at the world and, along with that, an elegance of design and a sharp visual wit, visible in the juxtapositions of elements within the picture.

The selected photographs are organized here roughly according to subject, progressing from rural America during the Depression to urban and industrial America during wartime. They are linked not by rigid categories but by motifs or subjects that carry over in some way from one image to another. And they cover the years from 1938 to 1943. Vachon went on, after his FSA experience, to settle into a career at *Look* magazine, and from that vantage point he was able to reflect on his FSA work and see what was distinctive about his method of working under Roy Stryker. Whereas the magazine photographer has to develop a particular story, known in advance, and works as a member of a photographer-writer team, the FSA photographer could take a more open attitude, reacting to what was out there, looking for the one picture that would say it all.

But though the one good picture may have been the goal, the process of achieving it was a trial of many labors, much film, and several cameras. Of the latter, Vachon's favorite format was the miniature or 35 mm, which allowed for maximum flexibility and speed, and he frequently refers in his letters to his Leica (though he began by 1940 to feel it was "too easy"); but he also mentions his Speed Graphic ( $4 \times 5$  inch negative), his Graflex ( $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ ), and his Rollicord ( $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ ). He took a few other images in a larger format ( $8 \times 10$ ).<sup>2</sup> When he was shooting landscapes or structures and could take the time to set up the shot, he usually took only two or three images of a given subject, from slightly different angles; when he was shooting a scene in motion, especially the street scenes that he favored, he would typically shoot several images in succession (capturing changing figures at an intersection, for example), relying more on his spontaneous intuition. Occasionally, he would pause and study a subject in a given locale, making a dozen photographs (one example from such a study—of the front of a burlesque house—is reproduced here as plate 54). Other images, more formally constructed as ab-

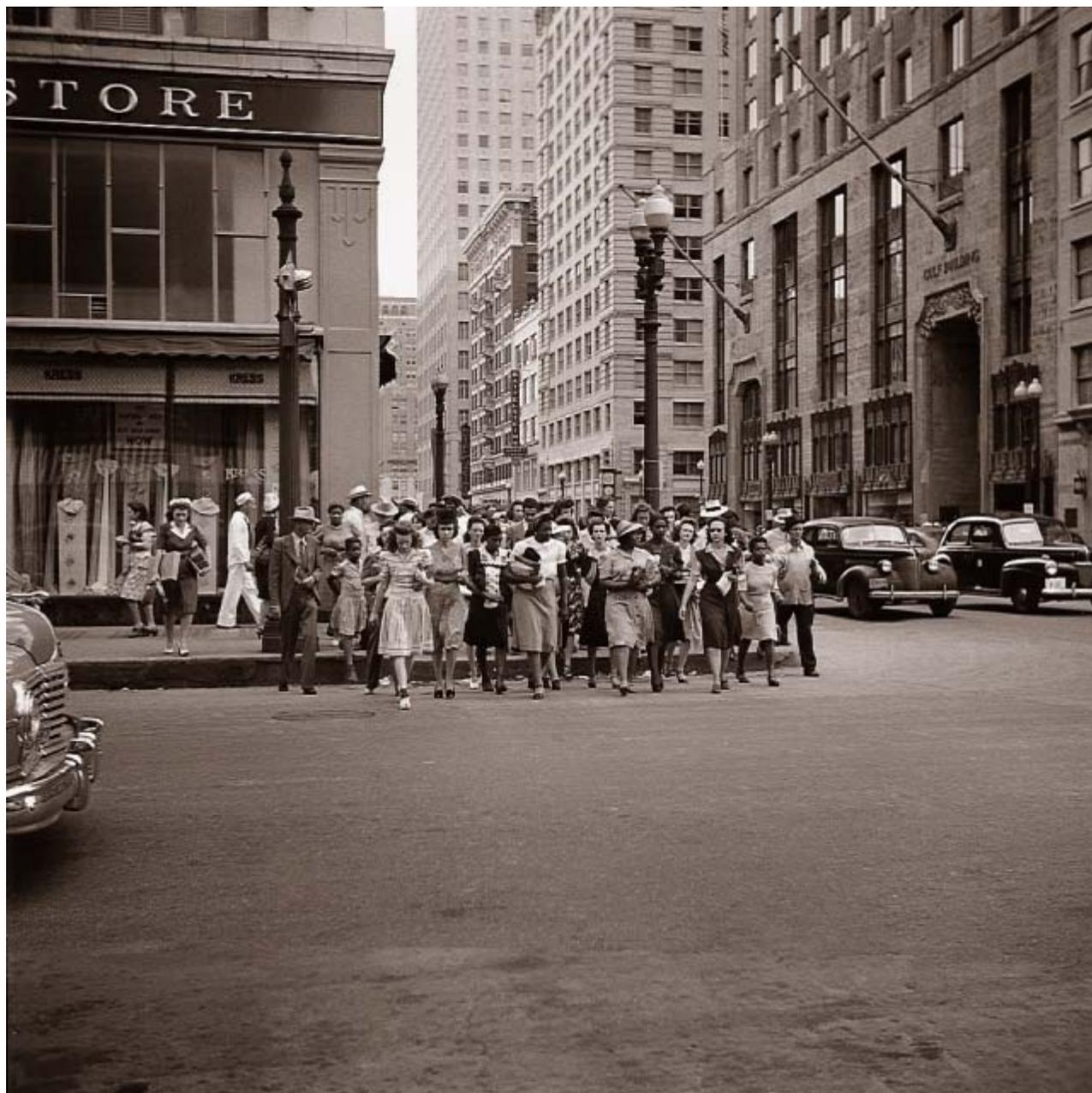
stractions, seem like inspirations of the moment and stand as unique images. Presented in this sequence, out of their original context, the selection that follows is, to state the obvious, my own personal choice. And choosing these images was, at a certain point—when I had narrowed down my choice to about a thousand photographs—extraordinarily painful, so reluctant was I to consign to oblivion any shot that I thought “great” (and there were many).

Vachon’s work appeared in a variety of venues during his FSA years: in newspapers and national magazines, as part of the broad distribution of agency images undertaken by Stryker; in *U.S. Camera Annual* publications, a roundup of the year’s best photojournalism, where Vachon was of course delighted to appear but mildly chagrined to be represented repeatedly by midwestern grain elevator shots; in state guidebooks put together by the Federal Writers’ Project; in books that exploited the FSA collection, which was made readily available to authors; in books for which photographs were taken specially on assignment as illustrations;<sup>3</sup> and in exhibitions of FSA work. Years later, Vachon was the subject of at least four one-man shows, beginning in the sixties.<sup>4</sup>

I started this project in the microfilm era of the twentieth century, and microfilm was my primary medium of research; but with much of Vachon’s work now on the Internet (at the Library of Congress’s American Memory website) it is possible to study the sequence of Vachon’s work in detail, looking at the images grouped in their “lots,” as they were originally made. This broader exposure of his work—through print and through the Web—will open up a significant body of material to further research, understanding, and appreciation.







*People Crossing a Downtown Street with the Green Light*  
Houston, Texas, May 1943







