

PIE TOWN REVISITED

In 1935, as part of the New Deal, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) was created to combat rural poverty in the U.S. Inspired by '40s-era photographs taken in Pie Town by FSA photographer Russell Lee, writer-photographer Arthur Drooker made four trips to Pie Town between 2011 and 2013.



Kathy Knapp, owner and head baker of Pie-O-Neer Pies since 1995. Facing Page: Russell Lee photograph of a family walking down Pie Town's main drag in 1940, juxtaposed with pies cooling on a rack at Pie-O-Neer Pies.



Ever since I was first exposed to Depression-era photography, as a teenager growing up in the Bronx in the 1960s, I had wanted to revisit a place that had been documented by a Farm Security Administration photographer and make a visual record of what had become of it. This project would combine my loves of American history, photography, and travel. But of all the places FSA photographers had visited, where to go?

When I saw the color pictures that Russell Lee (1903–1986), an FSA photographer, had made of homesteaders living like 19th-century pioneers in 1940s Pie Town, New Mexico, I had my destination. Lee didn't just photograph the homesteaders. He saw them. With his camera, he declared, "You matter."

During my visits to Pie Town in 2011–2013, I imagined myself as an FSA photographer documenting what had happened to the "pioneer spirit" that had so impressed Lee. What emerged evokes what William Faulkner wrote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

In making these photographs, I made a connection with a community. At the beginning of this project, its participants were strangers. Through an accumulation of small acts that spoke volumes, they became friends. Their collective appreciation of the work made me hope that, just like Russell Lee, I had declared with my camera, "You matter." ❖

Arthur Drooker is a photographer and writer who has published two photo books: *Lost Worlds: Ruins of the Americas* (2011) and *American Ruins* (2007). View more of Drooker's photographs at arthurdrooker.com.



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Left: A welcoming sign above the entrance to Pie-O-Neer Pies, where many of Drooker’s photographs are on display.
Below: California transplant Anna Roth, officer-in-charge of the Pie Town Post Office since 2011.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Working cowboy Rex Collins Norris Jr. holding a 1940 Russell Lee photograph of his grandfather, homesteader Sam Norris. Retiree Paul Thomas at his family homestead 10 miles outside of Pie Town, with a 1940 Lee photograph of his father, homesteader and former mail carrier Les Thomas. A Lee photograph of homesteader Jack Whinery repairing a fence, tucked into the same weathered structure across from what is now the Pie Town Community Center.

