

PREFACE

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TO STUMBLE UPON A SMALL TOWN LIKE OXFORD IS ONE THING—to be able to consider its whole population face by face, at your own leisure, is something else entirely. Think of how fascinated we are by group photographs and family portraits taken fifty years ago, how we pore over the clothes, the features, and the stances. What a field day it will be for the anthropologist, studying the thousand details of these lives so nicely exposed by Peter Feldstein's camera.

Oxford's population in 1984 was Irish-Catholic and Bohemian on the one hand, and Methodist on the other. There appear to be two African-Americans, both children. There is one Jew, Peter tells me. Only one person is dressed up, a little girl. Only a few men are in jackets and ties, but that is their work costume, not their usual dress. The attitude is casual and comfortable. Several men and boys are wearing hats, with peaks to keep out the summer sun. Some wear narrow-brimmed straws. A great many are wearing their Legion hats. Most women are wearing pants. T-shirts abound. There are overalls, but less than I would have thought. Some are in shorts and sandals; some are in shorts and halters. One is holding a guitar. Some are holding children. Many are holding dogs. One is holding a lion; one a raccoon. Most are smiling.

All stand facing the camera.

There are some canes, some suspenders. Some of the costumes are outrageous. No one is in rags. Several babies are in baskets, one in a wagon. The overwhelming majority is wearing sneakers. A few are a bit overweight. A few have beards.

What strikes me is the variety in age, size, costume, attitude, and posture. There are dozens of occupations: waitresses, cooks, businessmen, university personnel, government workers, house-painters, clerks, mail-carriers, secretaries, nurses, factory workers, bookkeepers, truck-drivers, veterinarians, teachers, backhoe operators, doctors, housewives, garage repairmen, roofers, chiropractors, farmers, bank tellers, Avon reps, prison guards, ministers, lawyers, college students, beauticians, carpenters, bank officers, sheriff deputies, railroad workers, tire changers, substitute teachers, cabinet makers, retirees, principals, bar owners, cashiers, masons, carpet installers, photographers.

Peter is the only one I know who has ever photographed an entire city. How the idea came to him I have no idea, but the execution was simple. Everyone was treated alike, and there was no direction. In and out. Six hundred and seventy times. The drama of the shooting determined the aesthetic. It was a lovely notion. With a tarp, two quartz lights, and a basic camera, Peter recorded their dreams, their fears—their spirit.

He is one of them.