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Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell: A Personal Album

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

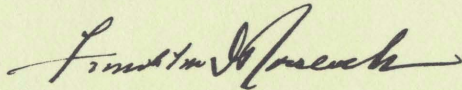
January 29, 1944.

Dear Paul:

I am glad your resignation, effective at the close of business Monday, January thirty-first, tendered in your letter of January twenty-first does not entail your retirement from the public service. I accept it, therefore, effective as of the date indicated.

You have done such good work as Under Secretary of Agriculture that I have the fullest confidence you will meet every requirement of your new responsibilities as Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget.

Very sincerely yours,



Honorable Paul H. Appleby,
Under Secretary of Agriculture,
Washington, D. C.

Letter to Paul H. Appleby from President Roosevelt on the occasion of Appleby's resignation as Under Secretary of Agriculture to accept the post of Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget. From Syracuse University Archives.

THE COURIER

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Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell: A Personal Album

by William A. Sutton

Margaret Bourke-White read *Tobacco Road* (1932) during a vacation, lying in a small boat off the shore of Connecticut. She was deeply moved at this introduction to its author, Erskine Caldwell, an artist with whom she felt much sympathy.

Several years later, wishing to demonstrate the facts behind *Tobacco Road*, Erskine conceived the idea of a word-and-picture book on the realities of poverty in the southern states. Negotiations for a photographer to accompany him were begun in March, 1936, and resulted in a month's tour with Margaret Bourke-White and her camera through several states, beginning in Augusta, Georgia, in July.

Among the more identifiable results of the tour were a book called *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937); their falling in love; their marriage from 1939 to 1942; two more collaborative books, *North of the Danube* (1939) and *Say! Is This the U.S.A.* (1941); and their joint coverage from Moscow between June and October, 1941, of the German attack on Russia.

Fundamentally, what pulled them together also separated them. The personal attraction between them was so great that it resulted in the termination of Erskine's first marriage in April, 1938. Their ideas, represented in their joint books and in *Journeyman*, Erskine's first novel during his life with Margaret, were very similar. They strongly shared a sympathy for the poor, needy, and inept, had a strong skepticism about evangelistic and materialistic religion, and were deeply opposed to the developing Fascistic regimes in Germany and Spain. Margaret was happy to collaborate, therefore, in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, about rural poverty, and *North of the Danube*, a book which suggested in 1938 what the Nazis were like, and she loved *Journeyman*, a book which mercilessly exposes the rascal-religionist whom both Erskine and his minister father despised.

But Margaret had an overriding allegiance to the importance of her superb photographic work, which it seems likely Erskine never viewed with

Dr. Sutton is a Professor of English at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. He is the author of *The Road to Winesburg, a study of Sherwood Anderson*, published by Scarecrow Press in 1972, and a feature on Erskine Caldwell titled "Georgia On His Mind," in the January 25, 1973, edition of the Douglas (Georgia) Enterprise. His biography of Erskine Caldwell is at present in the hands of his publishers, and he is currently working on a book concerning Caldwell's treatment of racial problems.

particular awe. Having conquered the ruin of a first marriage and having established herself artistically and professionally before she met Erskine, whose deep attraction she doubtless also saw as a threat to her important and hard-won freedom, she struggled for several years against the idea of marriage, even stating in public in August, 1938, that she did not plan to marry.

Erskine, for his part, needed to be dominant. During the period of Margaret's second leaving to go overseas on a military photographic mission, he gave up, presumably peremptorily, left their house in Darien, Connecticut, went to California, then to Arizona, and proceeded to get a Mexican divorce on December 19, 1942, while Margaret was afloat in a lifeboat on the Mediterranean, awaiting rescue from a torpedoing incident.

The accompanying pictures, a selection from hundreds dealing with this relationship in the Bourke-White Collection of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, will suggest a few aspects of the phase of Margaret Bourke-White's life spent in a vital contact with another major American artist.

Margaret Bourke-White presented her personal and professional papers, including hundreds of prints and negatives of her photographs, to Syracuse University before her death in 1971. Following her death, the Library received additional thousands of photographs and negatives from her estate. As a result, the Bourke-White Collection at Syracuse provides an invaluable store of research materials for photographers, journalists, and historians.

An exhibit of some of the Bourke-White works, prepared and mounted by Library Science students Robert Madden and Judith Woods, opened on the sixth floor of the Bird Library on February 26. On display until the end of March were many of her famous photographs, books by and about her, and some of her correspondence, all from the Library's Bourke-White Collection. Several years ago, Miss Bourke-White was awarded a Newhouse Citation for her contributions to the field of photographic art and journalism. Some of the cameras with which she painted her unforgettable portraits of the human experience are on permanent display in the lounge of the Newhouse School of Public Communications.

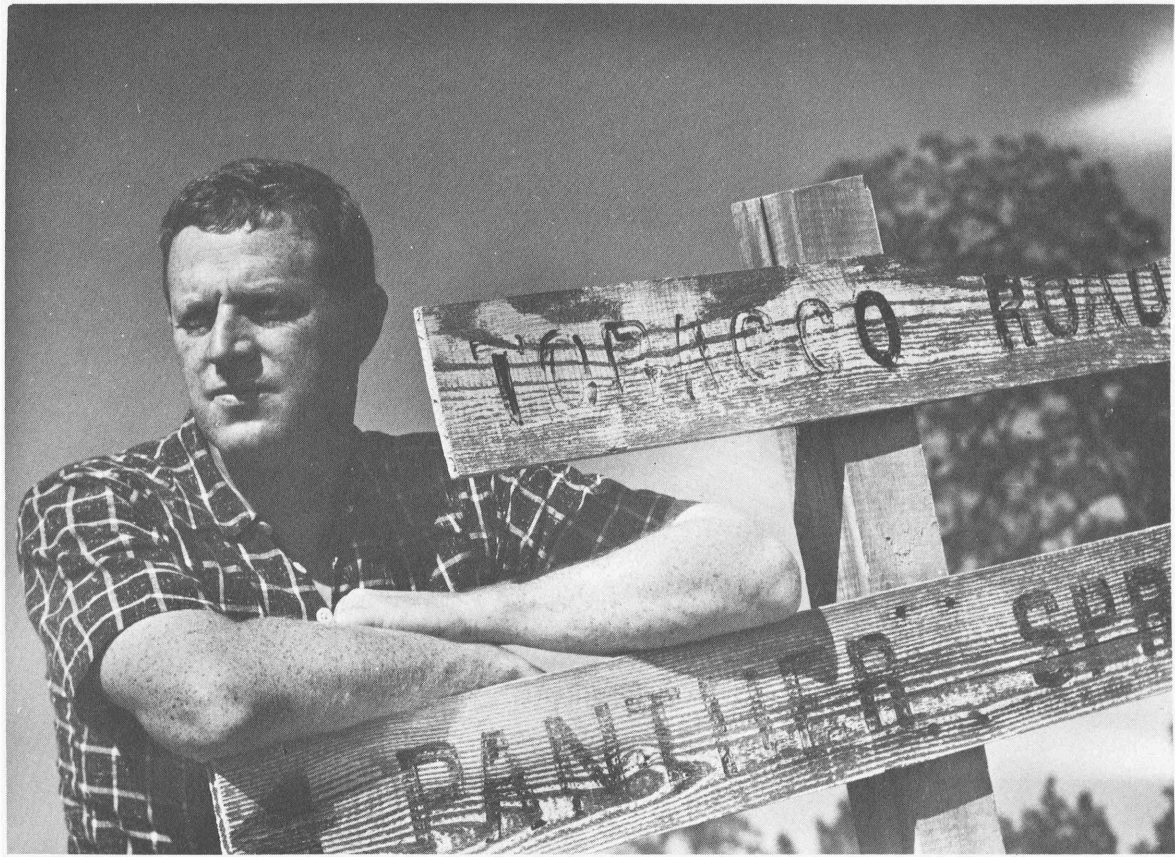
*Dr. Sutton has chosen in this essay to portray Margaret herself during one seven-year period of her life, with the addition of a few photographs from the books *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *North of the Danube*, published during the same period.*

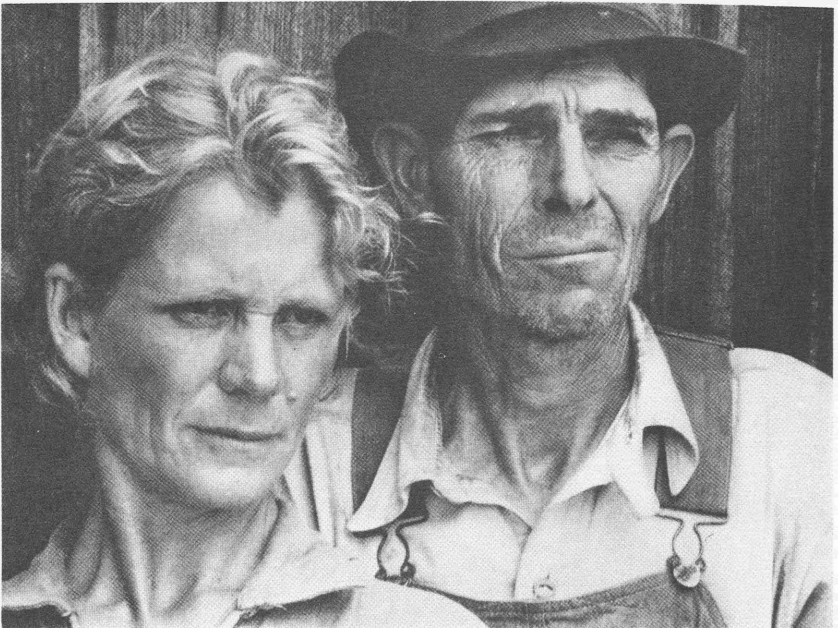
— Ed.



This picture, taken in 1937, following the trip to capture poverty in the southern states but before publication of *You Have Seen Their Faces*, represents the collaborators as they were when they started out. The car is not the original one.

This was a shot Margaret just *had* to take. In addition to the obvious relation between the author and Tobacco Road, perhaps the Panther Springs sign touched her funny bone.





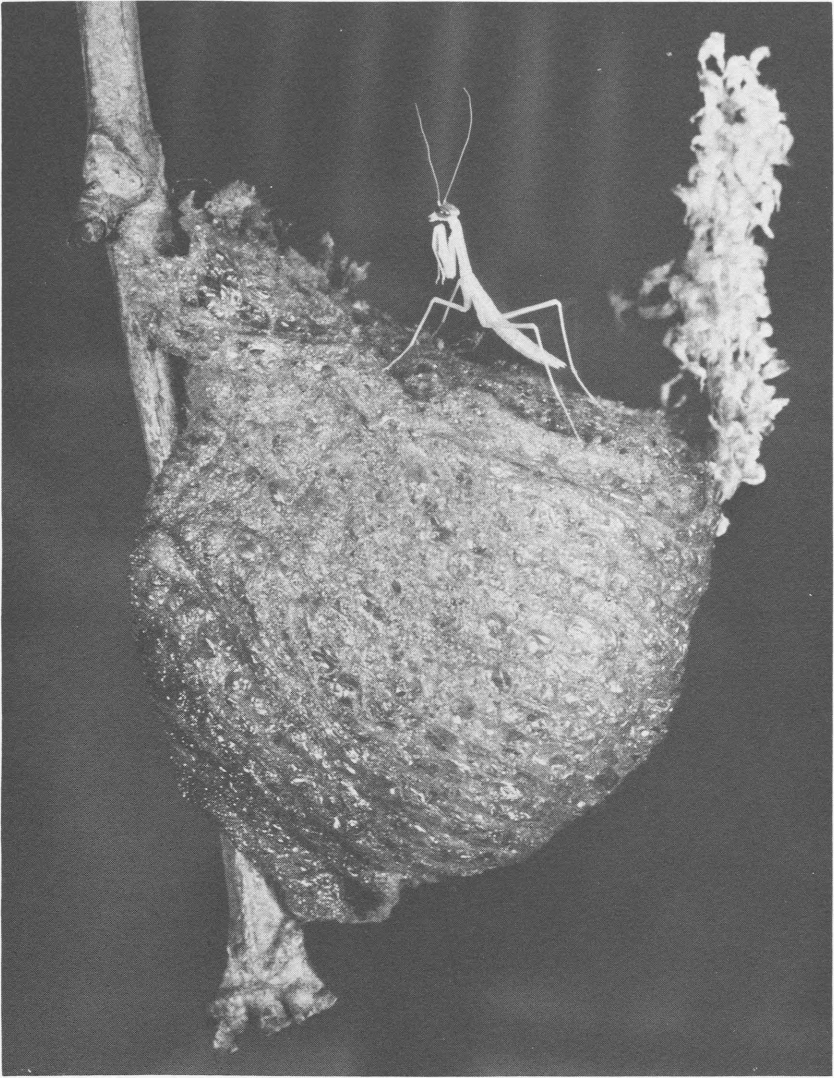
It frustrated Erskine to find that people would deny that *Tobacco Road* was written from life. Pictures of people like these, intended to suggest the barrenness, both culturally and economically, of a part of one of the world's greatest countries, helped Margaret and Erskine document the ravages of the hard life of the share-croppers, people of the economic level of his fictional characters. From *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Reprinted by permission of Erskine Caldwell.

Margaret and Erskine shared a very skeptical view of the fundamentalist, evangelistic type of religion exemplified by such sign-posting as is shown in this picture, which was one of their favorites.





Another 1936 photo. Kit was Erskine's name for Margaret. Skinny had long been an adaptation of Erskine, going back to his lanky youth. Margaret tried other names for him but found she could not improve on it.



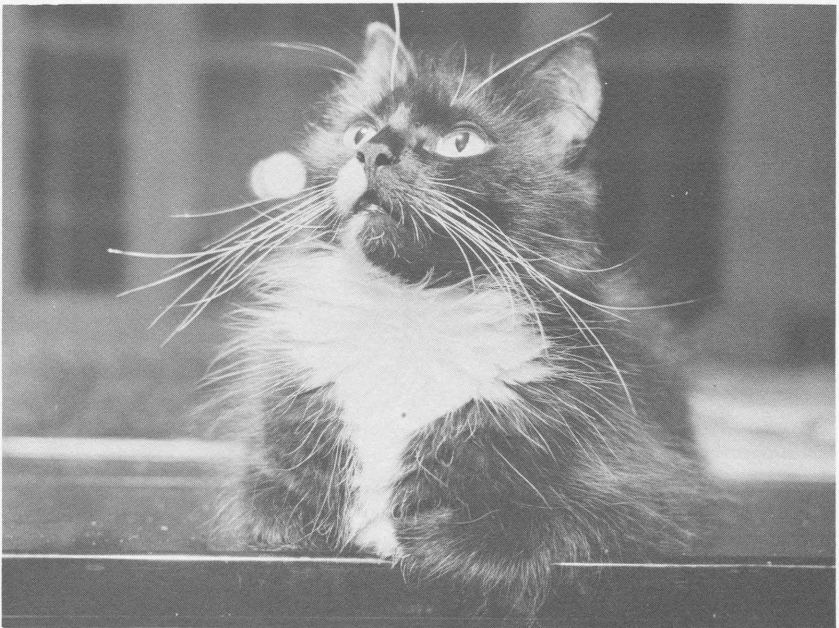
Margaret's interest in photographing animals and insects was fanatic. She had jars of egg cases in the car on the July, 1936, trip, so that she might photograph the life cycle of the mantis. In the Arctic, she prevailed on the captain of a ship to bring his vessel to a halt so she could photograph hatching butterflies without vibration. Erskine did not share her extreme reaction to this kind of work. Reprinted by permission of LIFE (c) Time Inc.



The two collaborators traveled through Europe, particularly the Balkan area, in 1938. Their intense reaction against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia was apparent in *North of the Danube*. Reprinted by permission of LIFE (c) Time Inc.



Probably the pattern in the photograph was as important to Margaret in this picture of girls hoeing sugar beets in Slovakia as was its commentary on the state of agriculture and the economy. From *North of the Danube*. Reprinted by permission of Erskine Caldwell.



A view of "Horseplay Hill," the house Margaret and Erskine built on Point-o-Woods Road in Darien, Connecticut, and which they began to occupy in November, 1938. Margaret landscaped it and furnished it with great care, fought Parkinson's disease with courage and endurance there for nearly twenty years. It was still her home when she died in August, 1971.

Both Margaret and Erskine loved cats. The interest and devotion which caused this picture, probably of one of the Darien cats, is apparent.

When Margaret finally capitulated to the idea of marriage, which took place under the most romantic circumstances in a deserted chapel in Silver City, Nevada, on February 29, 1939, the couple continued westward to honeymoon in Hawaii, where this picture was taken.





The upper of these two Christmas cards, a memento of their team research which produced *Say! Is This the U.S.A.*, was their card for 1941, as is chalked on the freight car. It was sent just after their return from covering the German attack on Russia. The lower, taken on board ship in the White Sea, as they returned from Russia in late October, 1941, similar in humorous style to the other, was apparently planned and executed early in 1942. By the time it would have been appropriate, their marriage had ended. Apparently it was never sent. Reprinted by permission of LIFE (c) Time Inc.

When she might have been mailing that 1942 Christmas card, Margaret was spending a “rather uncomfortable and unusual eight hours of sitting in a very rough and flooded lifeboat,” as she wrote to her stepson. Torpedoed while being shipped to North Africa to take pictures for the air force in December, 1942, she took this picture before she was rescued from the Mediterranean at precisely the same time that Erskine’s divorce proceedings rescued them both from a marriage they no longer enjoyed. Reprinted by permission of LIFE (c) Time Inc.

