

Photographs, 1915-1945: Paul Strand, by Nancy Newhall

Author

Strand, Paul, 1890-1976

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PHOTOGRAPHS 1915-1945



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PAUL STRAND

32 pages; 23 plates

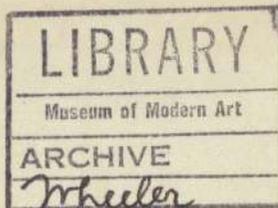
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PAUL STRAND:
Photographs 1915-1945
By Nancy Newhall

Paul Strand has been a discoverer of photographic forms and concepts for our time. The power and beauty of his work have often brought swift illumination to young photographers coming into contact with it for the first time.

Seen as a whole, Strand's work attains remarkable unity in a progressive development to broader and deeper themes; from the abstract impressions of speed and terror in New York in 1915 . . . to the increasingly majestic and tender interpretations of lands and peoples in the Gaspé, New Mexico, Mexico and Vermont series. His development has also included cinematography; outstanding films include *Manhatta*, made in collaboration with Charles Sheeler; *The Wave*, made for the Mexican Government; and *Native Land*, one of Frontier Films' productions.

This, the first critical monograph issued by the Museum of Modern Art on a photographer, accompanies the first of a series of one-man retrospective exhibitions planned to present major American and European photographers. Nancy Newhall, Acting Curator of the Department of photography, is also the author of articles in art and photographic journals and is an authority on the esthetic and historic development of photography.



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PHOTOGRAPHS 1915-1945

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STRAND

BY NANCY NEWHALL

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

wish especially to thank Paul Strand for his generous and unfailing cooperation in every stage of the preparation of this book and the exhibition which it accompanies, as well as the lenders to the exhibition: Mrs. Mitchell Littleton, Mrs. Rebecca James, Mrs. Charles Liebman, and Alfred Stieglitz.

I wish also to thank Ansel Adams, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby for their invaluable comments on the text.

Nancy Newhall
Acting Curator of Photography

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PAUL STRAND

The work of Paul Strand has become a legend. Rarely exhibited, its influence has nevertheless spread through the last thirty years of photography. Time and again photographers coming in brief contact with its force and its extraordinary beauty have felt the shock of a catalyst. Strand has been a discoverer of photographic forms and concepts for our time, penetrating with unswerving logic and passion through each succeeding phase of his problem.

Seen as a whole, his work has remarkable unity. The abstract impressions of the speed and terror of New York in 1915 triumphantly announce his themes. The increasingly majestic and tender interpretations of lands and peoples, from Gaspé 1929 through Vermont 1944, are their latest resolutions.

He was born in New York City in 1890, of Bohemian descent, and grew up in a brownstone on the upper West Side. In 1904 he started attending the Ethical Culture School. The gift of a Brownie camera had started him photographing when he was twelve, and when, in 1907, a young biology instructor named Lewis Hine persuaded the school to build a darkroom and start a course in photography, Strand eagerly joined the four or five students learning to develop and print and set up their cameras in Central Park. Hine was just starting himself, photographing the immigrants at Ellis Island and their degradation in slums and sweatshops.

One winter afternoon Hine took his group of students down to the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession at 291 Fifth Avenue. To the seventeen-year-old Paul Strand, that afternoon opened a new world. Here were photographs with the exhilarating impact of music, poetry, painting. These photographers were expressing vital things. Every print bore the individuality of its maker. The range of color and

surface seemed unlimited—the powerful chiaroscuro and rich blacks of Steichen's gum-prints, the shimmering tone-patterns of Clarence White's platinum, the dynamic portraits by Gertrude Käsebier and Frank Eugene, printed on surfaces ranging from thistledown Jap tissue to linen-like charcoal papers. There were rich carbon prints of Hill's noble portraits, Stieglitz's penetrating images of the rising, changing city. Strand felt that here was a medium to which one could devote a lifetime.

He joined the Camera Club of New York—only once or twice in his life was he to have a darkroom of his own—and settled down, at eighteen, to become a photographer. The control of camera, chemicals and paper came first. With characteristic determination and a capacity for taking unlimited pains, he worked his way through the current enthusiasms: soft-focus lenses, gum-prints, carbon prints, manipulations, all highly regarded then for their "artistic" effect. Feeling the need for genuine criticism, he went to see White and Käsebier, who were cordial but not cogent. He went to see Alfred Stieglitz, the extraordinary force guiding the two little rooms at 291 Fifth Avenue. Here was a man without prejudice or preconceptions, with an instinctive feeling and passion for photography. It was his energy and devotion that had evoked the Photo-Secession and brought forth its magnificent quarterly, *Camera Work* (1902-1917). Already the walls of "291" were beginning to blaze with strange revolutionaries—Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, Rousseau, Brancusi—Weber, Hartley, Marin, Dove . . .

Here Strand received his first real illumination: Stieglitz pointed out that photography in its incredible detail and subtle chiaroscuro has powers beyond the range of the human hand. To destroy this

miraculous image, as some members of the Photo-Secession, and Strand himself at the time, were doing, was to deny photography. To realize the full resources of his medium, the photographer must accept the great challenge of the objective world: to see, profoundly, instantly, completely. After that, during the slow, painful years of groping towards what he had to say, Strand went back to Stieglitz whenever he felt he had some advance to show.

Meanwhile, he faced the problem of making a living. Graduating from the Ethical Culture School in 1909, he began a dismal series of first contacts with the business world—an enameled ware business, a slaughter-house, an insurance office. In 1911 he took his childhood savings and went to Europe for two months. With his usual thoroughness, he landed in Africa and worked his way up through Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France. All alone, knowing nobody, travelling at night, he crossed to England, went up to Scotland, and came home, having enjoyed himself immensely. Shortly after this, he set up for himself as a commercial photographer, doing portraits and hand-tinted platins of college campuses.

Dropping in now and then to see the exhibitions at "291," he found in Picasso, Braque, Matisse something which at first puzzled him and then became a great generative force. He began to understand their need to re-examine reality in the light of the twentieth century, their search for the elements—form, line, tone, rhythm—whose counterpoint underlies all art. He found the same structural sense in Picasso and El Greco, in Stieglitz and Hill. "In 1915," he writes, "I really became a photographer . . . Suddenly there came that strange leap into greater knowledge and sureness . . ."¹

When, in 1915, he went to see Stieglitz with his platins under his arm, he was totally unprepared for what happened. Stieglitz was very much moved, particularly by the photograph of Wall Street, with the little figures hurrying under the ominous rectangles of the Morgan building. Here was the city, now

entering its climactic period of stricture and thrust, dwarfing its inhabitants, engulfing them in speed, terror, and frustration. Other photographers had looked down from the city's towers before, but not with this formidable realization of abstracted form. Here too were the hurt, eroded people in the streets and parks (page 9). These huge, astonishing close-ups are the first true "candid." To catch these people unawares in the split-second of self-revelation, Strand had diverted their attention by fixing a glittering false lens on the side of his quarter-plate reflex camera. Coming so close to things as to destroy identification, he created new classic structures from ordinary kitchen bowls (page 10), fruit, and later machines. With a white picket fence and a dark barn (page 11) he stated a rectangular theme that has obsessed a generation of photographers.

This was a new vision. Stieglitz himself, since his epoch-making "Steerage" of 1907, had been realizing its formal and emotional implications with quiet, searching portraits, architectonic records of exhibitions, and images seen from the back windows of "291" which served as metaphors for his thought. In Pennsylvania Charles Sheeler was making abstractions from native barns and buildings. In California Edward Weston, still winning prizes in pictorial salons, had not yet begun his true evolution. Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy were still painting and would not for six years take up the camera. These dynamic forms and concepts of Strand's proclaim the new approach to photography.

Stieglitz said these things must be shown at "291" and in *Camera Work*. He called in Steichen and others who were in the little backroom, introduced them, and said to Strand, "This is your place. You belong here. Come here whenever you like." That was the beginning of a close relationship that lasted for fifteen years.

The show took place March 13 to 28, 1916. Six plates appeared in *Camera Work*, No. 48; the last

¹ Strand, Paul, "Photography to me." *Minicam Photography*, May, 1945.

number, 49-50, was devoted to Strand. Stieglitz wrote: "His work is rooted in the best traditions of photography. His vision is potential. His work is pure. It is direct. It does not rely upon tricks of process. In whatever he does, there is applied intelligence . . . (These gravures) represent the real Strand. The man who has actually done something from within. The photographer who has added something to what has gone before. The work is brutally direct . . . These photographs are the direct expression of today."²

Strand's concepts have been endlessly repeated by the European experimenters of the 1920s and their American imitators in the 1930s. Few of the photographers who filled photographic magazines, annuals, and exhibitions with patterns from above and portraits from too close realized that these forms were not an end but a beginning. To Strand, Stieglitz, Sheeler, Weston, and all the major American photographers, abstraction was a discipline and a starting-point.

In 1918-1919 Strand served in the Army as an X-ray technician; on his release he found himself slow to regain his momentum. The photographs Stieglitz had been making, the passionate and searching portrait series of Georgia O'Keeffe, moved him profoundly and stimulated him to renewed activity. A sharper sensitivity to texture and light begins to characterize his work. In Nova Scotia in 1919 he made his first landscapes. In the New York landscapes of this period the raw chaos of the city's growth becomes a minutely organized vertical plane. A buggy in slanting sunlight becomes a skeleton of steely elegance, framed in weathered wood. A mullen, dark as sleep, prefigures his Maine sequence of six years later.

A beautiful new movie camera owned by Charles

² "Our illustrations." *Camera Work*, No. 49-50, June, 1917, p. 36.

³ Minicam. Op. cit.

⁴ "Alfred Stieglitz and a machine." Privately printed, New York, February, 1921; "Photography and the new god." *Broom*, November, 1922, pp. 252-258, ill.

Sheeler inspired the two men to make a movie together. The result was *Manhatta*, released in New York in July, 1921 as *New York the Magnificent*. With its captions from Whitman, its strange angles up and down on crowds pouring from a ferry and going to work, this film was hailed both here and in Europe as the first to explore documentary material with an abstract and poetic approach.

Soon after this Strand was persuaded to become a free-lance motion-picture cameraman. His purchase of an Akeley camera eventually resulted in a fairly comfortable living making newsreels for Fox and Pathé, background shots for Famous Players and Metro-Goldwyn, and short films for Princeton commencements. Its more immediate results, however, were a series of photographs of the machine. In the camera he saw the black sculpture of its case, the interlocking climb of its gears, and the glimmering abstraction of its film movement. Through these and the lathes in the Akeley shop he "tried to photograph the power and marvellous precision which the very functional forms, surfaces, and lines of a machine reflect. I barely touched this field; it is still to be explored."³ His preoccupation at this time with the relation of the machine to the artist appears in several articles.⁴

This was Strand's most polemic literary period. Intimately part of the brilliant, changing group around Stieglitz, he not only helped hang exhibitions, found galleries, and support projects, but fought battles in the press with articles and letters on Marin, O'Keeffe, Lachaise. A lecture he gave at the Clarence White School of Photography, attacking pictorialism and stating the creed of pure photography, caused much discussion here and in England.

By 1926 his income had reached the point where he was able to take a month or two each summer and concentrate on photography. That first summer, in the Rockies, he found two significant new themes: the uncanny sculpture of blasted trees and the ghostly ruins left by dead races. In Maine, 1927-

1928, he made a series of intense close-ups that have been called the essentials of poetry.⁵ In these photographs he rises to his full stature: the velocity of line developed in slanting grasses, curling ferns, vivid spear thrusts of young iris (cover plate); the rising counterpoint of dark forest, etched across with dead lichened branches. A fugal development of motifs runs through the series: rain and dew appear as jets of light on a fern frond, as a shower of jewels in a cobweb (page 16). Driftwood changes from bosses of splintered silver to passages of Dantean incandescence. These rock forms, to quote Henry McBride, ". . . have been bitten by rain and wind into hieroglyphics that seem to mean everything."⁶

Beginning with this series, Strand's prints attain a depth and richness which Elizabeth McCausland, the most comprehensive of his commentators, calls "superlative purity pushed beyond logic into passion."⁷ Preferring platinum paper because of its permanence and long scale of values, Strand was not satisfied with the pale and uniform results usually obtained and experimented ceaselessly until he found ways to deepen and vary its tones. The rich black of his platinum he obtained by adding to the prepared paper a platinum emulsion he made himself. Goldtoning this enriched surface produced intense violet blacks. For silver tones, he used blue-black platinum paper; for a cold brilliance, as in the *Machine* and early *Gaspé* series, he used ordinary chloride papers. Working in the intervals between movie assignments, he seldom had time to make more than one superb print. Those on platinum paper, now unobtainable, are truly unique.

In 1929 Strand went to the *Gaspé* for a month. Working with a 4 x 5 Graflex instead of his heavy 8 x 10 Korona view camera, he began composing with all landscape elements, developing an exquisite sense for the moment when the moving forces of clouds, people, boats are in perfect relation with the static forms of houses and headlands. In this little series, where the whites blaze in the cold light of the North, that sense of the spirit of place which

is implicit in the *New York* and *Maine* series emerges as the dominant theme of Strand's work.

This search for the fundamentals that shape the character of all that rises from a land and its people reaches symphonic proportions in the *New Mexico* series, 1930-1932. This is by far his most prolific and varied period. Of its first year, the poetess Lola Ridge writes: "Earth is here a strange and terrible foreground in which the dark forces of nature seem to be raised to the nth power. There is a triumphant movement in the skies that alone rivals the else omnipotent earth. . . . Paul Strand has apprehended and made manifest the fierce rhythms of this earth . . ."⁸

Among the shouldering adobe forms, the buttressed apse of the *Ranchos de Taos* church appears again and again in magically changing lights (page 20). In the ghost towns, *Aspen*, *St. Elmo*, *Red River*, Strand saw the last vestiges of the frontier. The boards of these mouldering buildings seemed to him still permeated with the violence of the lives that had been lived in them.

From *New Mexico* Strand drove down to *Mexico*. Here it was the spirit of the people—their grace, their pride, and their enduring strength—that moved him. Returning to the "candid" theme of nearly twenty years earlier, he fitted a prism on the lens of his 5 x 7 Graflex (always masked to 5 x 6¼) and went into the streets and market-places of the little towns. Photographed against walls under the open sky, sometimes gently revealed, sometimes struck with vivid sunlight, these portraits attain a massive solidity and intensity that recall the work of Hill (pages 26, 28 and 29). In the dark churches, Strand found the *bultos*, strange images of Christ and the Virgin (pages 24 and 25),

⁵ McBride, Henry, "The Paul Strand photographs." *N. Y. Evening Sun*, March 23, 1929. Review of one-man show at The Intimate Gallery.

⁶ McBride. *Op. cit.*

⁷ McCausland, Elizabeth, "Paul Strand, the photographer and his work." *U. S. Camera*, Feb.-Mar., 1940, pp. 20-25, 64, ill.

⁸ Ridge, Lola, "Paul Strand." *Creative Art*, Oct. 1931, 9 No. 4, pp. 312-316, ill.

which seem to symbolize, like the brief glimpses of the land and the architecture in this series, the emotional preoccupations of the people. The Mexicans themselves acknowledge the depth of Strand's realization.

The composer and conductor, Carlos Chavez, then Chief of the Department of Fine Arts in the Secretariat of Education, appointed Strand chief of photography and cinematography and asked him to make a film on Mexico. The result was *Redes*, released in the United States in 1936 as *The Wave*, the simple story of fishermen in the bay of Vera Cruz, and photographically one of the most beautiful films ever made. For Strand it was a focussing of his two media and his experience in Gaspé and Mexico. From then on, for nearly ten years, he concentrated on films. The pressures that were mounting into World War II impelled him, like many other artists, to devote all his energies to awakening in the public an awareness of threatening dangers. In 1935 he photographed with Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, under the direction of Pare Lorentz. In 1937 Frontier Films was formed, with Strand as president. This non-profit organization produced *China Strikes Back*, *Heart of Spain*, *People of the Cumberland*, and Cartier-Bresson's *Return to Life*. *Native Land*, the only Frontier film actually photographed by Strand, was released in 1942.

Two interludes only break these years in film. The first was a two weeks' return to the Gaspé, in 1936. Brief as this second series is, it is incomparably warmer and more powerful than the first. The Gaspé is no longer remote, under huge skies: children smile, a hardy old fisherman stands behind chicken wire in his barn doorway (page 19). The white picket fence, no longer a challenging abstraction, recurs among the clapboarded, gabled houses "like a musical figure."⁹

⁹ McCausland, Op. cit.

¹⁰ Hurwitz, Leo, foreword to *Paul Strand: 20 photographs of Mexico*. N. Y. Virginia Stevens, 1940.

The second interlude was the production in 1940 of the magnificent portfolio, *20 Photographs of Mexico*. This was Strand's attempt to solve the photographer's problem of distribution. After considerable research, he decided on gravure, hand wiped and hand printed, and worked out a lacquer that intensified the blacks. The fine paper, the close cooperation with the skilled craftsmen making the plates, even the assembly line of friends organized to coat the gravures with the special lacquer, are characteristic of his own craftsmanship. Sold by subscription only, the edition of 250 copies has long been exhausted.

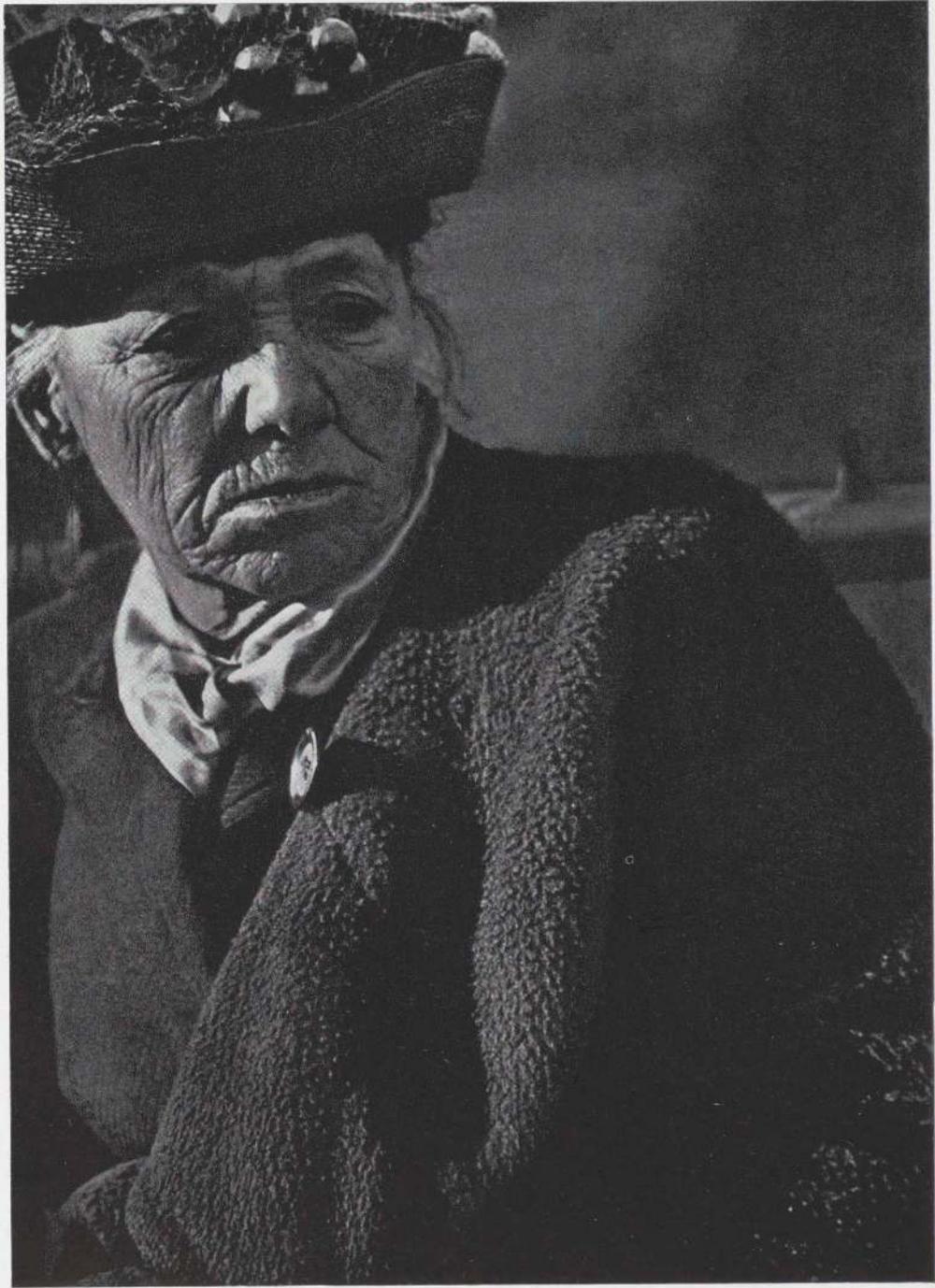
After the release of *Native Land* and various short films made for government agencies, it was with joy that Strand returned to photography. In the fall and winter of 1943-1944, he went to Vermont. Here, as in the Gaspé, in Mexico and New Mexico, where generations of painters and photographers have found only the superficial and the picturesque, Strand reached into the essence of New England. The shuttered white church stands on patches of snow like the terrifying grip of an ideal. In the worn doorlatch, the tar paper patch, the crazy window among rotting clapboards, appear the ancient precision and mordant decay of New England. In the glimpse of delicate woods in snow through the side of a shed (page 30) he expresses its frail and stubborn loveliness. The portrait of the old farmer, Mr. Bennett (page 31), is one of the most eloquent and poignant in photography.

Strand himself has never worked symbolically. "His photograph is his best effort to render the emotional significance of the object."¹⁰ In the past thirty years his work has been called brutal, cruel, tender, selfless, precious, static, timeless, tumultuous, wonderfully alive. The final verdict, as with all artists, rests with the future.

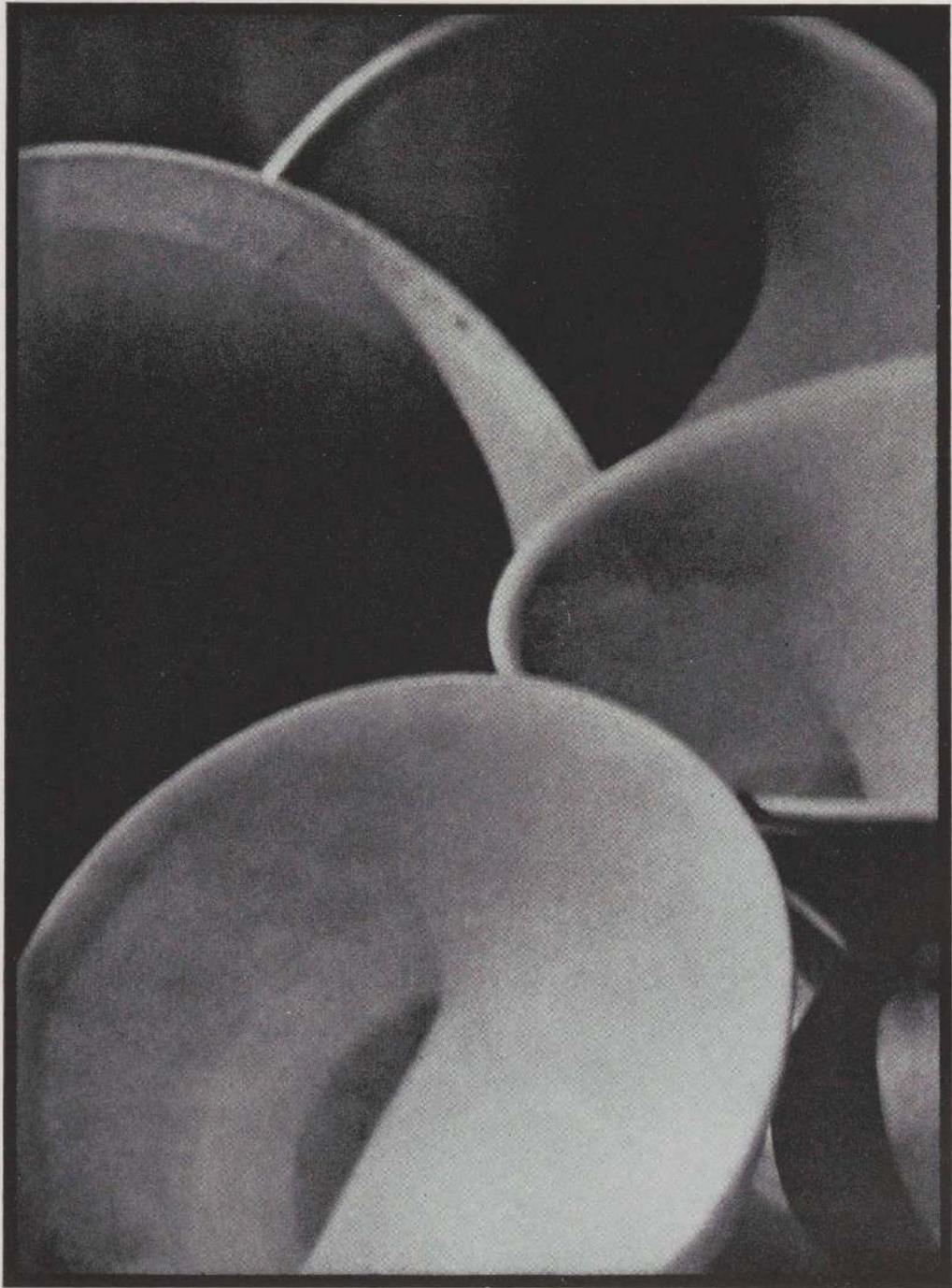
NANCY NEWHALL

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

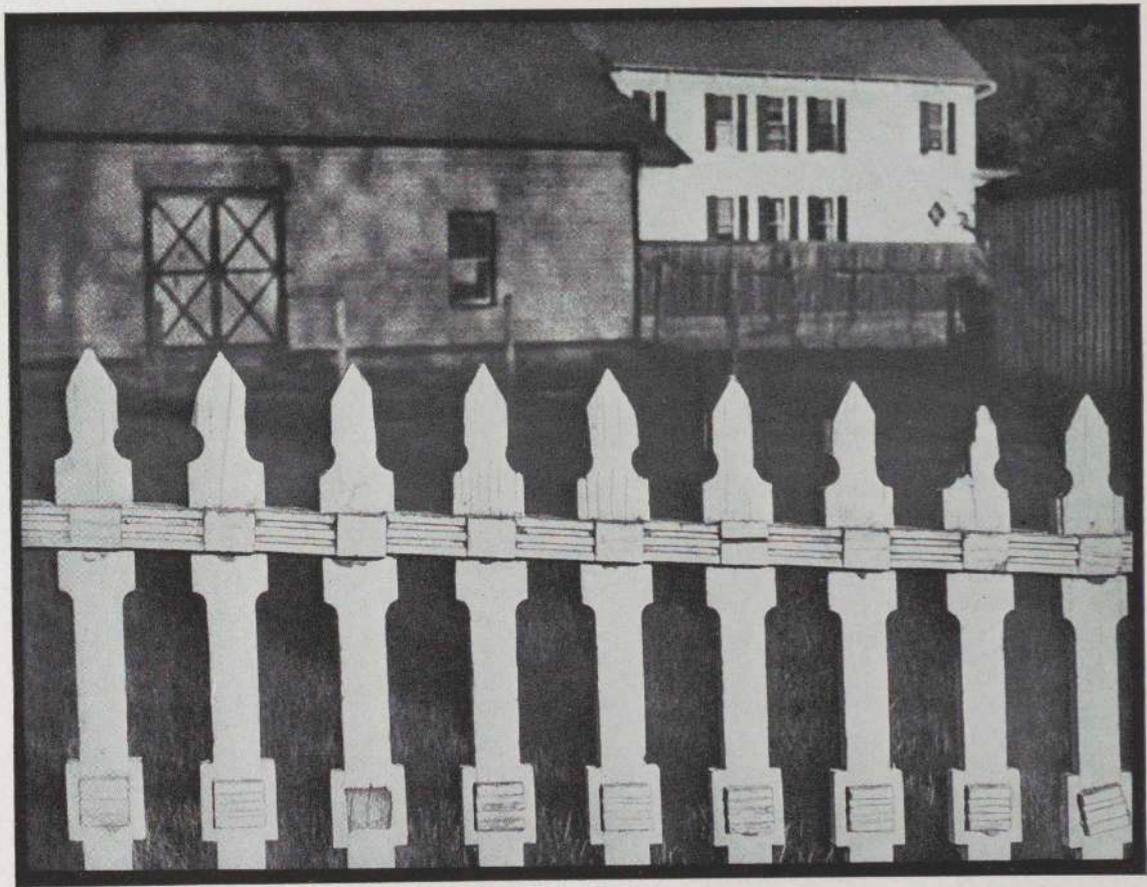
- 1890 Born New York City of Bohemian descent.
- 1904 Ethical Culture School.
- 1907 Joined class in photography given by Lewis Hine; went with Hine to Alfred Stieglitz' Photo-Secession Gallery ("291") to see exhibition of photography. Decided to become a photographer.
- 1908 Joined Camera Club of New York; experiments with soft-focus lenses, gumprints, etc.
- 1909 Graduated from Ethical Culture School; in business with father.
- 1911 To Europe for summer. Various jobs to earn livelihood.
- 1912 Set up as commercial photographer. Continued serious experiments in photography, returning to Stieglitz for criticism every few years. Influence of Picasso, others, seen at "291."
- 1916 First one-man show, "291," March 13-28.
- 1917 First close-ups of machine forms.
- 1918-1919 In Army as X-ray technician.
- 1919 Short trip to Nova Scotia. First landscapes.
- 1921 Made film, *Manhatta*, with Charles Sheeler. Joined company for making medical films as cameraman. First close-ups of plants.
- 1922 Set up as free-lance motion-picture cameraman. Married Rebecca Salsbury. Machine series begun.
- 1925 Exhibited "Seven Americans," Anderson Galleries, March 9-28.
- 1926 To Colorado and New Mexico in summer. Tree root forms.
- 1927-1928 To Maine in summers. Extreme close-ups: plants, driftwood, rocks.
- 1929 One-man show, *The Intimate Gallery* (Stieglitz), March 19-April 7. To Gaspé in summer.
- First interpretation of a locality, integrating all elements with particular interest in moments of perfect compositional relation.
- 1930-1932 To New Mexico in summers. Landscapes with clouds, adobe architecture, ghost towns, etc.
- 1932 Exhibited with Rebecca Strand at An American Place (Stieglitz), April.
- 1933-1934 To Mexico. Series of *bultos*, "candid" portraits of Indians. One-man show Sala de Arte, Mexico City, February, 1933. Appointed chief of photography and cinematography, Department of Fine Arts, Secretariat of Education. Photographed and supervised production of film, *Redes*, released in U. S. as *The Wave*, for Mexican Government.
- 1935 To Moscow for 6 weeks. Met Eisenstein, Dovzhenko. Offered jobs photographing for *USSR in Construction* and working with Eisenstein on new film. Returned to U. S. Photographed with Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz for film, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, directed by Pare Lorentz for U. S. Government.
- 1936 To Gaspé in summer. New Gaspé series. Married Virginia Stevens.
- 1937-1942 President of Frontier Films.
- 1940 Portfolio of hand gravures, *20 Photographs of Mexico*, published.
- 1942 *Native Land*, only Frontier film photographed by Strand, released.
- 1943 Films for government agencies.
- 1943-1944 To Vermont, winter. Vermont series.
- 1945 One-man show, *The Museum of Modern Art*, April 24-June 10.



PORTRAIT, NEW YORK. 1915

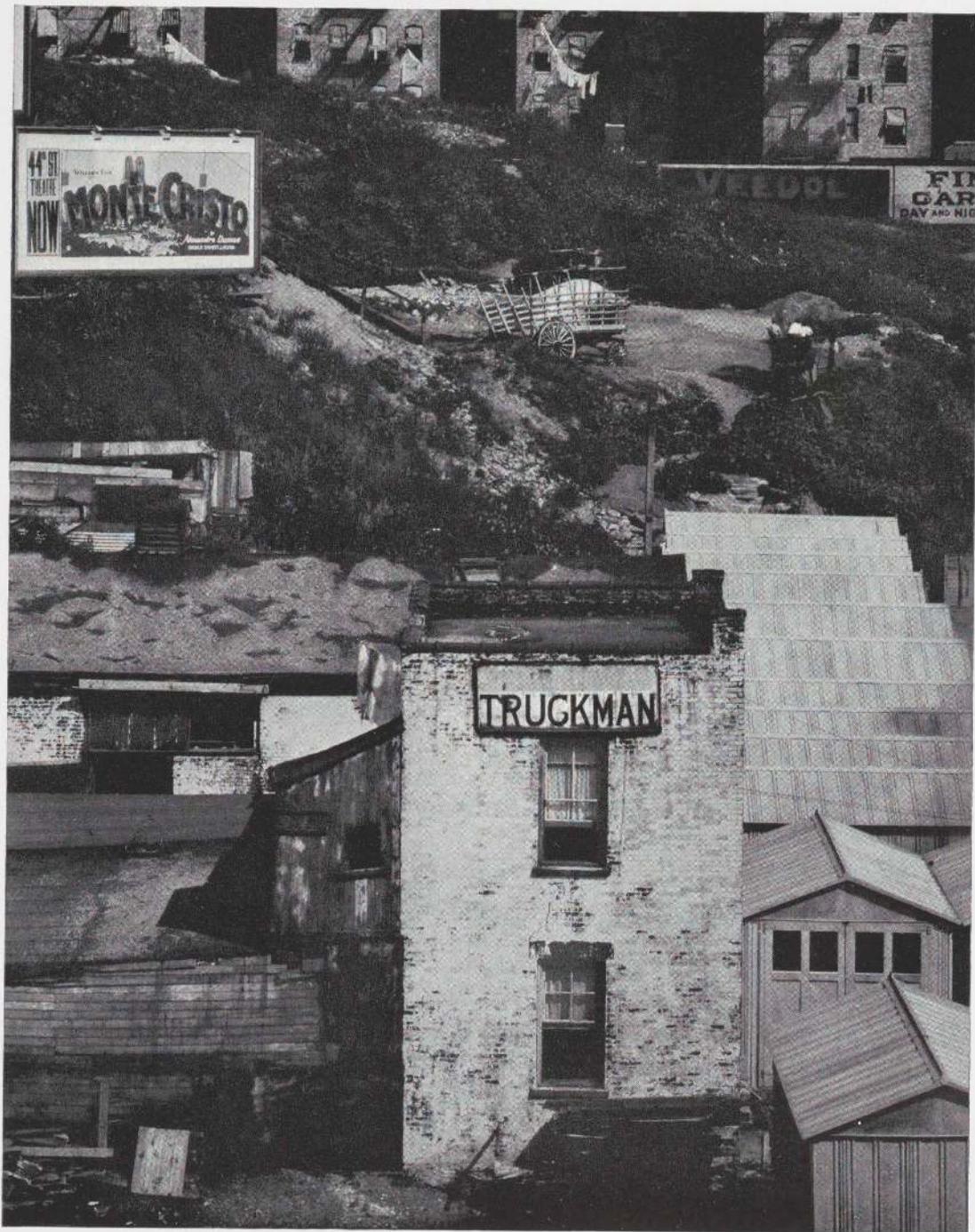


ABSTRACTION. 1915



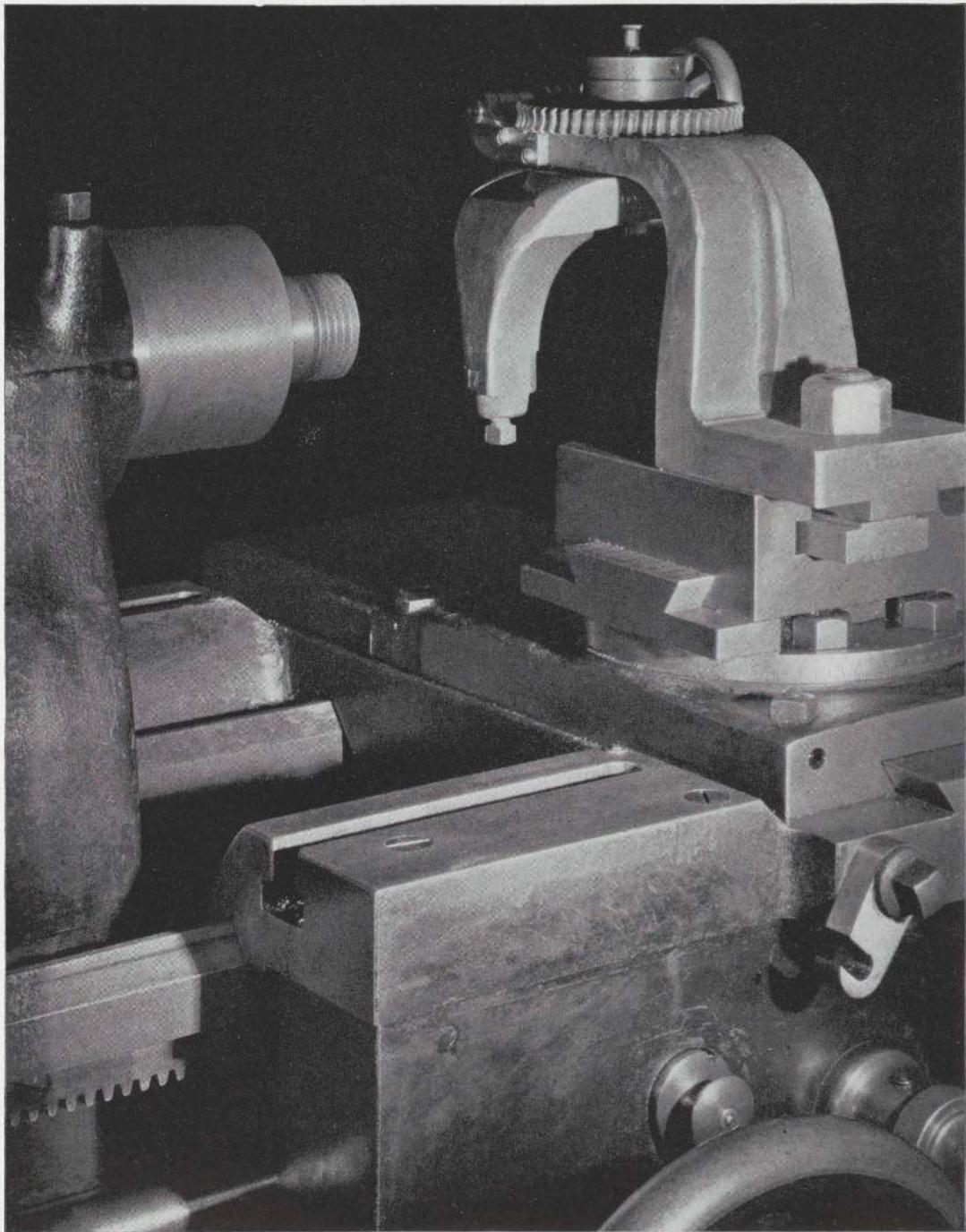
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NEW YORK. 1920

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LATHE. 1923



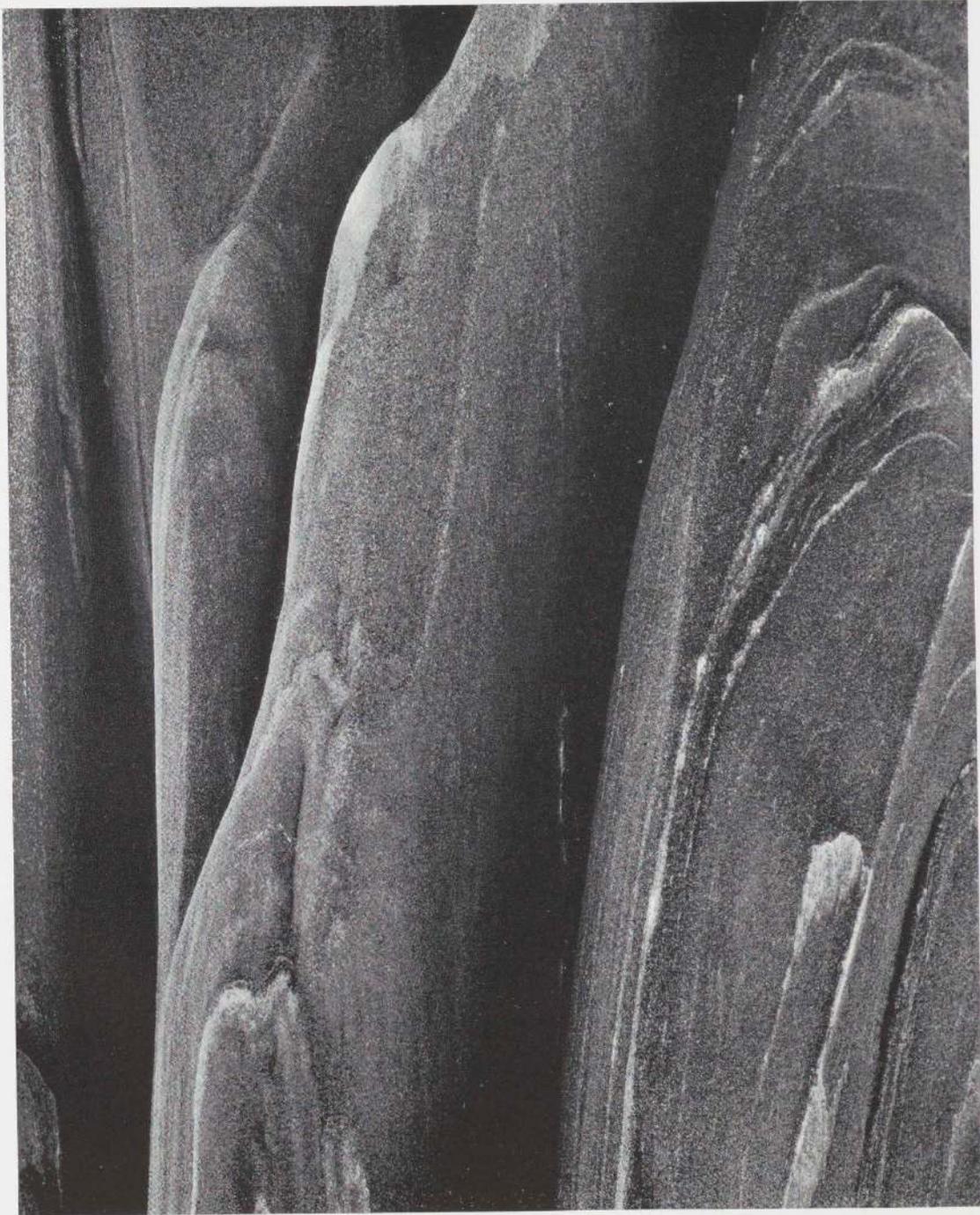
BLASTED TREE, COLORADO. 1926



IRIS, GEORGETOWN, MAINE. 1928



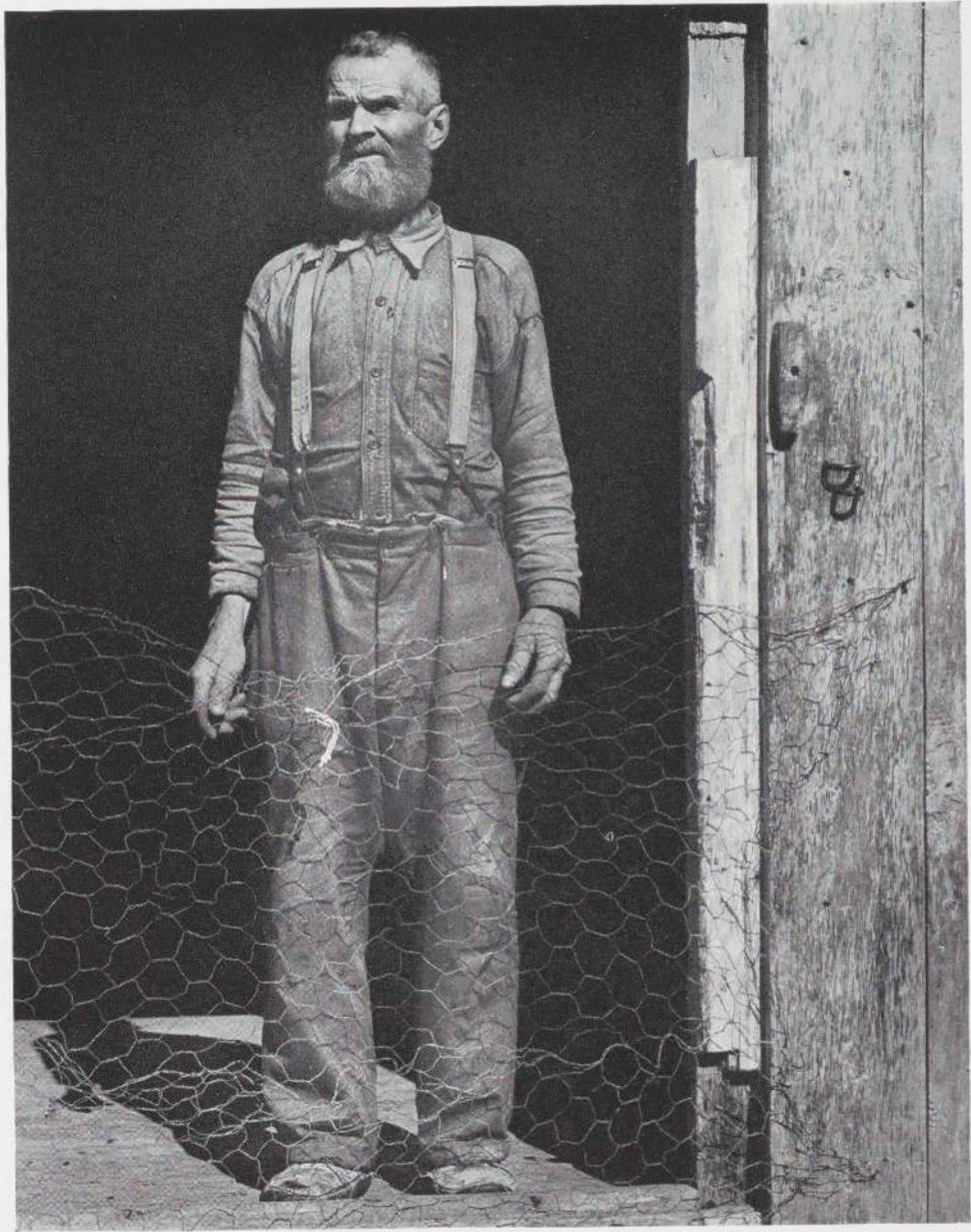
COBWEB IN RAIN, GEORGETOWN, MAINE. 1927



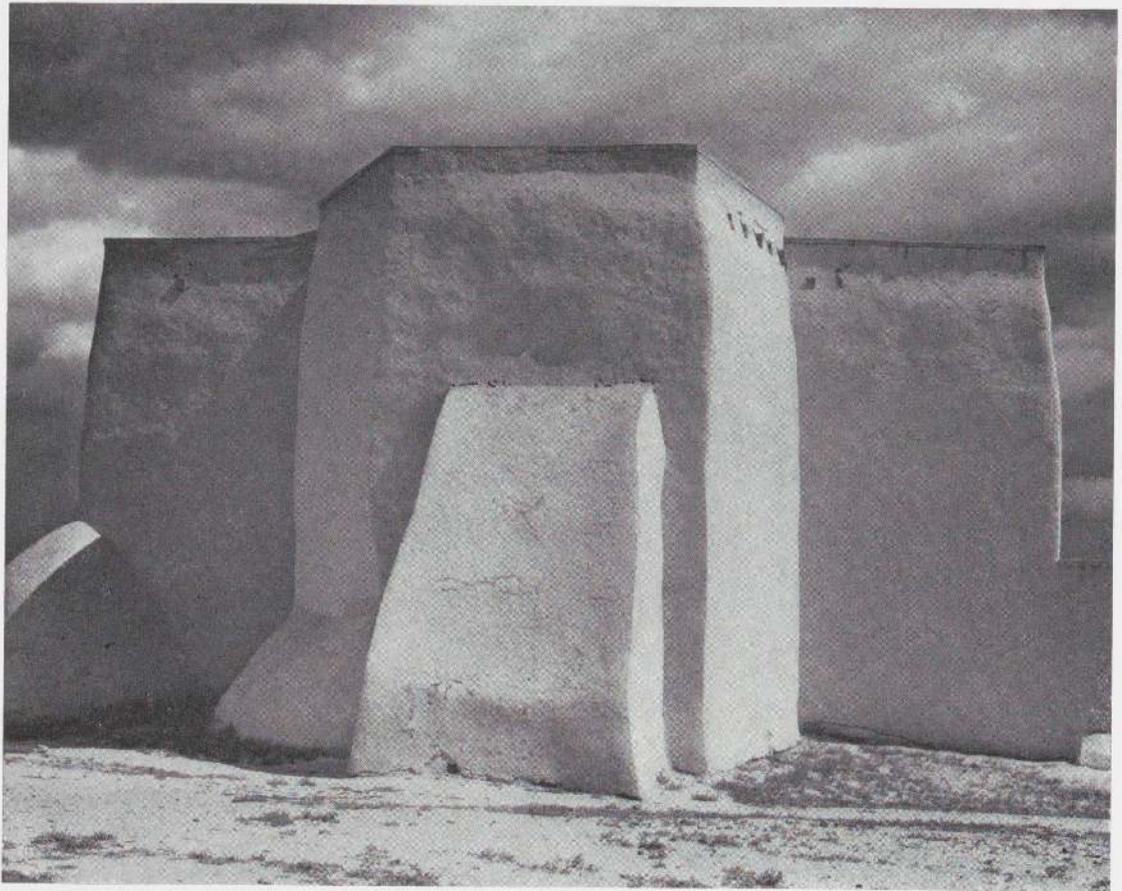
ROCK, GEORGETOWN, MAINE. 1927



FISHING VILLAGE, GASPE. 1929



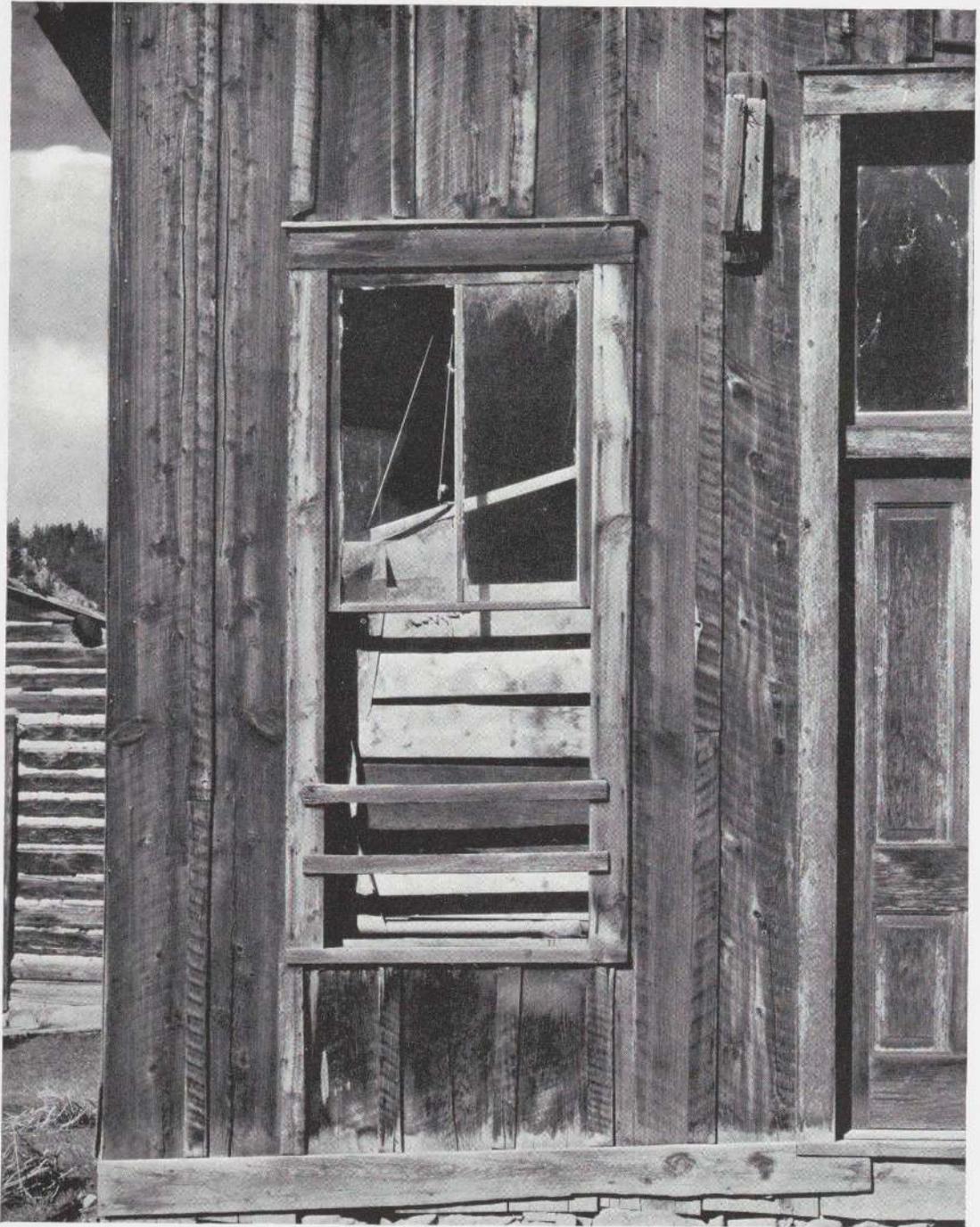
FISHERMAN, GASPE. 1936



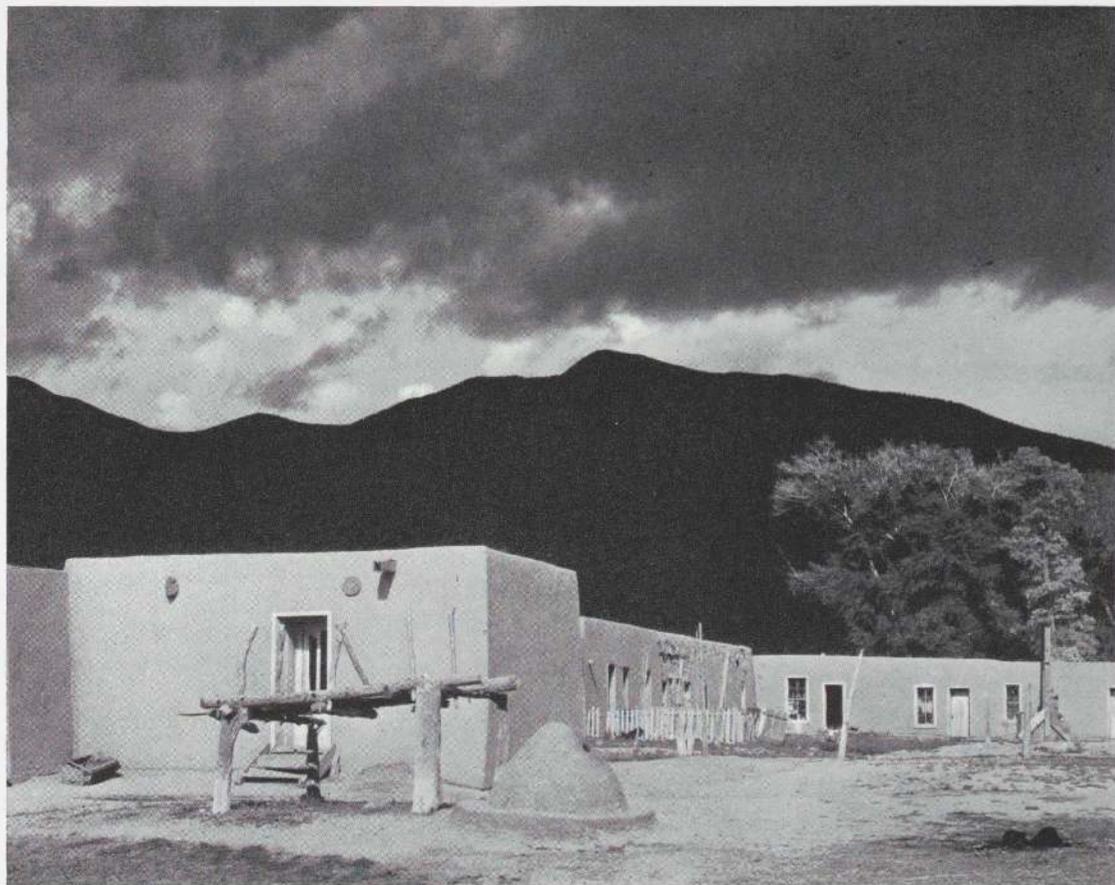
RANCHOS DE TAOS CHURCH, NEW MEXICO. 1931



HACIENDA, NEW MEXICO. 1932



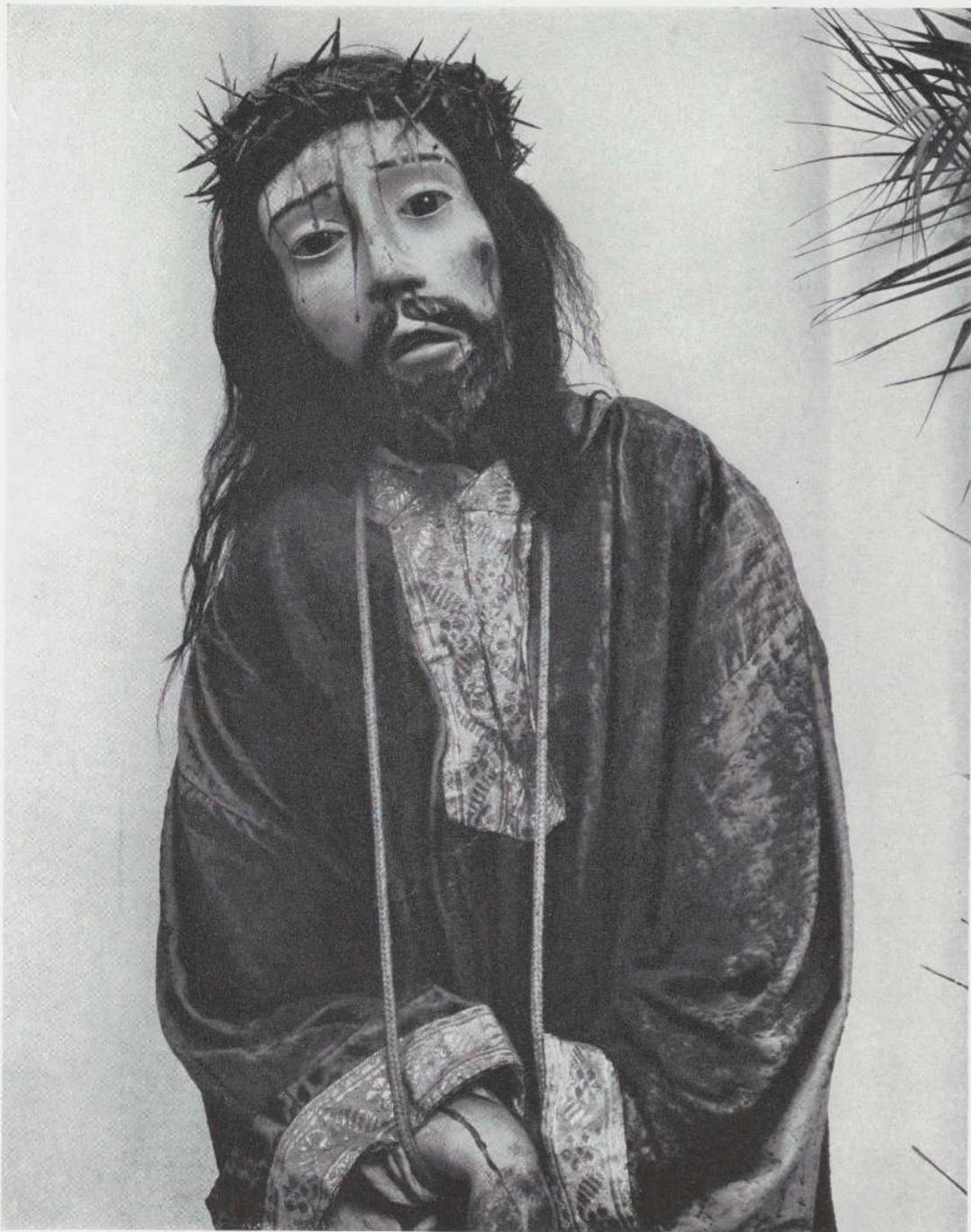
RED RIVER, NEW MEXICO. 1930



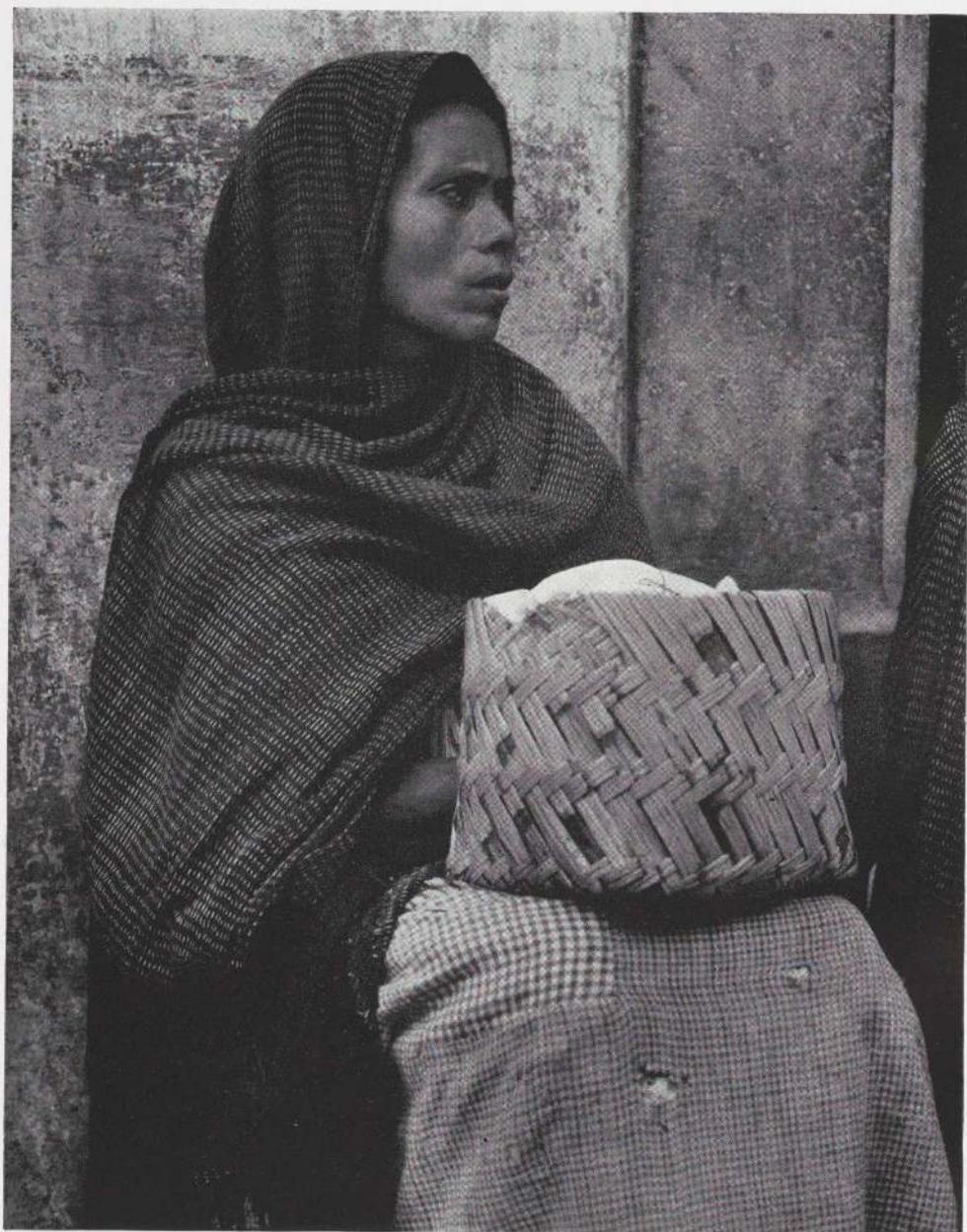
CERRO, NEW MEXICO. 1932



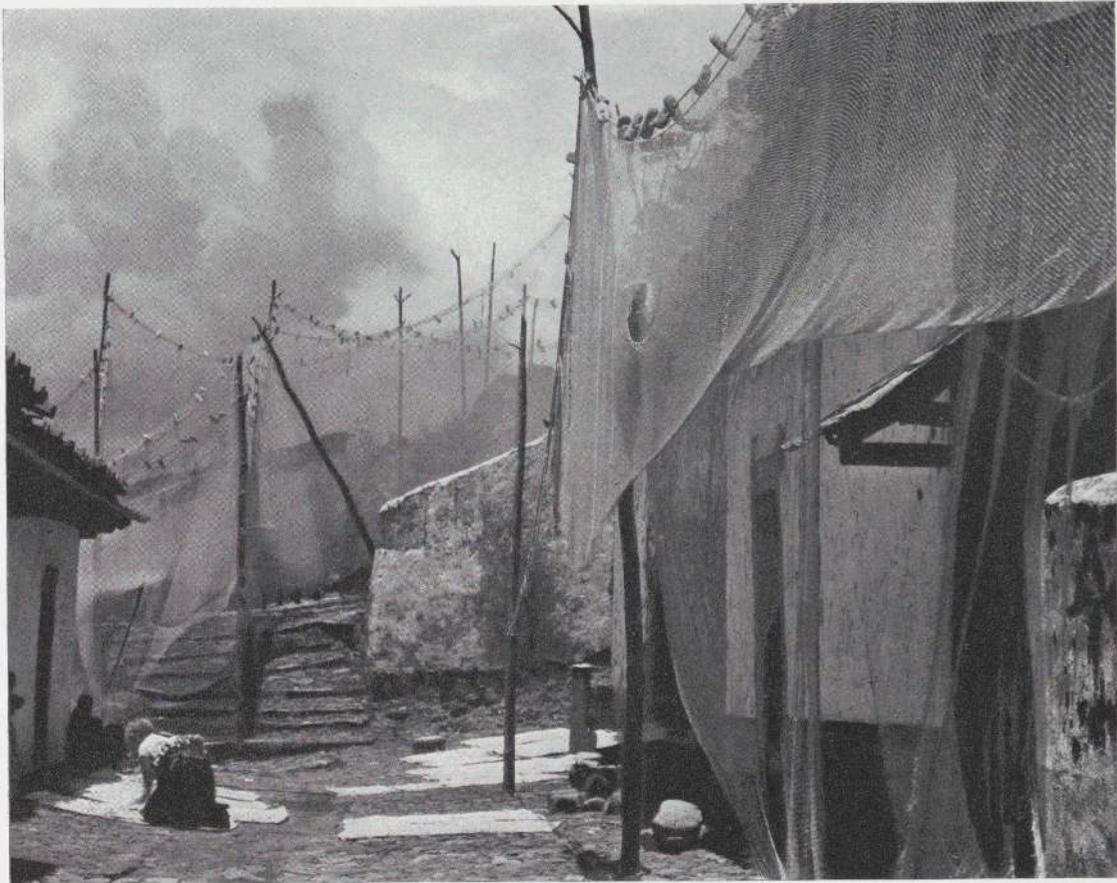
VIRGIN, OAXACA, MEXICO. 1933



CRISTO WITH THORNS, HUEXOTLA, MEXICO. 1933



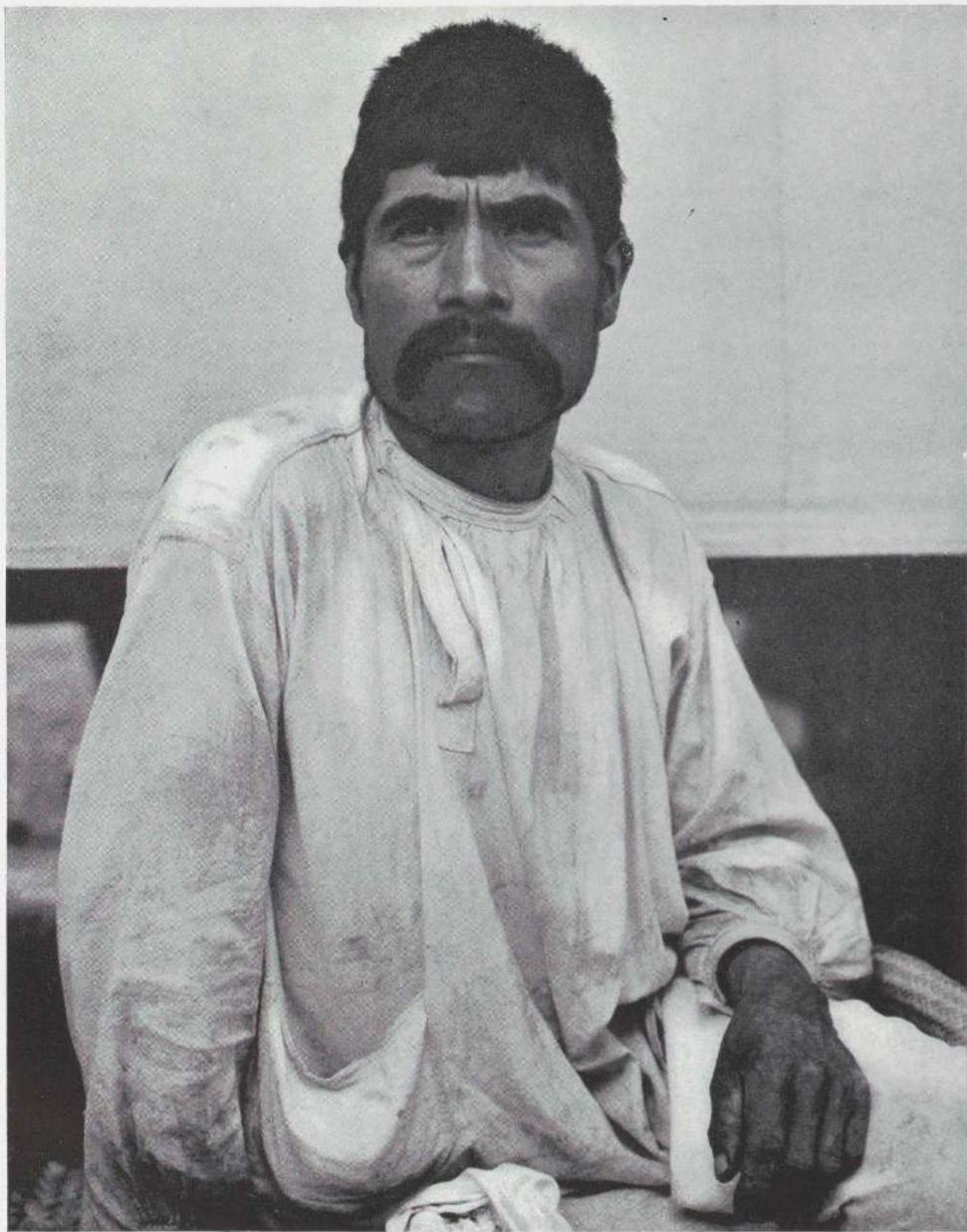
WOMAN, PATZCUARO. 1933



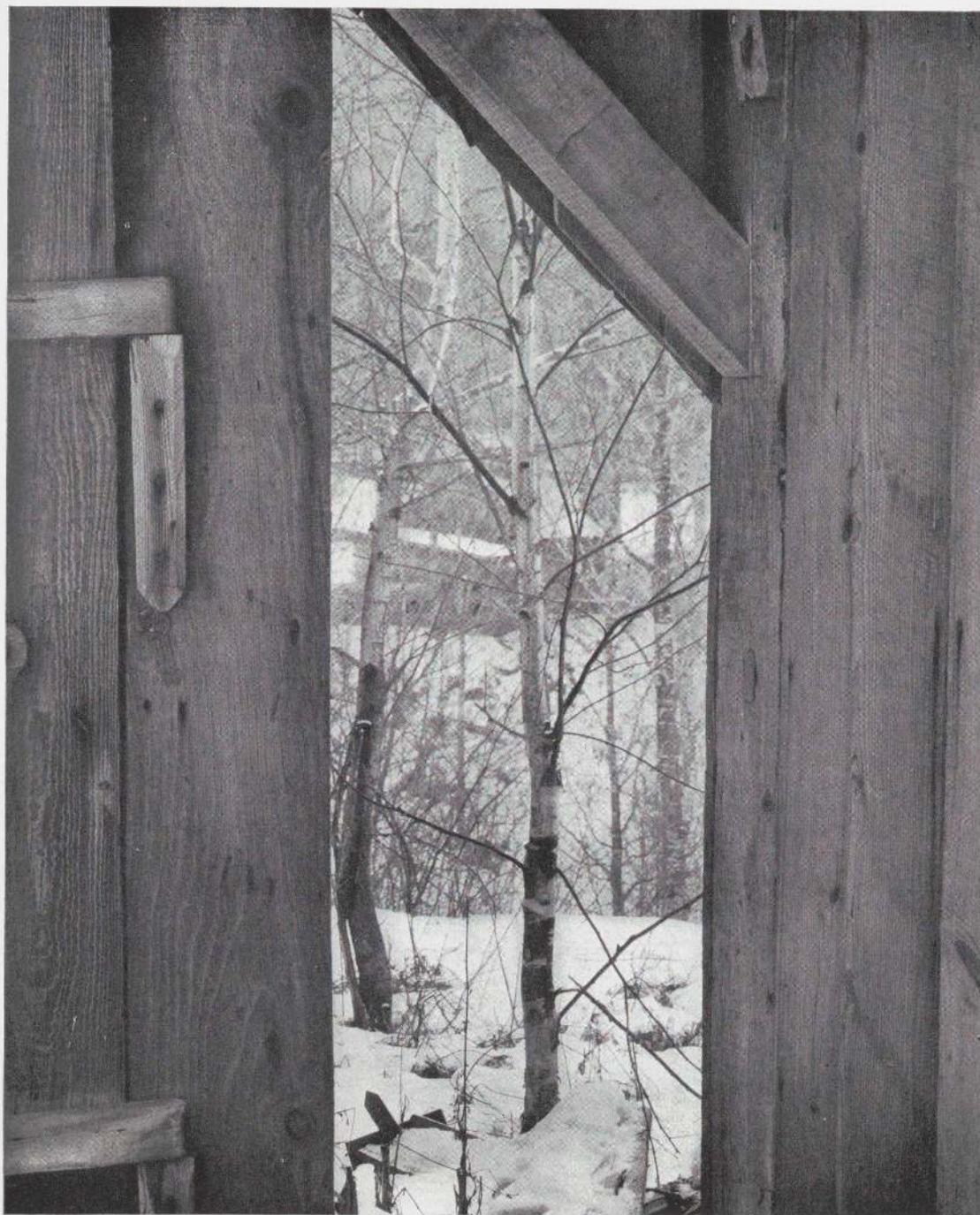
JANITZIO, MEXICO. 1933



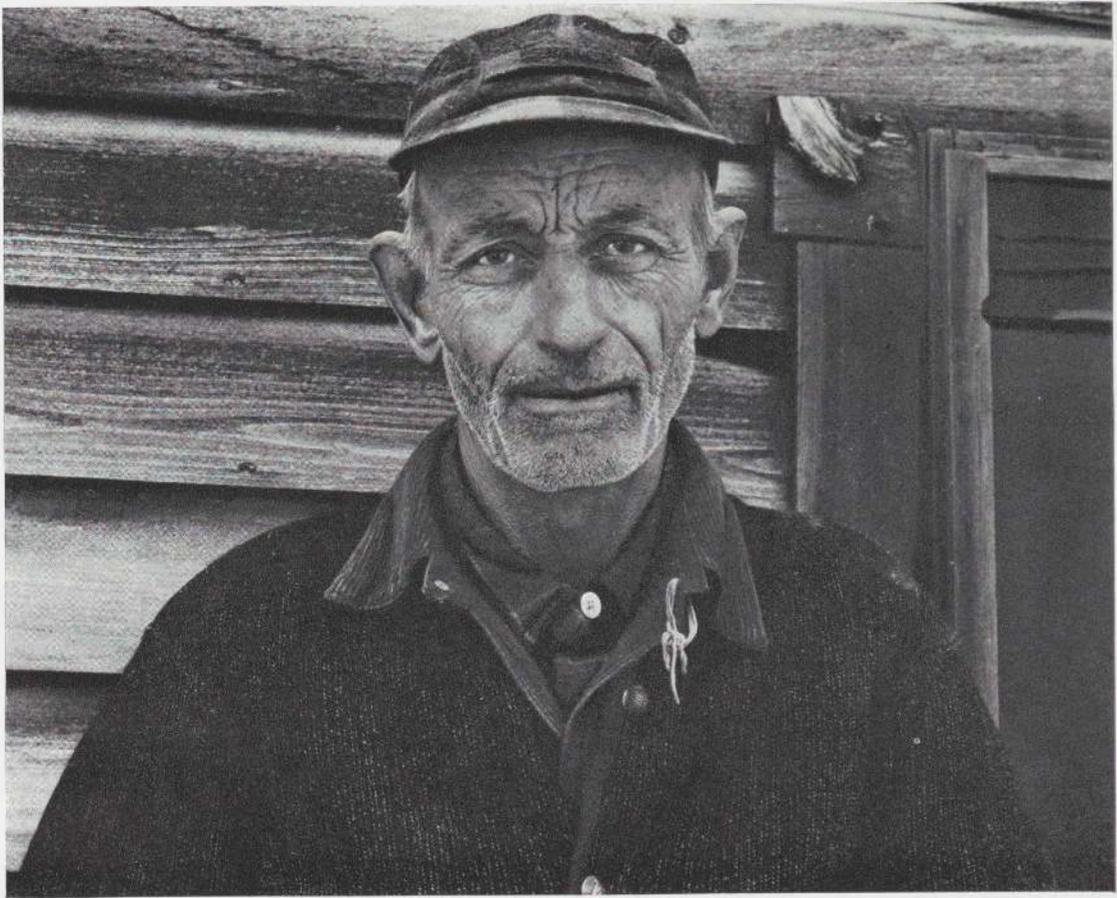
WOMAN AND BOY, TENANCINGO, MEXICO. 1933



MAN, TENANCINGO, MEXICO. 1933



TOWARD THE SUGAR HOUSE, VERMONT. 1944



MR. BENNETT, VERMONT. 1944

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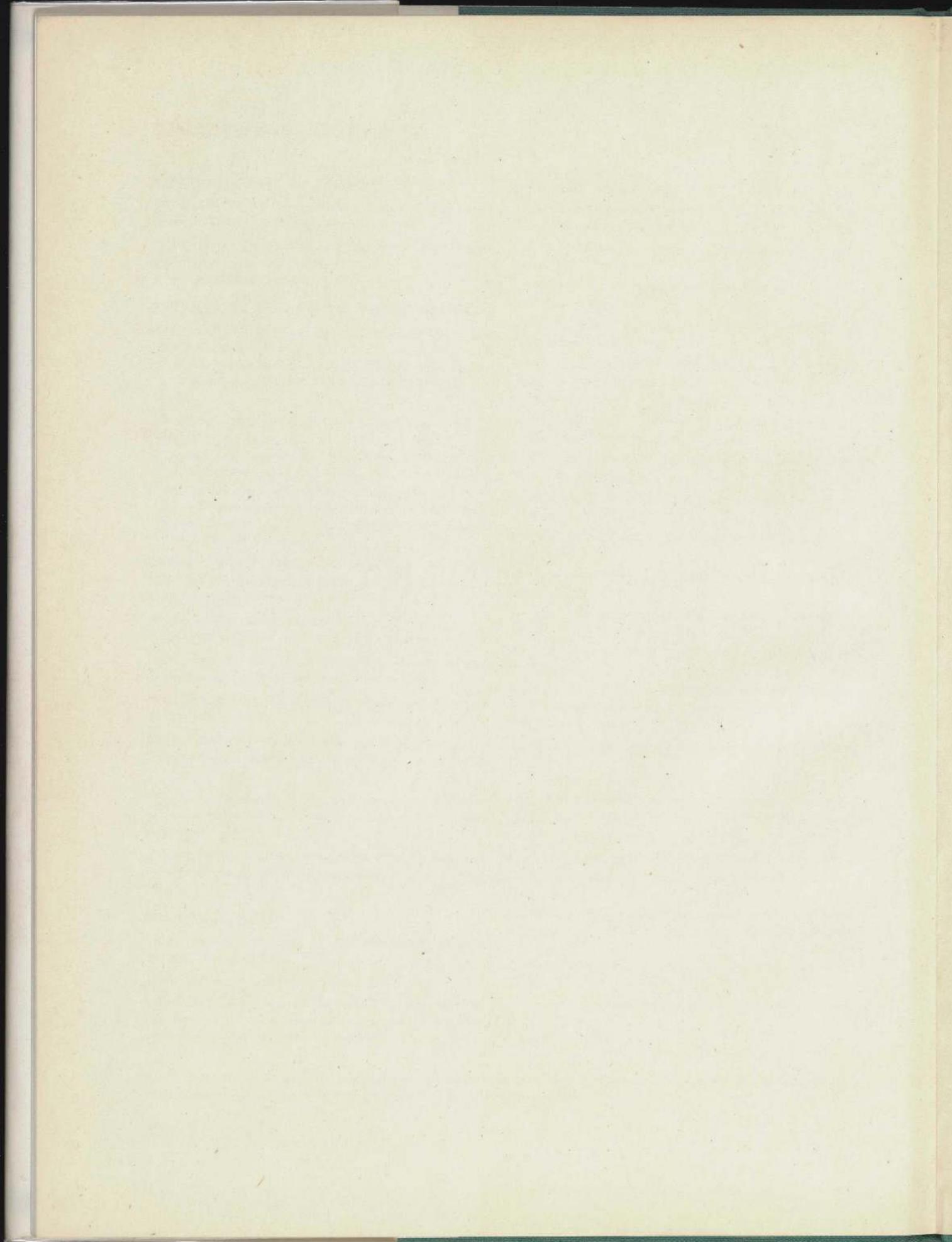
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