In her apron, she is bent close to her large, healthy cabbage plants, the lush dark green leaves of her potato patch visible beyond. A passing cloud gives a moment of shade, relief from the full sun on the hillside. We seem to be with the woman in the photo as she tends her vegetable garden—that’s the magic of the image—even though the “now” captured in Jack Delano’s photograph is nearly 70 years in the past.

2010 marks the 75th anniversary of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a tiny agency created in the 1930s by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt with the job of making Americans care about that woman and that scene, in Puerto Rico and across the continent. Seen now, the photos of Delano and Edwin Rosskam in Puerto Rico, along with others taken by FSA photographers across North America, reveal connections across borders and communities rarely seen. These photographs offer a fresh window on Puerto Rico of that time.

by David A. Taylor
Delano and his wife Irene came on assignment for the FSA, fell in love with the island, and chose to spend the rest of their lives there. Delano developed this eye for the essential everyday experiences of a place and its people while working in the FSA, led by Roy Stryker. Stryker urged his FSA photographers—who included Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, Marion Post Wolcott, and Gordon Parks—to capture “not the America of the unique, odd, or unusual happening, but the America of how to mine a piece of coal, grow a wheat field, or make an apple pie.” His aim was documentary photography that showed a place but also made the observer feel its reality. “The lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print,” explained Rothstein, and in that sense it takes the viewer directly into the scene.

Edwin Rosskam was one of Stryker’s early hires for the FSA. Born in Munich, Rosskam had emigrated to the United States. He studied painting at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts (where he met Delano). Soon after joining the FSA, Rosskam spent months in Puerto Rico in late 1937. His most famous work would be his collaboration with Richard Wright, the author of blockbuster novel Native Son. Their 1941 book, 12 Million Black Voices, published a year after Native Son, was a photo essay that captured a fresh awareness of African-American life before the civil rights era.

Delano would follow Rosskam’s path to the island in late 1941. He fell in love with the place and its people, and 40 years later, he shot another series of photographs showing Puerto Ricans and their lives. These appeared in his 1982 book Puerto Rico Mio, which traced the changes in lives of people he met over the course of four decades. “Delano saw,” wrote Alan Fern, “the thread of continuity that linked one moment of Puerto Rico’s history to another.”

Born Jack Ovcharov in Ukraine in 1914 and raised in Philadelphia, Delano was an art student in his early twenties when he saw images by the FSA photographers in magazines and exhibits. He was
In their assignments for FSA, Rosskam and Delano worked in tandem with the WPA Writers’ Project, which produced guidebooks to all the states and territories. The story of the WPA guides and their legacy is the subject of a new documentary film and companion book Soul of a People: The WPA Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America. “Roy protected us,” Irene Delano said later. “He gave us the freedom to move . . . . To me he is the really ideal example of a creative administrator.”

To get intimate views of life, FSA photographers sometimes pressed past the comfort zones of cultural exchange. Delano’s assignments on the mainland included the locales of 12 Million Black Voices, and he developed a thick skin to get the images he thought were essential to show how people lived. Irene recalled how in Mississippi, they had felt the suspicion of African-Americans who were accustomed to abuse and oppression from whites. “I remember one time in particular we passed a little church out in the country and there was a service going on,” she said. “I rememered, ‘Jack, let’s get out of here. I’m not going in.’” Delano pushed on, directed her to go up the aisle and light the flash to illuminate one part of the church interior. “I came out of that place just shaking, and so was Jack,” she recalled. “But what carried us was that we felt that the use of the pictures would warrant us acting that way in that particular circumstance.” Many of those pictures of the American South appeared in 12 Million Black Voices.

The couple was on assignment in Georgia when Stryker phoned with a sudden change of plan. “Roy called and said, ‘How would you like to go to Puerto Rico next week?’” Delano recalled. “So we packed up and went back to Washington . . . .”

In late November 1941 he boarded the steamer Coamo and landed in San Juan. Within months, the Coamo would be torpedoed by a German U-boat and all 187 people onboard would be lost. A few days after Delano reached Puerto Rico, he stood with “a solemn little group around a radio in the lobby” of the Palace Hotel in Old San Juan, listening as President Roosevelt announced the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States entry into World War II. The next day Irene boarded a freighter out of Baltimore and “zigzagged through the submarine-infested seas for ten days,” Delano wrote later, clutching their 16mm camera to snap photos in case her ship was torpedoed. She reunited with Jack in San Juan and spent the next three months taking more than 2,000 pictures of life on the island. Irene would go with Jack on shoots. “I would write down after practically every shot what was taken so that we’d be able to check afterwards and ensure that all the prints came out. ‘I was always afraid that the stuff wasn’t going to come out.’ In terms of their approach, she said, ‘I don’t think it’s anything special that we did, but rather what we tried
not to do. ‘They didn’t want to repeat the distortions of previous visitors.’

“When we first came to Puerto Rico there had been a tremendous amount of published material in the United States on poverty in Puerto Rico,” Irene Delano told an interviewer, “and people here in many of the slums would say . . . ‘You know, they’re going to show us outside of the Island without shoes.’”

Just as she was sensitive to Puerto Ricans’ concerns about being portrayed only as shoeless, the authors of the WPA guide to Puerto Rico did not want to “add to another of the volumes discussing the problem of Puerto Rico.” Rather, as the book’s introduction noted, they wanted to introduce mainland Americans to their 1.8 million fellow citizens on Puerto Rico. The guide told readers about how to get around the island and much more: about the news outlets and culture of the island, the range of lodging from swanky hotels in San Juan to furnished apartments and boarding houses in smaller cities, and the history. Before the Mayflower ever anchored at Cape Cod, the guide noted, San Juan’s citizens had built stone houses, begun work on a fortress, and were preparing to celebrate the city’s centennial.

The FSA had a mandate to gather images of farm productivity and a thriving rural economy, but its photographers made a point of showing all aspects of people’s lives. In Puerto Rico you see sugar cane workers and you see their families. You see farm-to-market links, and you see the living conditions outside the market. The faces show youth and age, resilience and attitude. You also see cultural foundations: musicians, a cockfighting ring, and the observance of faith in a child’s funeral procession. There are few shots of El Morro or other tourist landmarks.

“There were a tremendous number of dedicated people in that Farm Security thing,” observed Irene Delano. After the FSA, Jack served in the Army during the war, worked as a photographer for the government of Puerto Rico, and still later became an independent filmmaker, photographer, and illustrator in San Juan.

For decades, FSA images would influence later photographers. The iconic images from Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, John Vachon, and other alumni seeped into a global sense of what photography could show. Gordon Parks went on to careers as a photographer for Life and as a director of Shaft and other films. Evans became mentor to another generation. Robert Frank used Evans’ map of his FSA travels as a guide when he crossed the continent in the 1950s, taking photographs that would become his celebrated 1959 book The Americans. Today the FSA photographs are archived at the Library of Congress, where they can be seen on the Library’s website.

The Delanos revisited a number of towns in 1981 for Puerto Rico Mio, from Arecibo in the northeast to Yabucoa in the southwest. They were not overcome with nostalgia. “We found people today to be more outspoken, more assertive in their demands for social justice, more aggressive in the struggle for their rights, and far more confident in their own power to affect the course of their future,” Jack wrote in the introduction. ‘Some of our Puerto Rican friends are, however, less optimistic than I am.’

They found Emiliano Pacheco (aka Don Tok), who Delano had photographed years ago working in a sugarcane field near Guayanilla on the southern coast. “I was always a cane cutter,” he told them. “In those days nothing was done for the poor . . . Today I live on my social security, the little they send me . . .” In the eastern central town of Cidra they met up with Rosin Casillas, whom they’d photographed as a second-grader. “We ate meat once a week,” Casillas recalled of her childhood. “I got married when I was fifteen and now have four children,” she said. In 1981 her daughter was studying at Turabo University College to be a teacher.

The trip would be the Delanos’ last project together. Irene died the following year.

Delano’s essay in Puerto Rico Mio concludes with a letter he received, written in pencil by a fourteen-year-old admirer. The boy came from a poor family and his mother worked in a shirt factory. He wanted to become a photographer and loved the FSA photos he came across in books at the library. When Delano responded with a letter asking what he saw in those photos, the boy replied quickly: “I like the pictures,” he said, “because they make ordinary people important.”

David Taylor is a writer and documentary living near Washington, DC. All images appear courtesy of the United States Library of Congress.