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An outside appreciation

The book 'LaPorte, Indiana' offers a glimpse into the history of small-town Midwest

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Only expecting a quick meal and cup of coffee when he first visited a LaPorte diner in the summer of 2003, magazine editor Jason Bitner instead found himself with a new book project.

B&J's American Café is a classic slice of Americana with its authentic soda fountain, jukebox, wooden phone booth, vintage Coca-Cola memorabilia, and standard diner fare like hamburgers, salads, peach cobbler and rhubarb pie.

After ordering one of the famed cinnamon rolls, Bitner took a look around the diner and happened upon a stash of thousands of photos tucked in the back room with a sign inviting patrons to peruse or purchase the images (available for 50 cents apiece). The photos were the remnants of the Muralcraft photography studio located on the second floor of the same building and run by Frank and Gladys Pease from the late '40s to the early '70s.

B&J's owners John and Billie Pappas took the photos out of storage in the early '90s, planning to "clean out storage" but kept them around when they saw how much people enjoyed sifting through them, looking for long-forgotten photos of themselves, friends or family members. Bitner was entranced by the discovery, and describes the images as, "an enormous visual survey of the Midwest a generation back."

To be sure, Bitner already had a propensity for this kind of project. As the co-creator of Found Magazine -- a "show and tell" magazine that publishes found photos, discarded school-kid notes, doodles on scraps of paper, and other found miscellany sent in by readers worldwide -- he revels in such discoveries, which he calls, "the accidental archive of an entire town."

For Bitner, a fire had been lit, and he couldn't get the photos out of his mind. Though he'd only planned to pass through LaPorte for the County Fair and demolition derby, he ended up spending two weeks in B & J's looking through images in amazement at the magnitude of the archive, and the almost-painterly beauty of the photographs. The end result of Bitner's enthusiasm is a book of selected portraits titled "LaPorte, Indiana," which will be published by Princeton Architectural Press in March.

Bitner found the book idea to be an easy sell. "People love photos of other people," he explains. "I was in New York, and stopped at a publisher who I knew was into photo books, and said 'Hey, I've got something that you might like.' I dumped out the envelope of images on the table, and at first, there were two people standing there, then three, four, five. Right away people got really excited and started trading them around the table saying 'That looks like my grandfather! That looks like your boyfriend!' That is also what it's like at the diner, once you start looking, you just want to see more and more. It's amazing -- I've never gone to an archive where I saw photos all by one person."

Captured forever

Photographer Frank Pease was by all accounts a nice guy who enjoyed his job. He also was an excellent craftsman and as Bitner puts it, "an accidental historian."

One of Pease's former clients remembers him as "really nice, down to earth, very patient." His wife, Gladys, helped him in the studio by greeting customers in the lobby, and helping to prep them with grooming and makeup before they went before the camera. The photos themselves are interesting not only for their comment on the time and place (mostly '40s and '50s, in small-town Midwest) but because of their old-fashioned formality and idealism.

The poses varied only slightly, with eight or so poses for men and eight for women, with a few variations for children and couples. Pease obviously had great technical skills, but it is clear that at some point, he zoned in on a certain "look," and, Bitner notes, "didn't waver from it in 2-1/2 decades."

The poses and lighting are not natural ones but are instead traditionally classical -- the men are wearing ties, the women often hold a flower, or tilt their heads in imitation of movie-star glamour. Bitner has spoken with several of the subjects of Pease's photos, including Hugh and Kathy Tonagel, whose somber engagement photograph is at the forefront of the book. "Hugh told me that Pease was trying to impress upon them that this was a really weighty moment. Like, 'You guys are getting married, and this is the photo that is going to represent that forever. This is a really important moment and I want you to be here and present and understand what it is you're sitting for.'"

Part of the delight of the archive is that it is not limited to only the shots that ended up being used, but also the myriad, back-to-back proofs from the sittings. The mistakes and glitches are all there -- a couple bursting out in open-mouthed laughter at the camera, an accidental wild-eyed grin from a teenage boy, and a young boy raising his finger in a politician's pose. After Pease's death in the early 1970s, much of his equipment was donated to the local high school or given away and Muralcraft Studios was eventually renovated to become a large apartment.

Another era

A striking facet of the archive is how idealized the images are, and that they seem to tell a story about the ideal way that each of the subjects wish to see themselves.

"Nowadays, it's different," Bitner says. "There are so many cameras around and people are so comfortable in front of a camera. Back then, there was definitely a feeling that film was a little more precious, and I think that when people took a portrait, they were more interested in creating an image for public history; their public face."

"Some were taken for specific events like graduations, engagements, first communions and anniversaries. Other people posed with objects that conveyed their individuality; a nurse or military uniform, a musical instrument, a radio microphone or prayer book. Still others simply seem inexplicable, like the one of two elderly men in suits preening for the camera while one affectionately straightens the other's tie.

The end result of the book is a crossbreeding of several genres; because of the beautifully displayed images, it easily functions as a coffee table photography book. It is also of interest to history buffs and found-art aficionados alike. It contains approximately 150 photographs and a forward by both Bitner and writer Alex Kotlowitz who calls the images, "Distinctly middle American. Open. Unassuming. Sturdy."

Kotlowitz goes on to intuit that although the images were taken in a time when the country was perched on intense conflict, the people in these portraits "seemed impervious to the upheaval around them."

Famous Hoosier John Mellencamp weighs in on the book's back cover, musing that "the grace and dignity one sees in their faces should be a source of hope for us all."

Undeniably Midwestern

According to Fern Eddy Schultz of the LaPorte Historical Society, LaPorte is going through a time of re-evaluation, "trying to make plans for what is best for it in the future and how to implement them."

But Schultz notes that LaPorte is otherwise "very much like most towns its age and size in the Midwest." Indeed, residents and historians alike seem to agree that there is nothing terribly out of the ordinary about this peaceful Midwestern town.

These extraordinary photos of mid-century Midwest, then, seem to be extraordinary for their very ordinary-ness. These are people carrying out their lives in the midst of a rapidly changing world.

There is a father surrounded by wife and kids gazing worriedly into the camera, a toddler playing with his ears, a girl graduating from high school. These are optimistic portraits of real people with quirks and flaws who gain love and lose it, experience birth, death, and all the rituals of life.

LaPorte, then, is all of us. We'd value this discovery from any town. But the people of LaPorte happened to have a better archive than most of us, along with the impeccable foresight to preserve it.

It is of note that the images were made public via the enthusiasm of a non-native, a testament to the idea that we oftentimes overlook what is right under our noses. With his outsider's perspective, it seems that Bitner was in a unique position to be able to see facets of the archive that were regarded as everyday by those familiar with them.

He notes that, "I think that a lot of times it takes an outsider to make people appreciate what they have. If these were from my town, I know that I'd be looking for photos of family or friends, and I wouldn't be so interested in the guy at the end of the block. When you're so close to something you may not understand the greater significance."

Several hundred photos were purchased for the book, but most photos remain in boxes in the back room of B&J's. The count has only dwindled down to about 17,000 from the original 20,000 and the archive is basically intact.

"The vast majority are still there," Bitner notes, "And they want them there; it's a document of their community."



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