

P.S.

“Only in the Way I Saw It”: John Vachon’s Omaha



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John Vachon (1914-1975) was not yet a famous photographer when he arrived in Omaha in October 1938. It was his first extensive solo trip shooting photos for the US government’s Farm Security Administration. Partly as a way to build support for the New Deal, the agency was creating a nationwide pictorial record of the Great Depression.

Vachon’s supervisor gave the twenty-four-year-old a great deal of leeway in the Omaha assignment. Vachon recognized the opportunity he had been given: “For the past year I had been sedulously aping the masters. And in Omaha I realized that I had developed my own style with the camera. I knew that I would photograph only what pleased me or astonished my eye, and only in the way I saw it.”

Four photographs from that assignment appear in these pages, one on the front cover, two illustrating Nathan Tye’s article about hobos (see pp. 212-13), and one shown above, which was taken on lower Douglas Street in November 1938. The 208 Omaha photographs that Vachon added to the FSA’s files provide a visual cross-section of the city at that time, capturing the human drama in ordinary scenes. The Omaha photos are an early example of Vachon’s emerging style, which became well known to the public during his long postwar career as a staff photographer for *Look* magazine. You can see more of his 1938 Omaha photos by searching “Vachon Omaha” at www.loc.gov.

—David L. Bristow, Editor