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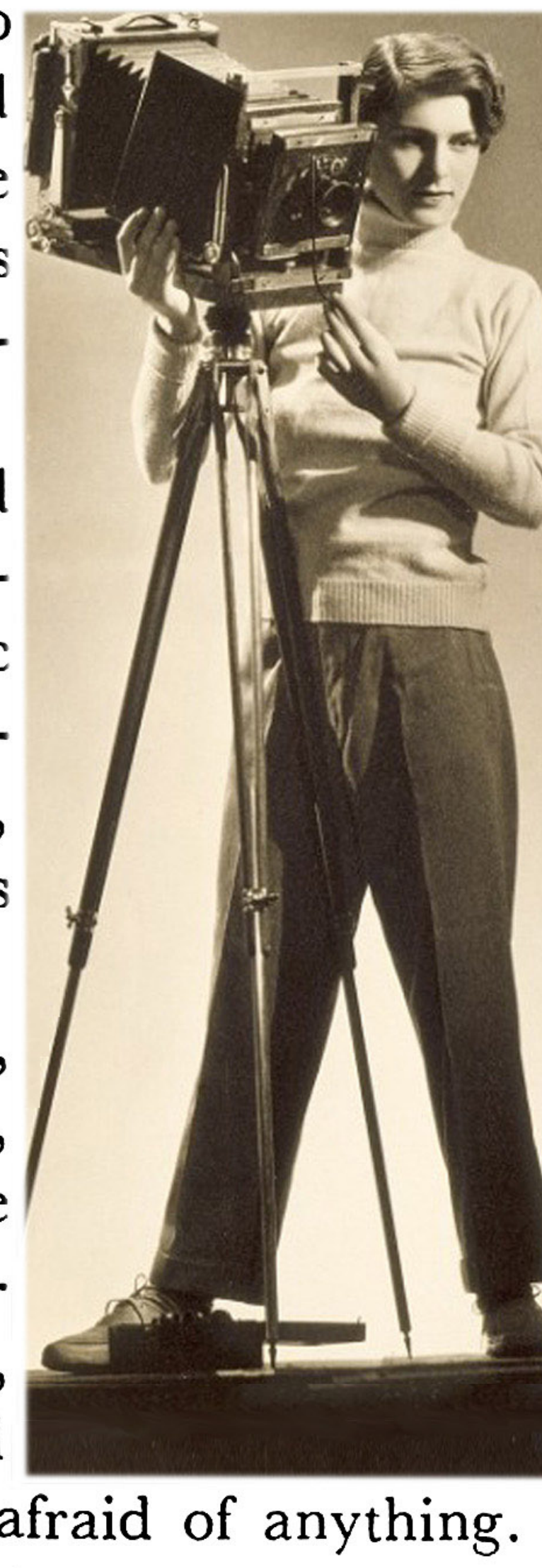
PORTRAIT OF BOURKE-WHITE

SPECIAL PLEADER AND DEVIL'S ADVOCATE BY TURNS, NOBODY KNOWS WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PHILLIPS

Margaret Bourke-White in Prague

To the outside world, Margaret Bourke-White symbolizes modern America, modern photography, the modern woman. To the European and Asiatic the whole American scene is a Bourke-White-wash.



She transformed the American factory into a Gothic cathedral. She glorified the gears, made the whistles sing *Hosanna*.

Thirtyish, direct, chic, rapid-fire, Miss Bourke-White is an amazing combination of daring, dynamo and girl scout. She is not afraid of anything. She thrives on heights and danger, depths and disaster.

Whenever she sees a skyscraper, she climbs it.

At any moment you expect her to rub two sticks together and start a fire.

The *Baltimore Sun* calls her "the Sonja Henie of photography." Winchell authored the quip, "she has that Elinor Glynt in her eye."

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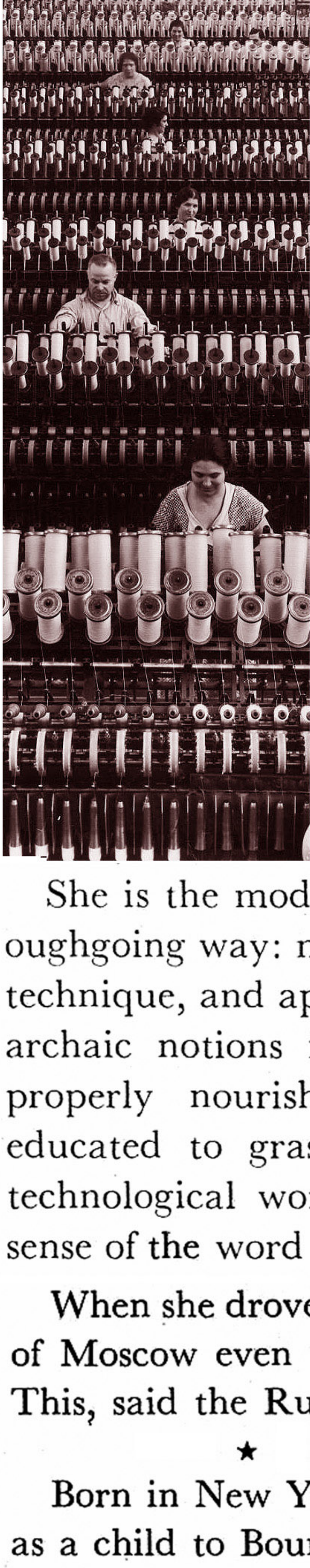
BOURKE-WHITE



But be that as it may, Miss Bourke-White is perhaps the most outstanding personality in modern photography.

She combines, in a special degree, the qualities of artist, technician, social-scientist, and go-getter. She knows what she wants to shoot, she knows how to shoot it, she flies to the ends of the earth and shoots it.

She is the modern artist in a thoroughgoing way: modern in materials, technique, and approach. Freed from archaic notions in art and society, properly nourished, well-exercised, educated to grasp and integrate a technological world, she is in every sense of the word a healthy organism.

When she drove through the streets of Moscow even the babies cheered. This, said the Russians, is a woman.

★ ★ ★

Born in New York, she was moved as a child to Bound Brook, New Jersey. Here she had an exciting life.

Her father, who was an inventor, introduced her into the mysteries of mechanics and natural history.

She learned about cogs and gears, the habits of birds, the ways of the wind in the tall grass.

"My father taught me not to be afraid of anything," she will tell you, proudly.

This was a happy beginning. Today, when her plane plummets down in the Arctic, when she worms across dizzy space on a girder, she is a little girl again, walking with her father.

★ ★ ★

The family moved to Cleveland. Miss Bourke-White went on with her nature work.

Soon she began jumping from college to college like an academic Tarzan.

She began work at Columbia, added a course in photography "for credits." Her instructor was Clarence H. White. The coincidence is interesting; many still think the two "Whites" were related.

For reasons obscure, she did her sophomore and junior work at Michigan. Her major was biology, with em-

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phasis on snakes. Then her money ran out.

She left college, put her snakes to work. She got a job at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, prepared for a career with nature's glories.

In a year it was possible to go back to college. The college this time was Cornell; the major, philosophy.

Then destiny beat a tattoo on its ancient drum.

Miss Bourke-White's father died, and for a second time she found herself face to face with very little.

She was determined to stay at college, get her degree.

She tried to get a job in the college library; there were too many librarians. She tried the dining hall; there were more waitresses than tables. Necessity called a rump parliament.

She racked her brain, made an inventory of her stock. The inventory was easy because "all she had was a camera," . . . "So, I started out," she said, "to make a living with it."

She decided to test her shots.

She took a batch to New York, during spring vacation, presented herself at the office of a famous architect. Miss Bourke-White spent a whole afternoon in the outer office, bouncing her portfolio on her knee.

Finally he came out. He was in a hurry—leaving the city.

Out of politeness he took a hurried look. His eyes opened. "Please come in," he said. And when Miss Bourke-White left that office, she had decided on photography as a life's work.

The proper word at a significant moment can be a powerful thing. If she had gotten the waitress' job at forty cents an hour, she would probably have stuck to her biology . . . and her birds and boas and bats.

"I might never have taken a picture," she said.

On the other hand, she might have become Frank Buck.

★ ★ ★

College was over. A job was open at the Museum of Natural History in New York. But Miss Bourke-White had cast her die, crossed the Rubicon, burned her bridge. And now she made her bed on a photographic plate.

The whole world lay ahead in an expanding universe. She set her shutter, got ready to click.

★ ★ ★

Returning to Cleveland, she took a small apartment, set up a darkroom in

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the kitchen. Then, packing her best prints under her arm, she set out to do the rounds.

Painfully, persistently she pounded the pavements. But going was hard. Life's high speed formulas are for declines, not development. Her bank account dipped.

★ ★ ★

One day she climbed down to the flats of the Cuyahoga River. She groped unhappily for a composition. "I had taken many exposures," she said, "but I was completely dissatisfied.

"Then suddenly, as I threw the hood over my head for one more try, an amazing sight appeared. It was nothing more than a small flat boat, dilapidated and sagging in the middle like a tired old cow. On it were two weather-beaten figures . . . shoving . . .

"Here, though I didn't analyze it until much later, was contrast. In form. In line. In bulk and lighting and balance. The old and the new . . .

"I snapped the shutter as rapidly as my hands could move . . . That's how my ship came in!"

The pictures were taken, next day, to an executive "who had been holding up an expensive catalog for just the right illustration."

They hit him hard.

"He snapped up four of them," said Miss Bourke-White, "and gave me the highest price per print I had ever been paid up to that time.

"I have always been grateful to those two river men whose names I've never known."

★ ★ ★

On the basis of these, Miss Bourke-White was inducted into the sanctum of E. J. Kulas, president of Otis Steel. She wanted permission to shoot the works.

Kulas was callous. It couldn't be done. The heat would even melt the buttons on her jacket.

She argued.

Persistence won.

Kulas, worn down, wrote a reluctant okay and took the next boat for Europe.

All summer she plugged away in the mill. Her only tools were an old view camera and a cracked lens. Every penny she could scrape up went for film and supplies.

Piles of pictures were no good. Dozens went into the trash.

Each day the problems grew bigger. The workmen complained, found her in the way. The heat outdid Dante.

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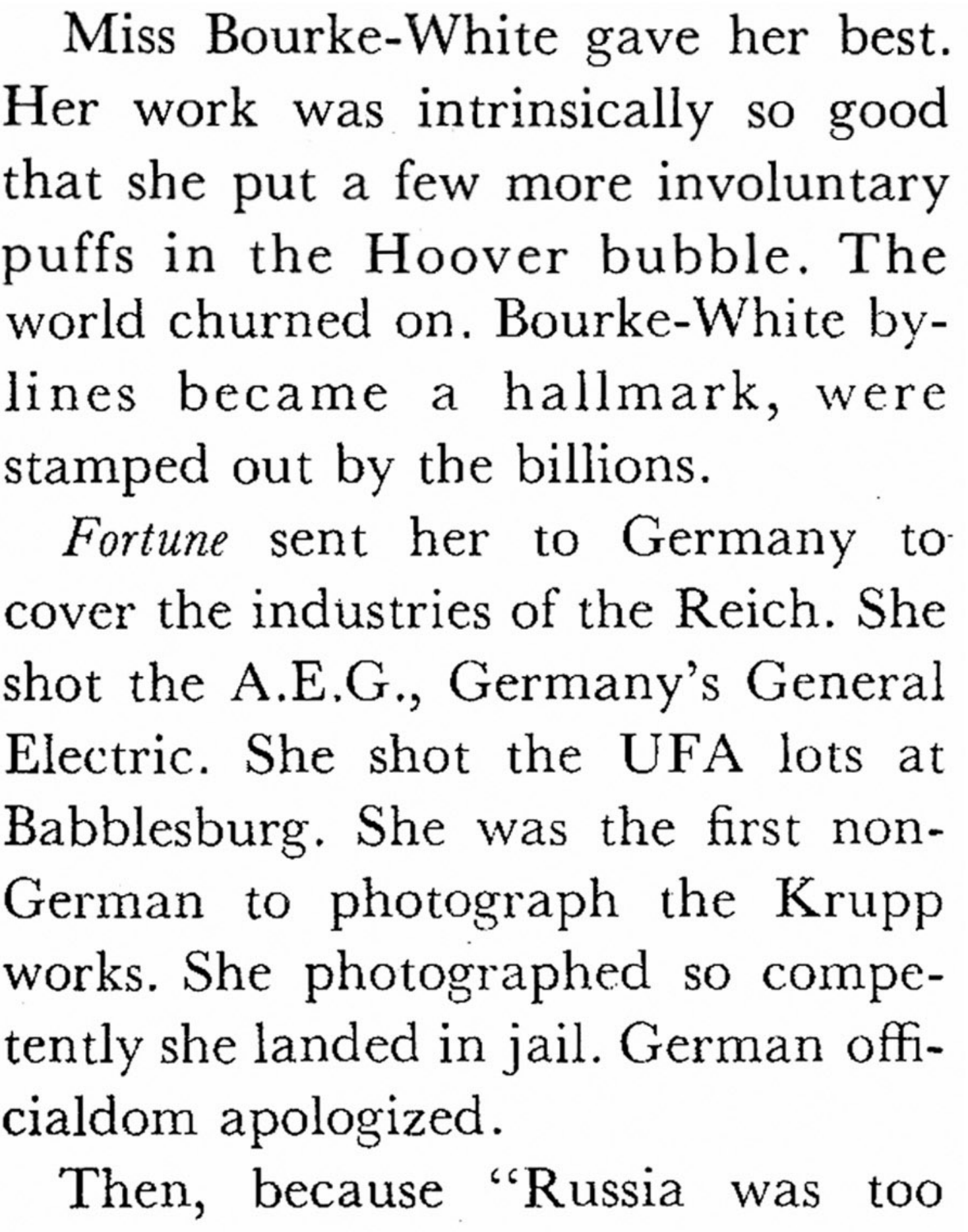
She wore herself down to her last pair of nerves. Then Kulas came back.

Miss Bourke-White was sent for.

Kulas looked at her work, whistled. He bought every one of the ten shots she submitted, paid a hundred dollars apiece. They were published in a privately-printed book and circulated around the world.

From then on she had a reputation. She had glorified the organs of industry, made the derrick a masthead for progress.

Perpetual prosperity was on its way, in America, and orders poured in from all the big businesses that could afford the luxury of a face lifting.



PISTON RODS
An abstraction taken from modern industry, but as pure in form as any springing from a fine-arts artist's imagination. It was Miss Bourke-White's feeling for industrial materials as art forms, combined with a fine sense of the dramatic, that first won her earliest fame.

Miss Bourke-White gave her best. Her work was intrinsically so good that she put a few more involuntary puffs in the Hoover bubble. The world churned on. Bourke-White bylines became a hallmark, were stamped out by the billions.

Fortune sent her to Germany to cover the industries of the Reich. She shot the A.E.G., Germany's General Electric. She shot the UFA lots at Babblesburg. She was the first non-German to photograph the Krupp works. She photographed so competently she landed in jail. German officialdom apologized.

Then, because "Russia was too close, too exciting" to miss, she made an invasion into Soviet territory.

She trekked across the Steppes, made her reputation all over again. She documented the new order.

She looked at Russia with understanding eyes. She talked with children; with old men and women. She worked in the theatre. She plunged into the Caucasus on horseback. She snapped Stalin's mother.

When problems came up, she met them with the resourcefulness of a gold star scout.

At Dneiperstroi she had to load film. There was no darkroom. At last

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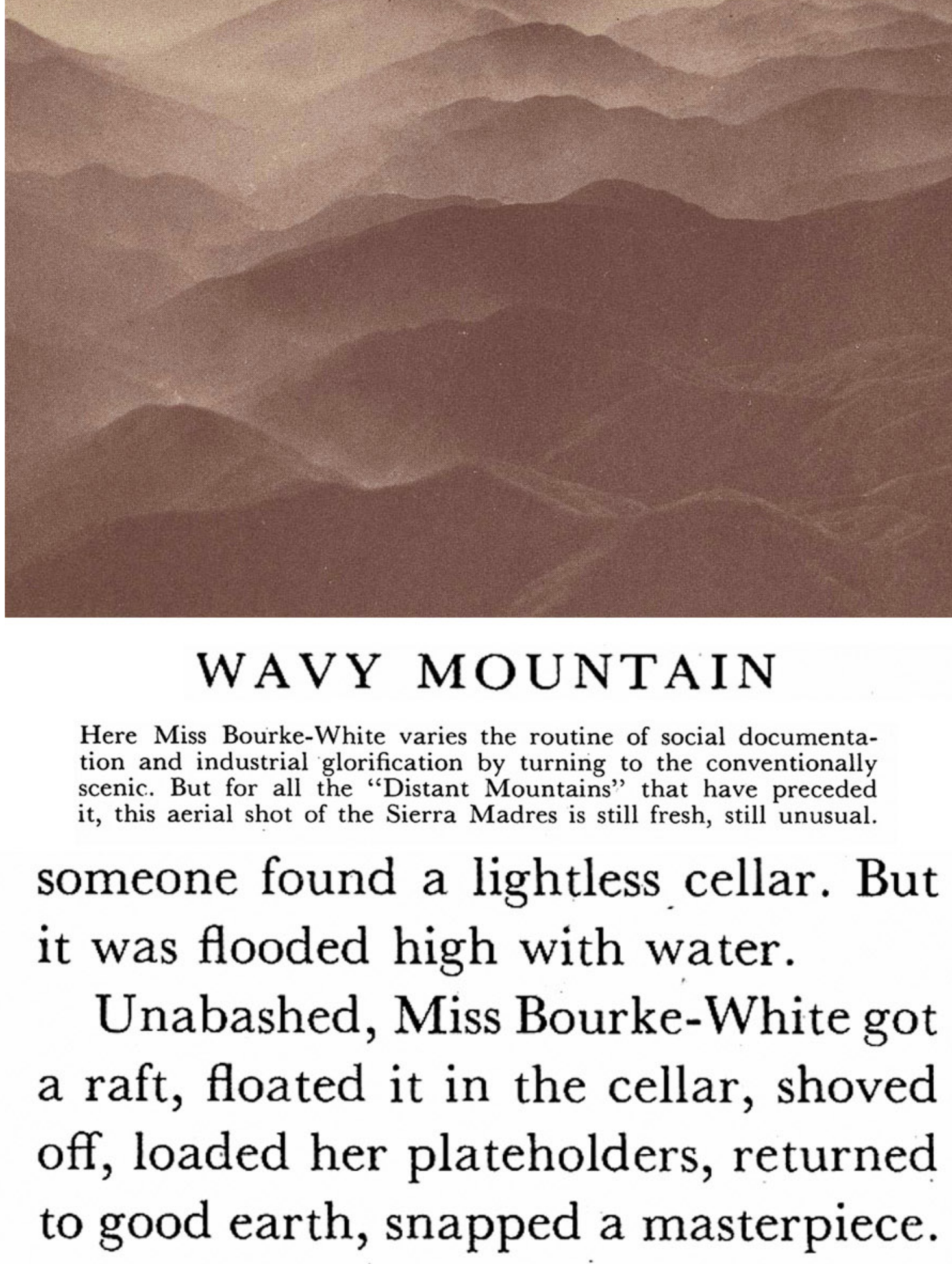

WAVY MOUNTAIN

Here Miss Bourke-White varies the routine of social documentation and industrial glorification by turning to the conventionally scenic. But for all the "Distant Mountains" that have preceded it, this aerial shot of the Sierra Madres is still fresh, still unusual.

someone found a lightless cellar. But it was flooded high with water.

Unabashed, Miss Bourke-White got a raft, floated it in the cellar, shoved off, loaded her plateholders, returned to good earth, snapped a masterpiece.

Once at a dance she found a number of men talking to her with passionate gestures. There was no interpreter. She nodded and smiled.

Some days later she learned that she had accepted five marriage offers; one man had already gotten a divorce in happy anticipation.

★ ★ ★

The months clicked off. Meanwhile, Miss Bourke-White crossed Brazil for American Can.

She climbed into a new studio on the sixty-first floor of the Chrysler. She felt at home here; she had been puttering around the place since it was a little girder. *Life* began. Her assignments spread out. She went to drought areas, thrived on the dust—"Vitamin K."

She covered political conventions and President Roosevelt.

She juggled nightmares, before going to the White House—dreamed of breaking the camera. She faced the President, took aim, made her shot. Then crash went the camera. Winchell blamed "the President's kisser."

She went five lateral miles under Pennsylvania to show miners coming of age.

To the uninitiated, five miles along the tunnel may look no whit different from the mine at the foot of the shaft. But there is *quite* a difference to Miss Bourke-White. And rain or shine, sink or swim, do or die, be there hell or high water, she brings back the McCoy.

★ ★ ★

Miss Bourke-White made two more trips to Soviet Russia. Her shots became classic, her morgue a monopoly. She turned out articles for the *Times*, a book for Simon & Schuster.

She expanded her horizons, added an extra hour to the day.

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With Erskine Caldwell, she burrowed into the deep South, brought back a biting social indictment called *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

She went through the Boll Weevil belt, the old South and the new. She made straightforward studies of Negroes and whites, sharecroppers, tobacco-roaders. She graphed the shadow of marginal subsistence.

It is not practicable, in these pages, to go with Miss Bourke-White to the ends of the earth. The incidents included are designed only to hint at the scope of her work, her attitudes and methods.

Unlike any photographer that came before her, she has the world at her feet, a plane at her door, and all science behind her.

She has capitalized to the *n*th degree on all the resources of modern business and industry. Yet she would never concede that the thread of life is spun on a ticker.

"There is a limit," she asserts, "to the progress that the photographer as an artist can make in *purely* commercial work. . . .

"The technical problems are so difficult, so varied, so stimulating, and for a long time so challenging that his work will leap ahead if he successfully meets the problems put to him. But a point comes where his work will increase in merit from the advertiser's point of view only if he himself begins to adopt that point of view.

"A desire to do honest work, a social view of the world, will lead him into unexpected pitfalls. To go on competently in the line along which this work leads him he must abandon his own artistic and social conceptions."

★ ★ ★

Curiously, Miss Bourke-White in her own work has successfully mixed oil and water. Her income is reported in large round figures. She works for magazines which carry all Wall Street on their neatly curried backs. Yet she has done some of the strongest pieces of honest documentation in modern photography.

In her development, Miss Bourke-White has mastered the machine and turned a critical eye on the machine's masters.

She has altered politically, moved a step apart from the art-for-art's-sakers who died on the barricades outside the Royal Academy. She has steadily matured not only as a photographer but also as an individual.

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BOURKE-WHITE

If her career ended now, it would be said that her work had been significant, that she had left her imprint on the age.

But her work is just begun; only ten apprentice years are behind her.

In the meanwhile the old order passes and barren leaves crumble in the dust.

Soon, perhaps, she will swing out into time on some transcendental derrick and shoot a sick world's swastikal suicide . . . on assignment.

—ROBERT W. MARKS

SCHOOL CHILDREN—RUSSIA

The technical virtuosity of Miss Bourke-White's pictures must not be underestimated. It required some trickery before the devices of lighting and arrangement could be combined here to accentuate to such an extreme degree the dramatic possibilities of an everyday scene.

ACCORDION PLAYER—RUSSIA

A genre picture, depicting a leisure moment in the life of a proletarian. Not content, however, with merely setting down the record, Miss Bourke-White has made of this a powerful arrangement, building the rhythmic material of the composition into a fine and strong design.

WAITING FOR WHAT?

This stark portrait of two women is not necessarily a study in futility. It affirms nothing, it denies nothing, commenting on the fact of their existence without attempting to explain it. Another instance of Miss Bourke-White's indigenous social documentation.

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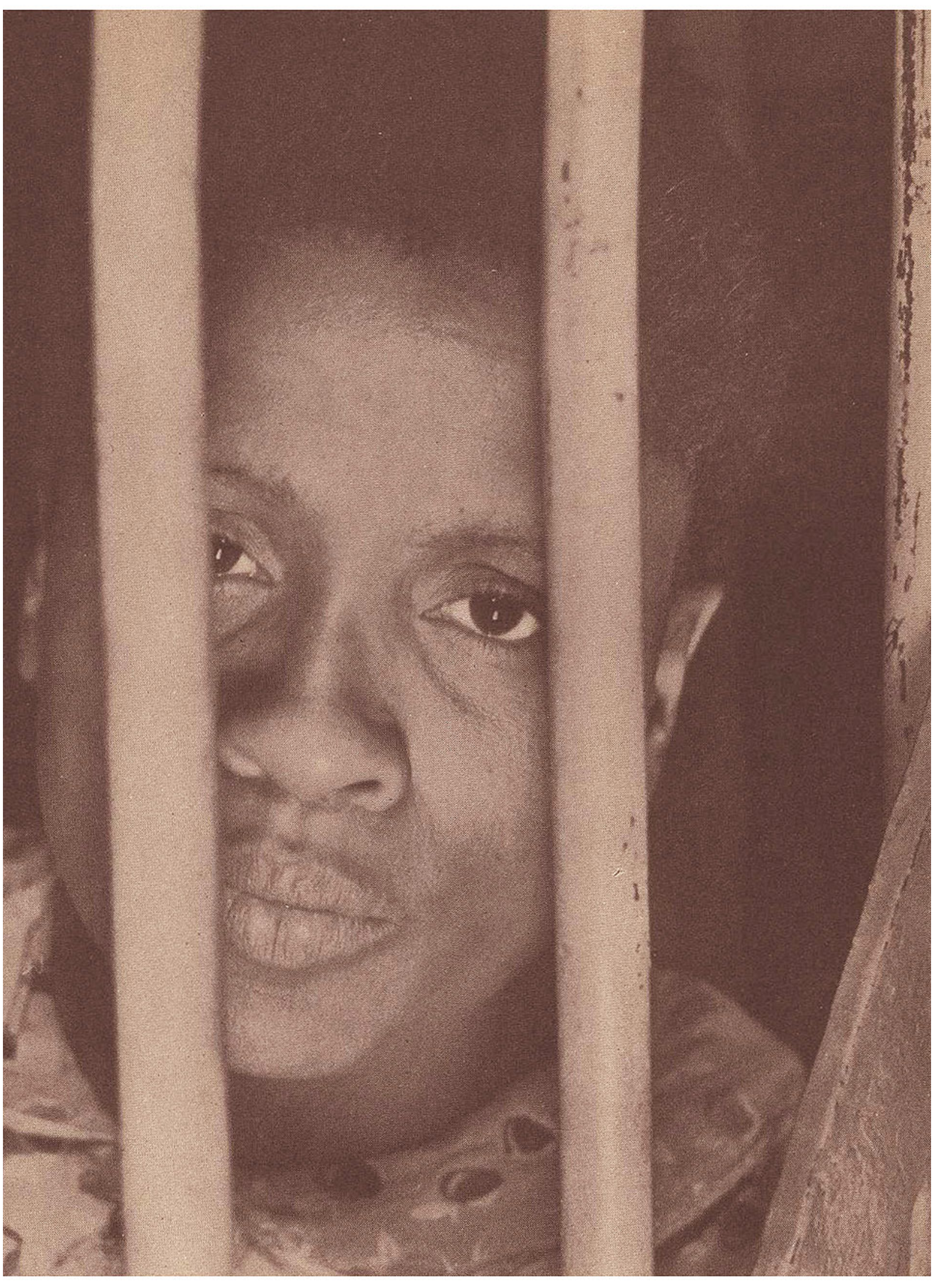
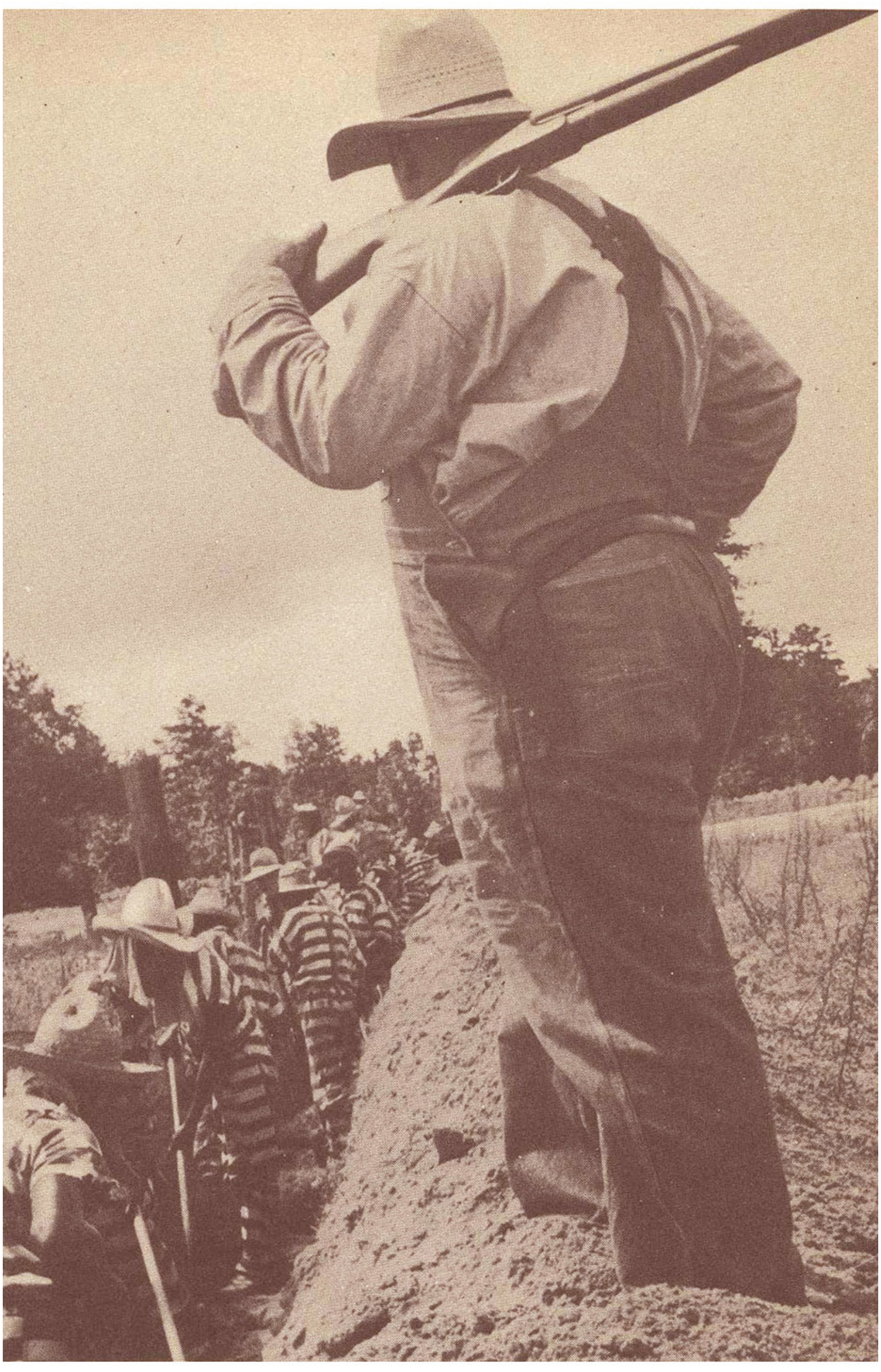
BOURKE-WHITE



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Miss Bourke-White does not mince pictures, as witnessed by this forthright negative presentation of the theme of "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," originally published in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. An exceptionally strong piece of social documentation.



GEORGIA CHAIN GANG

Here Miss Bourke-White presents American forced labor in undraped form. Her impartiality is obvious. With one hand she glorifies the industrial civilization of the nation; with the other she adds such indictments as this of the social order that exists alongside of it.

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