

Silver Of A Different Kind From The Ozark Hills

By Arline Chandler

Eccentric Heber Springs Photographer Leaves Legacy

In the first half of the 20th Century, times were hard in and around Cleburne County in the Arkansas Ozark foothills. Farmers scratched out a meager livelihood on rocky hillsides. Loggers clearcut and hauled away the county's biggest natural resource—trees. No one dreamed of silver in those hills until recent months when two New Yorkers came knocking on doors and offering cash for vintage photos stashed in albums, dresser drawers, and old trunks.

Almost fifty years after the death of the eccentric portrait photographer, Mike Disfarmer, the images he transferred from glass negatives to paper for mere nickels drew up to 1,000 pieces of silver. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the cranky, odd man of German descent photographed in an American Gothic style a steady stream of Ozarks' farmers, housewives, young children, and soldiers off to war.

In his Main Street studio in Heber Springs, the disheveled and peculiar old photographer, remembered by local folks as "spooky" or "weird," pointed his subjects to a stark white or solemn black backdrop, and grunted "...stand still." He disappeared underneath the light shroud of his portrait camera to snap their pictures for pennies. That is, if the mood struck him—or the north light from his studio's vertical skylight danced certain shadows across his subject's faces. Sometimes with no explanation, he said, "Not shooting today!"

In the art and photo world of New York, critics hail Mike Disfarmer as one of America's greatest portraitists. He captured a spontaneous reality absent in work by city photographers. In *Original Disfarmer Photographs*, edited by Steven Kasher, an essay by Alan Trachtenberg states, "Disfarmer worked by instinct, knowing what was right for a

photograph. He knew how to fill a frame and made no effort to change the angle of a head or elicit a smile. No one knows what mixture of precision and passion he performed under the dark cloth."

Yet, those he photographed believe the crusty old man who framed himself in fanciful tales simply shot photos as he had learned as a means of eking out a livelihood. He worked with handmade cameras, using only two lenses, a 12-inch Tessar made by Bausch and Lomb mounted on a Wollensak Betax number 5 shutter, and a shorter Wollensak Double Anistigmatic number six. He persisted with slower glass plates rather than celluloid.

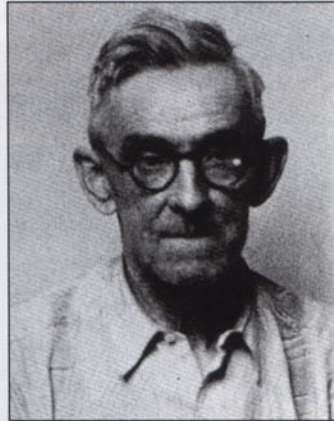
By all accounts Mike Disfarmer had no friends, except perhaps, alcohol.

Exhibiting his obvious disdain for family and neighbors, he legally changed his name in 1939 from Meyer to Disfarmer, disassociating himself from his German surname meaning "peasant farmer." Still, he

exclusively photographed people of Cleburne County. While art critics claim that the aloof man created some of the most soul-revealing portraits of his time, his subjects treasure most the sense of life in the Ozarks captured forever in the faces and body language of those who stood before his camera.

The photographs, mostly in a 3 by 5 postcard format, reveal folks as they were, typically rural people coming to town for Saturday shopping. Many wore work clothes of that era—rumpled pants, bib overalls, and print dresses. Some posed with hunting dogs—or a big catch from the Little Red River. A few wore bandages on fingers or scrapes on knees. On occasion, a cigarette dangled from a smirking mouth and a hat jauntily covered a home-style haircut. Few smiled, not even embracing young lovers or dads holding a firstborn.

While art critics state that souls were bared, Dr. M.E. Barnett, local historian of Heber Springs, believes subjects wore expressions of gloom or fear because of the eeriness of the Disfarmer Studio and the frightening old photographer who worked in silence. The question is posed: Why did people con-



Mike Disfarmer, ca. 1940s, in a portrait taken by Bessie Utley, his assistant. (thanks to Arline Chandler)



The cranky, odd man photographed in an American Gothic style a steady stream of Ozarks' farmers, housewives and young children.



(Merlon Noah and sisters Emmagean Faust, Ruth Faust, Abigail Faust and Eula Faust Mannon, ca. 1940) The lone boy is in dramatic opposition and contrast to his stair-step sisters. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)

tinue to file into his studio for portraits?

Heber Springs resident, Fay Olmstead, who grew up with enough Bittle and Badders cousins to fill two wagons, recalls going into town for a group picture at the studio. "It was something to do," she says. "It cost a quarter and we had something in our hand to mark an occasion."

She remembers asking her brother, Dr. Gerald Pearce, why their parents had Disfarmer take his picture in a cap and gown. He replied, "I was the first grandchild to graduate high school!"

From Cleburne County history, Dr. Barnett recounts that Mike Meyer came to Heber Springs about 1914 with his mother and other relatives from Stuttgart. He first practiced photography in a partnership with a man named Penrose in a studio in the lavish Jackson Theater on Main Street, perhaps even learning his trade from the older photographer. Some photographs found today are stamped Penrose/Meyer Studio. After the theater burned, Meyers established his studio on the porch of his mother's modest frame home. A tornado that ripped Heber Springs apart in 1926 demolished the Meyer home, and the lone photographer built his studio with a living quarters on Main Street.

Ironically, Disfarmer claimed that the Heber

Springs storm displaced him for a second time in his life. He told an imaginative tale about an earlier tornado back in Indiana that had snatched him as a baby from his true parents and dropped him on the doorstep of the Meyer family. In turn, he believed that the Meyer's own baby, the real Mike Meyer, had been carried away in the fierce storm.

Upon his death in 1959, Disfarmer left behind no documents or artifacts. Before his dank and dark studio was razed to make way for a parking lot, former Mayor Joe Allbright bought the contents including remnants of the photographer's equipment and approximately 3,000 glass negatives for a paltry sum of five dollars. His subsequent sale of the negatives to Little Rock attorney, Peter Miller, and Miller's marketing of the prints, brought the photographs' significance to the attention of Toba Tucker.

Tucker, who modestly characterizes herself as a documentary portrait photographer, lived among Cleburne Countians for two years during the 1990s, photographing subjects of the original pictures, and ultimately publishing her work in *Heber Springs Portraits*. In an essay by Helen A. Harrison in the book's foreword, she states, "In his work, Disfarmer often seems mercilessly frank, like the grumpy relative who enjoys finding fault. As a result, many of his portraits have a guarded quality."

She goes on to say that Toba Tucker, a genuine outsider in relation to Ozark folks, made a determined effort to allow her subjects extraordinary latitude in self-presentation, encouraging them to reveal their own truths. She says, "In contrast to Disfarmer, Toba was like the wise relative who counsels without



(Wallace Sloane, Elliot Smith and brother Homer, ca. 1940-45) Disfarmer captures the camaraderie and cockiness of three young Ozarkers. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)



The standing men on either side "frames" the quartet of roughly dressed young men, and the "V" of the dark background draws the eye to their faces. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)



The dressed alike twin brothers portray a Tom Sawyerish feeling but their serious expressions show no boyish mischievousness. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)

contradicting, praises without flattering, and respects confidences."

In two important aspects, however, Tucker emulated Disfarmer. She adopted his camera and his studio setup, a challenge she says that paid off in the human insight and poetic dimensions of the subjects she photographed many decades after they had stood before Disfarmer's camera.

Harrison continues, "Without diminishing Disfarmer's achievement, I say that whatever art we find in his work is a by-product of the commercial portraiture that was his livelihood. Toba's primary concern, without consideration of financial reward, is the expression of her artistic intentions. The earned trust and affection of her subjects reflects in their eyes."

Folks like Joe Allbright, Peter Miller, and Toba Tucker first brought Disfarmer's work to the attention of collectors and artists. Their interest in preserving the work of a crotchety old man resulted in silver mining of a different kind in the surrounding hills of Heber Springs.

—Arline Chandler is a resident of Heber Springs, Ark., and a frequent contributor to *The Ozarks Mountaineer*.



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Disfarmer's camera used during his entire career is on display at the Cleburne County Historical Society (Photo: Arline Chandler)



The child is obviously doted on, judging by the dress, and Disfarmer places her on a literal pedestal, perhaps for thematic emphasis. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)

Thanks to Steven Kasher Gallery, Arline Chandler and the Cleburne County Historical Society for photographs and information. If anyone knows the names of people not identified in the photos, please contact *The Ozarks Mountaineer*.

These books with photos by Mike Disfarmer and information about him are available from The Ozarks Mountaineer Book Store:

- *Disfarmer: 1939-1946 Heber Springs Portraits* by Julia Scully
- *Original Disfarmer Photographs* by Steven Kasher
- *Heber Springs Portraits: Continuity and Change in the World*

Disfarmer Photographed by Toba Pato Tucker, Alan Trachtenberg
Call toll free 1-888-283-5599 for information and prices.



Though all three have serious expressions, the love and protectiveness of the parents for their child is obvious. (Photo: www.stevenkasher.com)