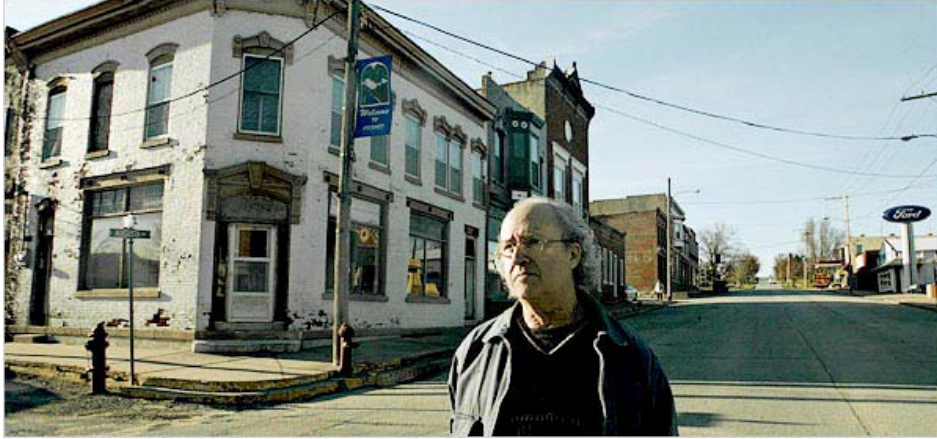


OXFORD JOURNAL

An Iowa Town's Story Told in Portraits 21 Years Apart



Jason A. Cook for The New York Times

Peter Feldstein photographed the residents of Oxford, Iowa, in 1984. He began doing it again last year.

By NINA SIEGAL
Published: April 9, 2006

OXFORD, Iowa — Ben Stoker was only a few weeks old when Peter Feldstein took his picture in 1984, so tiny that his father held him aloft, head cradled in one palm. In another portrait by Mr. Feldstein, taken last year, Ben stands at more than six feet tall, a lanky man in long, baggy shorts, a T-shirt and a backward baseball cap.



"When I was 10 the man holding me — my dad — died," reads the text that accompanies the photographs. "He was an architect and had renal failure; he was a fantastic father. Pretty much I think about my dad every day. I remember feeling his beard against my face as a little boy."

"Two years ago when I was 19, my mother died of cancer. She was my guiding light," the text continues.

"I'd be a liar if I said that everything is all right."

Mr. Stoker is one of 670 people Mr. Feldstein photographed in 1984 as part of the Oxford Project, an effort to document small-town Iowa life through the images and words of its people. At the time, Oxford, a town in eastern Iowa, had 676 residents. Last year, Mr. Feldstein picked up his camera again, beginning a new series of portraits of the same people — or, at least, those who had not died or moved away.

"Iowa is always the butt of the jokes when people think of country folk or hicks," said Mr. Feldstein, 63, who grew up in New York but has lived in Oxford for 27 years. "I think people in Iowa defy those stereotypes. The people here have much more breadth to them than that."

Mr. Feldstein plans to show parts of the Oxford Project at the Des Moines Arts Center next February.



Portraits by Peter Feldstein

Photographs of Ben Stoker, taken in 1984 when he was just a few weeks

Oxford now has a population of about 725. Strangers driving into the town center — off Iowa Highway 6, past the rippling American

old and in 2005, after he turned 21. Both his parents have died. "I was very angry with God," Mr. Stoker wrote in an essay with the portraits. "He came in and took my father and then he took the other person I loved most in the world."



By The New York Times

Oxford, Iowa, population about 725, has grown little since 1984.

flag and the dilapidated barn — will be noticed immediately, if not by sight then by the sound of their unfamiliar car. For many people here, familiarity does not breed contempt, but rather a sense of security.

"A lot of people don't like small towns because they're so tight knit," Mr. Stoker said in an interview. "But that's what makes the place so great. You know who's sleeping with whom, but when your mother dies you know there will be 28 people at your door with casseroles."

Mr. Feldstein says he was originally inspired by the 1940's and 1950's photographs of Mike Meyer, also known as Mike Disfarmer, who, Mr. Feldstein said, "took straightforward, no-frills, but generous portraits of local farmers." Mr. Feldstein's pictures are full-body portraits set against a plain backdrop — a gray dropcloth in 1984, a concrete wall in the recent shots, in which the subject stands casually facing forward.

Stephen Bloom, 54, an author and journalism professor at the nearby University of Iowa, has conducted interviews with Mr. Feldstein's subjects, distilling their comments into short prose poems. He said his model for the text came from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," the 1941 photojournalistic account by James Agee and Walker Evans of three Depression-era Southern sharecropper families.

The project has brought to light several personal histories.

One lifelong Oxford resident, Jim Hoyt, who lives on the same plot of land where he was born, was one of the first four American soldiers to liberate the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald on April 11, 1945. As the replacement radio operator for the Sixth Armored Division, Mr. Hoyt went unawares into the death camp, and radioed back to his commander just one word: "Horror."

Mr. Hoyt, the only surviving member of that reconnaissance team, still has nightmares about what he saw that day, including a lampshade made of human skin that the wife of an SS officer had made after admiring a tattoo on a living inmate's chest. Before being drafted into the Army, Mr. Hoyt had never left the state of Iowa.

"The farthest I got to go was to Des Moines for the county spelling bee — I fell down on either 'archives' or 'irascible,' I don't remember," he said.

Darrel Lindley, 73, was not born in Oxford, but he has become as much a part of the landscape as the russet haystacks that squat like cats in these empty winter fields. As Oxford's primary livestock butcher, Mr. Lindley has slaughtered hogs, cattle, goats and buffalo for local farmers for 30 years — about 3,000 a year at his peak.

"I shoot 'em, bleed 'em, then skin 'em," reads the text between Mr. Feldstein's 1984 portrait of Mr. Lindley, in jeans and a cowboy hat and a dark mustache, and the 2006 image of him with salt-and-pepper hair, in billowy camouflage pants that emphasize his larger belly. "One thing I do if kids are around is I cut out the eye (it's a little smaller than a golf ball) and I swish it around in my mouth."

Changes in the rural economy since the farm crisis of the 1980's have changed more than just Mr. Lindley's looks. "That farm butchering hasn't ever recovered," said his wife, Kathleen, 72, over salmon casserole and lima beans at a weekly dinner at St. Mary's [Roman Catholic Church](#). "A lot of people just got out of the livestock business. They got completely out of hogs, or they stopped slaughtering on the farm. Darrel still went to work, but he didn't do near as many heads."

Mr. Lindley said farm consolidation had indeed taken some of his business. Still, there is work to be had. "Sometimes I get a critter with a broken leg so I go out and do it," he said. "Sometimes, they call me if one gets away from them, wild or something. I shot one at 60 yards the other day. I've shot them at 110 yards, but not recently."

One of the town's oldest residents is Iowa Honn, who turned 96 on April 1. Mrs. Honn was born in Oxford, and she said her father named her Iowa because "he said I was the prettiest girl in the prettiest state." She has only lived outside of Oxford for three years, when she moved to Iowa City, about 15 miles east, with a current population of about 60,000.

"I hated every minute of it," Mrs. Honn said. "I hated city life. I traveled some with my husband, but I liked best when I got home and I could kiss the ground here."

Mr. Bloom said he hoped the Oxford portraits would give voice to a forgotten population. "So many people call this flyover country," he said. "No one listens to rural America. They are the ignored. My hope is that this project will be able to show that there's great rural poetry and rural wisdom."

To Mr. Lindley, the logic of living in a town like this is simple: "There's just good people here. Most of all, they've got a minute for you, even if it takes an hour."

[More Articles in National »](#)

Related Articles

[PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; Diane Arbus, a Hunter Wielding a Lens](#) (January 9, 2004)

[ARTS BRIEFING](#) (December 31, 2003)

[BOOKS OF STYLE; The Longest Party](#) (October 19, 2003)

Related Searches

[Photography](#)

[Culture](#)

[Iowa](#)

[Farmers](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



STYLE »



Vows: Campbell Brown and Dan Senor

TimesSelect

Frontlines: In Ramadi

A U.S. soldier serving in Iraq describes the city where he's been stationed.

MOVIES »



The Bjork-Barney Enigma Machine

BUSINESS »



Executive Pay: A Special Report

REAL ESTATE »

Foreclosure Auctions: Let the Bidder Beware

TimesSelect



Peter Applebome: A Fisherman's Legacy

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)