

## Recycled Snapshots

[words and photos by Dale H. Cotton]

Snapshots. Everyone has them—arranged in photo albums, tucked away in dresser drawers, tacked up on bulletin boards. What are they? Documentary slices of life; depictions of postmodern irony; family mementos? Try to categorize them as one thing or another and their potential richness is lessened.

I've been an itinerant snapshot collector for many years. Initially, I sought out family albums and loose photos to relieve the boredom of having to wait while my friends finished scouring the clothes racks in lower-end antique shops and junk shops. Merchants fit these smallish prints into almost any type of container that would hold them—shoe boxes, woven baskets, upside-down hats. Priced between 25 cents and 3 dollars, I figure they were displayed mostly for the sake of ambiance, and the fact that they took up little shelf space, not because the store expected to make anything off them.

I purchased a few that struck me as mysterious and somewhat quirky but ended up sticking them in my own shoe box. Then, after living with a dozen or so images, I found that I was drawn to them in a way that I couldn't exactly



articulate. An image-maker myself, I couldn't say that they reminded me of pictures I would have taken. No, they had subtle qualities that I had trouble putting my finger on.

What was so special about a girl posing next to a statue of a buck, or, an out-of-focus shot of women in bathing caps standing at the side of a swimming pool, or, three older couples carrying on separate conversations in a farmyard? And to make it even more confusing, why were these of interest when whatever interest they once had was no longer relevant?

In family snapshots, context is everything. A snapshot separated from the family album is like a wedding ring stuck in a pawn shop. Its historical roots have been snipped. Its place within the family tree has been uprooted. But could it be that not knowing anything about the people or the places photographed was exactly what piqued my interest?

I was drawn to them because their context had changed, and I was an agent of that change. I looked at these pictures with no knowledge of the people or places within them, and so was able to piece together my own version of the events taking place. Like viewing a gallery show of professional photographs, I came at these with a fresh eye and was able to appreciate them as images independent from their actual histories.

A specific image comes to mind. Idle speculation pictures a group of people, perhaps a family, surrounding what looks like a casket. The setting appears to be an old field, once farmed, now overgrown, with a broken-down split-rail fence in the background. Two adult women and a girl are



hunched over the casket working intently. A fourth woman, in her early twenties, looks toward the camera, somewhat consternated. Maybe she is irked at the picture-taker for requesting that she look up from her work to pose. At first glance, this image is disturbing in that, if it is a casket, this family is building it for someone recently deceased, or soon-to-be dead.

On closer inspection, however, I'm not so sure about my initial judgment. The woman squatting in the foreground, possibly the girl's mother, is wearing a feather in her hair. She is also holding a playing card in her hand. The younger woman looking toward the camera is grasping a writing utensil as if she were interrupted by the picture-taker while in the act of writing. The figure who's back is turned to us could also be writing, since she is leaning over the "casket." Now I'm thinking that this casket is really just a makeshift table, being used by the family to play cards and write postcards on.

Why would anyone photograph this scene if it were as morbid as I initially imagined? I do know that there are people who need to document things as they unfold, no matter what the circumstances. My father photographed our family cat lying dead in the backyard. She was fairly old at the time, and had dropped dead of heart failure while evading a neighborhood dog. My father sent the picture to me while I was away at college, my freshman year. It was unusual for him to communicate much at all, so when I got a letter and a picture I was quite surprised and actually pleased. Even though our cat was dead, my father thought I needed to know the circumstances of her death. There was

nothing gruesome about it. If someone else saw the photo though, they would have thought it a pretty mediocre picture of the backside of a cat asleep on the lawn.

But this scene is not as clear-cut. There is a mystery to this photo that drew me in and inspired me to speculate about what is taking place here. There is also an aesthetic component. The group is nicely framed by the fence and the surrounding trees, and the viewer is led through the opening in the fence and out to a tree just touched by the sun on its upper branches. Unlike many snapshots, the people are concentrating on what they are doing and not posing for the camera. This spontaneity is rare and does not allow the viewer to focus on any one thing in the image.

In fact, because we do not really know what is going on, we are left with a mystery that will not be solved. Another viewer can take these clues and come up with a different story. What the image in question actually shows is important from the perspective of that family. To the casual observer, the image portends something else.

But what I never anticipated was the more personal reaction. When I showed my snapshot collection to my friend Jane, she recoiled at the thought that these images were no longer part of the family to which they belonged. She abhorred the idea that family albums could ever be severed from their family ties. Her own family albums immediately surfaced in her memory. I explained that yes, it was disturbing to see these images separated from their owners when you thought about them in that way. I knew though that sometimes there were no living relatives who had any connection to the photos and did not think to destroy them. Antique and junk dealers often find them in estate sales, accompanied by furniture, paintings, silverware, and other household items. In fact, it probably never entered the minds of living relatives that someone else might be interested in these pictures.

I realized then that I had not really considered this when collecting the snapshots. I somehow understood the circumstances of how the pictures got to the shops I scoured. I looked through the piles of images and found that what had struck me as interesting many other people would find



These “moments” are documented to capture specific details about times and places important to the photographer and the photographer’s family. It just so happens that the images capture acts of spontaneity at the same time, perhaps accidentally. Much of my own work is of this type. But the “moments” are a little more planned, I would like to think. Yet, much about this genre of professional photography—called “street photography”—capitalizes on accidental exposures, juxtapositions, and interesting and unplanned lighting effects.

Snapshots are also harbingers of irony. Fashions, appearances, juxtapositions, décor, signage, technologies, fads from the past are mined for new content by succeeding generations. Removed from their familial context, snapshots offer details that emerge because of the personal and temporal dislocation gained by later viewers.

For example, the woman watering her yard appears silly and somewhat sexualized to the contemporary viewer. Who would wear such an outfit today, much less be caught in ultra-short culottes and high heels watering the garden? Perhaps the image is symbolic of the shifting ground from 1950’s American innocence to the more self-conscious present. It has transformed from something tinged with humor to an ironic humor tinged with eroticism. What may have been someone’s daughter or a housewife watering the garden on a hot, summer day, is now seen as an

interesting too. Jane could not accept this, and I’m sure many others won’t either.

This is then, in a sense, a newly created art form using imagery that was not intended for that purpose. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art devoted a show of snapshot photographs and a book to accompany it in 1998. Snapshots, it has been proven, can be appreciated in new ways—for their aesthetic appeal; their historical hints about place, technology, and landscape; their ability to exhibit “everyday life” in ways that more “advanced” methods of photography do not; their ironic content; and, most importantly to me, their ability to convey the intimacies and details of family life.

After several years of casual collecting, I have found that my collection has expanded in specific directions. I was drawn initially to “decisive moment” photos: a grandmother interacts with her grandchildren after church; a family looks on unperturbed from the porch while a farmer shears the hedges; the slightly off-kilter shot of a well-dressed woman parading in front of a colonnaded building at the 1915 San Francisco World’s Fair.

Grandma, in her Sunday attire, is irked at her grandsons’ behavior. The thick glasses do not obscure a look so pronounced it would stop anyone in their tracks. As she glares at one of them, he turns around and betrays the other as the true cause of her annoyance, as if to say, “Don’t blame me, blame him.”





iconic figure representing the naiveté of 1950's America.

Similarly, the beautiful couple posing on a split-rail fence represent a 1950's vision of perfection. Their shapely bodies and obvious mutual attraction create a textbook image of fifties innocence (white socks, shorts, and v-necked sweaters) and robust health. Mr. and Mrs. America are on a linear trajectory toward the American Dream. Today we can't help but ridicule their self-conscious image. The American Dream turned out to be not quite as innocent and simple as originally envisioned.

Because snapshots often document important occasions and coming-of-age events of importance, they offer details of life that would be difficult to observe otherwise. A street photographer, distanced from his or her subject, would find it difficult to capture the same intimacy as the amateur photographer shooting relatives or friends. Family members relax among people whom they know and feel comfortable around. Inhibitions tend to disappear.

In addition, amateurs with cameras typically do not consider the possibility of viewers outside of family members when snapping their pictures, so the pictures tend to be loose and relaxed in

feel. They do not carry the weight of images from established photographers trying to make a distinct impression on the viewer. For example, there is a spontaneity to the picture of the two men bracketing a young woman with kisses. The awkward position of the men trying not to get too close, combined with the woman's reticence, come to the surface. It's as if the photographer asked them to pose this way and they reluctantly went along with it.

Have you ever seen a family album without some such element of humor? Humor carries a place of honor in most family albums: a man photographed with a cannon pointing at him, while his wife looks on; a man trying to impress his wife by pretending to lift a boulder the size of a car; many boys taking a bite of their ice cream cones at the same time.

These types of snapshots give us inadvertent glimpses into the lives of individuals and families, while at the same time reflecting details of life that are more or less universal. As a photographer myself, I attempt to record—usually through stealth—peoples' gestures, states of mind, intimacies, and other more subtle details of daily life. Much like a poet or novelist, who mines public and private realms for character details, I record similar subject matter through mechanical means.

From the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, I photographed a mother guiding her daughter on her first bicycle ride. Although originally shot in color, this black and white version captures the thrill of a child's coming-of-age adventure. Perhaps in a snapshot the resulting image is not pre-determined, and the picture quality is not as good, but the outcome is similar.

At the same time, I cannot pretend that my predilection for collecting and showing these



to remember and to share with intimate others the details of your life. Yet, these images can have a life of their own independent from their intended life. Outsiders can conjure up hidden meanings and invent their own stories.



photos is not contradictory or problematic. I remember fondly my father bringing along his large gray Polaroid to family events and especially to vacations. I can still smell the magic elixir with which he methodically swiped each and every picture in order to fix them. It would certainly be disturbing were those pictures to leave the family nest. However, I do not support having snapshot images removed from the public domain. My family cherishes our snapshots but I would choose to show them to the public if I thought any of them merited it.

The moments pictured in snapshots—travels through distant lands, important events, relationships between people—are recorded in order

