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Iowa Town, People Evolve in Photo Project

By TODD DVORAK

Associated Press Writer

OXFORD, Iowa — At first, John Honn felt like so many of his neighbors — a tad suspicious when Peter Feldstein announced his plan to photograph all 676 residents in town. For some, like Tim Hennes, there was also a reluctance to take part in the "artsy" ventures of Feldstein, who despite having lived in Oxford for six years was by some accounts still a newcomer.

Yet there they are, part of a collection of friends, neighbors, relatives, classmates, lovers and ex-lovers, colleagues, drinking buddies and quilting partners, each frozen in an insignificant instant of their lives more than 20 years ago in black and white.



(enlarge photo)

This composite image, provided by photographer Peter Feldstein, shows photos of John Honn that Feldstein made in 1984, left, and 2005, with a narrative text between them based on interviews with Honn. The photos are part of the Oxford Project, which includes photographs made more than 20 years ago by Feldstein of 670 residents of the small town, and new photos of many of the same people. (AP Photo/Peter Feldstein)

Honn, a buckskinner by trade at the time, seems poised to wrestle bear: With his unruly beard, dressed in frontier-style shirt, pants and moccasins, his right hand clutches the barrel of a shotgun that stands upright by his side. Hennes, 21 when photographed, stands with only a hint of smile on his face in cut-off jeans and a worn T-shirt, his left hand clasping his right wrist at the waist.

"I don't remember exactly why I finally went down to the studio that day, other than I think I felt it had become some sense of obligation because Peter was so persistent," Hennes says. "I don't think people could help but wonder what he was doing ... or what was to be gained from it."

At the time, not even Feldstein — who snapped portraits of 670 residents of this eastern Iowa town that summer — knew what to think or do with his work. After a brief exhibition at the American Legion Hall, Feldstein gathered up his prints and stashed the negatives in storage.

"I had no intention of ever coming back and doing this again," says Feldstein, who retired last year after teaching photography at the University of Iowa for 32 years.

Now, more than two decades later, he is tracking down anyone who hasn't died, moved or been sent to jail for another round of portraits.

The same rules apply. Subjects wear what they want. Each stands on the same sidewalk square fronting a plaster wall on the side of Feldstein's Main Street studio. None are posed. Smiles, gestures, expressions are optional. No one is allowed to peek at his or her original portrait before Feldstein shoots a new one.

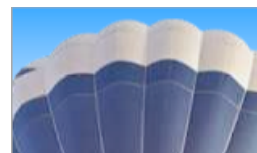
So far, Feldstein has reshot about 60. Matched side-by-side, the portraits show the obvious signs of aging, maturity, weight gain and loss, graying hair. Babies and children have morphed into 20-something nurses, truck drivers and teachers. But there is also evidence that some human traits and idiosyncrasies are impervious to time and change.

Don Saxton, the mayor then and now, still prefers striped, short sleeved shirts. In both portraits, Pat Henckleman tilts her head slightly left and reveals an enduring fondness for Docksidiers. Jim Jirus still wears his seed corn hat cocked to the right.

In the current phase of his project, Feldstein has added a new twist, thanks to the help of friend Stephen Bloom, an author and journalism professor at the University of Iowa. Based on interviews, Bloom has crafted short narratives that lend a confessional, poetic and unvarnished dimension to the lives in Feldstein's then-and-now portraits.

In their own words, Oxford residents share struggles with alcohol or abuse. Some recount romantic first encounters with spouses, their faith in God, displeasure with President Bush or, in the case of Jim Hoyt, the recurring nightmares from being one of the first four American soldiers to liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp in Weimar, Germany, during World War II.

Hennes, photographed again last summer, strikes a pose similar to his original, even down to the way he clasps his left hand over his right wrist at the waist. In his essay, he likens himself to George Bailey, James Stewart's character in the movie classic "It's a Wonderful Life," and shares how his dream of getting out of Oxford to attend college in Hawaii was forever altered by one simple act.



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"On the way home one day, I stopped at Slim's, and that's where I met Robin. Today we have two girls, ages 16 and 13. I've been on the Oxford City Council for eight years, and now I'm on my second term on the school board. That trip to Hawaii was my ticket out," he says.

Honn, now a Pentecostal minister, was photographed in 2005 wearing a blue blazer, dress pants and tie, his beard neatly trimmed; he holds a Bible in his left hand. In the essay, Honn talks of his former obsession with coon hunting, hearing God speak to him for the first time at age 16, and his religious conversion and beliefs.

"I've seen devils, demons, and angels," he says. "I once had a demon come to my bedroom. His face was a silver outline. I rassedled with him on the bed."

Feldstein says he has no favorites, but is particularly fond of the images and intimate tale of Ben Stoker.

When he was first photographed in 1984, Stoker is a just weeks old, cradled in the arms of his father. In the portrait taken last summer, Stoker, in a T-shirt, long baggy shorts and a baseball cap worn backward, creases a slight smile, his hands clasped behind his back.

"When I was 10, the man holding me — my dad — died," reads Stoker's narrative. "Pretty much I think of 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. I'd be a liar if I said that everything is all right."

Inspired by the photography of Mike DisFarmer, whose vast collection of portraits chronicled post-Depression life in the rural South, Feldstein and Bloom say their Oxford Project offers a unique and authentic look at personal change and life in a small, Midwestern community.

"But at the same time, this project is not just about Oxford," Bloom says. "This is real. These people and their stories reflect who we are ... wherever we live."

Interest in the work is growing. Feldstein and Bloom are negotiating a book deal with two publishers. Next year, they intend to exhibit the work at the Des Moines Art Center and they've had inquiries from other galleries.

Like the people captured by Feldstein's camera, the last 20 years have also brought change to Oxford, which hosted more than 4,000 people in 1948 when President Harry Truman made it one of several whistle stops during his re-election campaign.

Located about 15 miles west of Iowa City, Oxford has grown to 725, its growth evident mainly in the new subdivisions and the commuters who live there.

Gone are the multiple grocery stores, hardware store and downtown diners, victims of the crash in the farm economy of the 1980s. A violent storm in 1998 wiped out a healthy swath of old growth trees that shaded homes along its quiet streets. It's reputation as an outlaw, rough-and-tumble town has softened with the closure of a handful of taverns.

But as much as the project documents changes in Oxford and its inhabitants, Feldstein acknowledges that his work has caused a personal transformation.

"Because of this second time around, I've really come to realize that I love the people of this town," he says. "I'm seeing a goodness and a kindness in a lot of people that I didn't expect it from."

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