



The Oxford Project

Intro by BEN BAMSEY

Photography by PETER FELDSTEIN

Written by STEPHEN G. BLOOM

What do people do in Oxford, Iowa? Euchre is popular. Some of the men go "coon huntin'." Women clean houses and cook – anything from koloches to sliced deer in cream of mushroom soup.

Oxford is quintessential flyover, small-town America, a town of 700 people. It's got black sheep, Christians and Buddhists. Death brings with it 28 casseroles to the griever's door. Everyone knows everyone else's dirt. The town is at the bottom of two small hills in the rolling plains of Eastern Iowa, 100 miles east of Des Moines. Corn and soybean fields lead you in and out of Oxford. The seasons are extreme; sweat on contact, humid summers and winters so cold, you can feel the chill in your bones. It's tornado country, where severe thunderstorms are green and you can actually smell them coming. Many conversations in Oxford begin and end with the weather.

There's a pony farm on the outskirts of town with cattle grazing in the distance. Across the street there's a dilapidated barn with missing boards. The Hummer family's trucking business in rural Oxford flies a giant American flag every day. It's the can't-miss signal that the town is just around the bend. The turn off from old Highway 6 is marked by a red and white sign reading "Oxford." An arrow points you in the right direction.

As you descend into town, the homes look modest, old, and in need of paint. Oxford has that unvarnished, down-home character. There's one restaurant – The Oxford Grill and it's only open for dinner. Oxford is 16 miles from Iowa City and the University of Iowa, but it may as well be 16,000. Most of the townspeople work in Iowa City or nearby. Some rely on farming to make a living. Others work for Amana Refrigeration. All are white, except for a Mexican family that bought a house there last summer. Iowa's a red state, but Oxford folks aren't so sure about President Bush. Principles and values are the lifeblood of this community. People are judged on their actions. There is a collective sense of protection here. Residents drive under the speed limit cause there's no need to hurry. It's a town under the national radar. Much of the country has never heard or really cared about Oxford, Iowa – that is until now.

The exhibition is called "The Oxford Project." And, all photographer Peter Feldstein did was offer to take free pictures. All journalist Stephen Bloom did was ask people to tell the truth about themselves. It's a remarkable journey two decades into the future and the past. Results are nothing short of sublime, poetic and extraordinary.



1984



2005

Ben Stoker

When I was ten, the man holding me— my dad — died. He was an architect and had renal failure. He was a fantastic father. He used to take me to his office on Saturday morning and in the afternoon, we'd catch a Kernels game. Pretty much I think about my dad every day. I remember feeling his beard against my face as a little boy. His hands were always soft and warm.

Two years ago when I was nineteen, my mother died of cancer. She was my guiding light.

I was very angry with God. He came in and took my father and then he took the other person I loved most in the world. I'd be a liar if I said everything is all right. But I'm a spiritual person. I know I'll spend an eternity with both my parents. Two sayings come back to me: "He's not going to put you through something you can't handle," and "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

I have dreams mostly of my mother. I dream that my whole family is in Disney World — we're all Disney fanatics — and we're going from ride to ride, but my mother is the only one who isn't talking.

I started at Luther College two months after my mother died. It was too soon. I turned into a party animal. Now I realize I was self-medicating myself. I needed to step back and fix my life, so I came back to Oxford. I want to return to college. I used to want pre-med, but lately I've been thinking of becoming a teacher. My mother was a teacher.

I want to have a family. I could care less if I make a huge mark on the world. I just want to be the best father I can be.

A lot of people don't like small-towns because they're so tight-knit. But that's what makes this place so great. You know who's sleeping with whom, but when your mother dies, you know there'll be twenty-eight people at your door with casseroles.



Iowa Honn

I didn't realize I had such nice straight legs.

I was born in Oxford on April 1, 1910. My father said I was the most beautiful baby in the most beautiful state, so he named me Iowa.

My father owned a general store with his brother. It was called John and Bill's. I met my husband in kindergarten. His name was Faye, but everyone called him Friday. We graduated high school in 1928. He had a car — a blue, four-cylinder Whippet. In those days there weren't many kids in school with a car. We got married in 1931.

I read the Bible every day at breakfast and at bedtime. It gives me a sense of quietness and contentment. Tonight I'm going to read Ezekiel. After I die, I'll go to heaven to be with God. I'll see my baby and husband there, too. If you're a believer, God opens the door. If you aren't he says, "I've never seen you before. You go to the other place!"

I hate to sew. But I can cook or bake almost anything.



1984

OXFORD PROJECT

2005



Mindy Portwood

I hope Oxford is my home forever. My family is my world. My brothers, my sister, my parents are my best friends. Growing up, I was a 4-H farm kid. We didn't have a lot of money, but we sure were happy.

I still live at home. I get up at six in the morning, shower, eat Frosted Mini-Wheats or Cheerios. Then I'm off to teach pre-school. By the time I get home, I try to catch the last fifteen minutes of Days of Our Lives. I like to read cheesy romance novels at night.

One of my great successes is graduating from college with a teaching degree. My dream job is to teach third graders, but those jobs are hard to come by.

I believe I was put here to be a wife and a mom. I totally believe my soul mate is out there, but he's hiding. If I hit thirty-five and I'm not married, I'm still going to be a mom. I've had a great life, and the rest of it ought to be just as good.



The Oxford Project

My mom died from cancer in 1982, and ten months after that, my sister died from cancer. My father died when I was twelve. I learned a lot at a young age. I used to think, "Why can someone else have their family and I can't?" I used to be scared that everyone close to me was going to die.

Kevin and I met in high school. His family had just moved to town. I thought he was really cute, but I was afraid to say anything to him. We went to a 4-H dance in the high school gym and danced to "Never My Love." I was fifteen and Kevin was sixteen.

Patty Thompson Hackathorn

I'd say only ten- or fifteen-percent of our graduating class went to college. If you could get a job with benefits, that was the thing. I got a job working at the bank in town. I could walk to work, come home for lunch, hang clothes on the line at noon. It was more than I could ask for.

Kevin always has had motorcycles. For my fiftieth birthday we went to Sturgis. This summer we're going to Colorado. Most of the people who ride with us are empty nesters. We're all down to earth and we look out for one another. We're kinda wild. We don't drive drunk, but we do stop and have a beer or two. I've never flashed.

I'm real big on family. We have two daughters. I think I'm the most boring person in the world because I've always lived here. We've talked about moving to Florida, but I think we'd miss the seasons. You're happy when spring comes around. And autumn, that's harvest. That's one of the best smells there is.





Darrel Lindley

I shoot 'em, bleed 'em, then skin 'em. I do hogs, cattle, goats, buffalo and sheep. I use a .22 magnum. After I shoot 'em, I cut their throats. Hogs I stick 'em underneath in their brisket.

Tomorrow I'm going to do four hogs. That'll take me four hours. Hogs I get twenty-four dollars a piece. Cattle is fifty dollars, plus the hide. There was a time when I'd work five or six days a week. I had customers in seven counties. I used to do five- six-thousand head a year.

One thing I do, if there are kids around, is I cut out the eye (it's a little smaller than a golf ball), and I swish it around my mouth. The kids can't believe that. Then I give the eyeballs to the health teacher at the school so the kids can dissect it.

We lost one of our daughters to cancer two years ago. I still talk to Darnell every day. She had a sense of humor. Always did, even as a little girl. The loss of a child is about as bad as it gets. The last thing Darnell said before she died was, "I love you, Dad."

The invasion of Iraq was very foolish. We never should've gone there. A just war is one thing, but this war isn't just. Bush isn't honest. He's an idiot and a coward.

Disappointments? I don't have a lot. I wish I had charged people more, maybe then I'd have more money now.

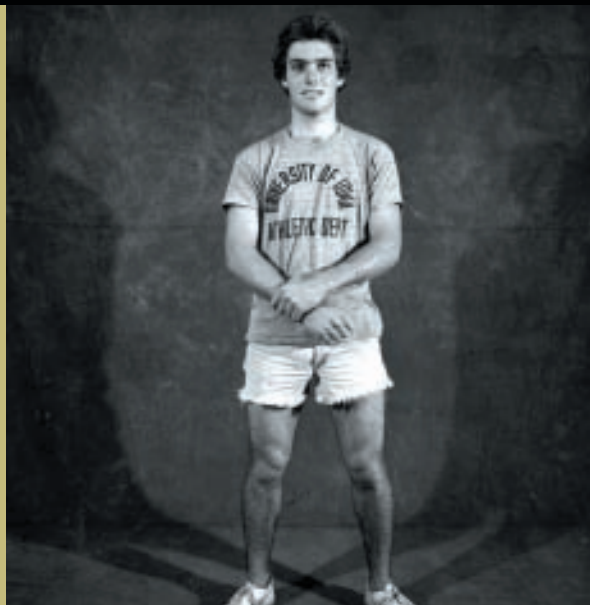
I like to fish. Usually I catch one big catfish every summer.



84

Tim Hennes

1984



I had the world by the ass those days I could work eight hours, party till three in the morning, then get up and be at work by seven. My idea was to work a year, then attend college in Hawaii. That was my plan. Nothing really was tying me down here. So I got a job doing construction to save up enough money.

On the way home one day, I stopped in at Slim's, and that's where I met Robin. Today, we have two girls, ages sixteen and thirteen. I've been on the Oxford City

John Honn

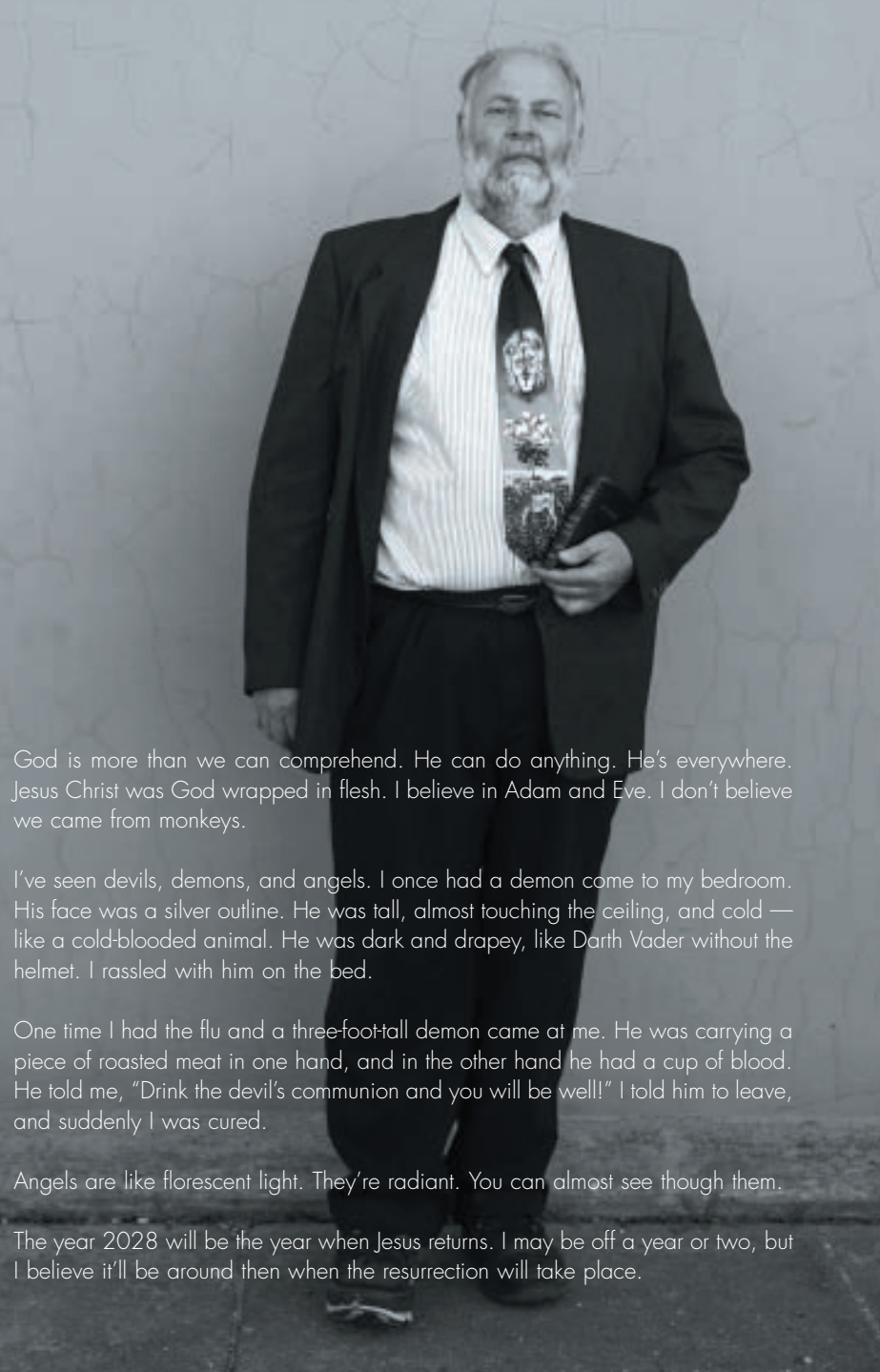


I used to be a buckskinner, shooting muzzle-loaded rifles, throwing knives and tomahawks. I was obsessed with coon-hunting. It wasn't about the kill. It was the chase.

I first heard the Lord speak to me when I was sixteen. I took four years of correspondence Bible college and from then on I've given myself to the Lord. He told me to start a gospel church and call it Anchored in Faith. In our church we have a horse tank with a heater in it to do baptisms. We've done more than a hundred.

We had a lady from Malaysia who was cured of a heart condition with one of our prayer cloths. We've had three people with epilepsy healed. We prayed with a lady who had a brain tumor and she was cured. We've had several people healed from total insanity. One man had manic depression and now he's totally functioning. I once saw a blind man whose sight was restored.

I've spoken in tongues on three occasions. It happens when you allow God to speak through you.



God is more than we can comprehend. He can do anything. He's everywhere. Jesus Christ was God wrapped in flesh. I believe in Adam and Eve. I don't believe we came from monkeys.

I've seen devils, demons, and angels. I once had a demon come to my bedroom. His face was a silver outline. He was tall, almost touching the ceiling, and cold — like a cold-blooded animal. He was dark and drapery, like Darth Vader without the helmet. I rassed with him on the bed.

One time I had the flu and a three-foot-tall demon came at me. He was carrying a piece of roasted meat in one hand, and in the other hand he had a cup of blood. He told me, "Drink the devil's communion and you will be well!" I told him to leave, and suddenly I was cured.

Angels are like florescent light. They're radiant. You can almost see though them.

The year 2028 will be the year when Jesus returns. I may be off a year or two, but I believe it'll be around then when the resurrection will take place.

Council for eight years, and now I'm in my second term on the school board. I work as a building inspector. I help people see through the housing-code maze.

I'd love to travel Route 66, see New York City, Vegas, maybe Alaska. Sometimes I feel like George Bailey, the Jimmy Stewart character in *It's a Wonderful Life*. That trip to Hawaii was my ticket out.



Tim Hennes
2005



Vince Grabin

My grandfather farmed down the road, so did my father and so did I. Our land runs to the county line, through Grabin Cemetery Road. We farmed oats, corn, beans, and cattle. I went to a little country school, a quarter mile from our house. The teacher lived with us.

I met my wife at a party or a dance, I can't remember which. We used to ride horses in the riverbed. My father-in-law was a barber.

The military expected me or one of my brothers to go to war, so I got drafted. I was an MP for a year, then I went overseas. My job was guarding German prisoners.

My wife and I have three children. They all live close by. My wife is in a nursing home now. I try to see her every day. They don't allow visitors to eat with residents, so I bring a sandwich and eat in her room.

My left hand got caught in a corn picker in 1967. I was reaching back,

trying to get something unstuck, and my foot pushed the auger. That's when I lost the two fingers. It was a mess. After the accident, I started to go to church more. I go every Sunday.

I don't have much to do these days. Today I got a haircut. I get up at daylight. I eat pork and beans sometimes. I like cranberry sauce. I don't eat too many vegetables. I read the newspaper. The mail gets here by five p.m. I watch the news, Wheel of Fortune, and Antiques Roadshow. I get to bed by seven.

I haven't really thought about death. My wife and I have a stone with our names on it. You think you're going to live forever. But I know it's coming. We die, they bury us, and basically that's the end of it. I don't know enough to have any regrets.

I always wear a hat. I don't go out without one. Sometimes I splash on a little Old Spice. I always carry a pocketknife, a pen and paper, and pliers. You never know when you're going to need pliers.

ABOUT THE OXFORD PROJECT

"The Oxford Project" took root in 1984. Peter Feldstein, a native New Yorker, studied at the University of Iowa. He retired from the university last year after three decades as a professor of photography and digital imagery. He moved to Oxford in 1978 and decided to take a picture of everyone in town. He posted a sign reading "Free pictures." "I wanted to make it as democratic as possible," Feldstein says. His goal was to let each picture tell that person's story. Feldstein didn't tell people how to stand or what to do. From start to finish, each shoot took just seconds. It was a project that demanded he make as few artistic decisions as possible.

Everyone saw Feldstein sitting there. The town's only five blocks long. "Someone referred to me as that slightly eccentric guy who talks to children and dogs," Feldstein smirks. At first, it was the curious school kids who dropped by, then a few old couples out for a walk. On Memorial Day, 165 people marched over from the American Legion hall to have their pictures

taken. Feldstein's setup couldn't have been less complicated: an old construction tarp backdrop, two quartz lights and his trusty four by five inch view camera.

Some people in town thought to bring props and Feldstein allowed it. One guy brought his 300-pound pet lion. Another held a raccoon. One guy drank a beer. Another wore his wife's wig. One young man came dressed as a cowboy. He thought he was one. On his way out, when Feldstein told him, "Be good," he looked back with a swagger and said, "That ain't the cowboy way."

They kept coming. It seemed people liked getting their picture taken. After awhile, Feldstein had snapped pictures of the entire town. There were just a handful of those too sick, too young, or too old whom he didn't get. Anyway, that was it. That was "The Oxford Project" for 21 years – an un-posed, un-

staged, one-take snapshot of the people of Oxford. "Originally, I was going to do a book on the project or something. That never happened. So, I just hung onto the negatives."

Then, two decades later, Feldstein got to talking with his University of Iowa buddy, journalism professor Stephen G. Bloom, and "The Oxford Project" was reborn. The new idea was an exercise in time travel, an experiment with photography and the written word. Over the last year, Feldstein has re-shot many of the portraits, Bloom has interviewed dozens of the subjects about their lives, and together they've turned the town's stories into art. Like famed Arkansas artist Mike Disfarmer, who took snapshots of his neighbors in the 1940's, Feldstein's portraits speak volumes about rural America. But Feldstein and Bloom wanted to take this narrative project to a new level. Their idea was to show the visual transformation of each person over a 21-year period with portraits on either side of the canvas (the 1984 picture on the left – the 2005 picture on the right), and life stories boiled down to no more than 450 words in the middle. It's a risk. Many art viewers start in the middle of a piece and work their way outward. In this case, there's a bunch of words in the way. But that's exactly what Bloom and Feldstein wanted. They knew that the text had to be so captivating that it would force the viewer to sit up and pay attention.

Bloom has pulled this kind of thing off before. His book *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America* focused on the not-so-pleasant changes occurring in the tiny farm-town of Postville, Iowa, after Hasidic Jews took over a defunct meat processing plant in town. Bloom's careful account of the town's identity crisis garnered him "Best Book of the Year" honors from *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *Denver Rocky Mountain News* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 2000. He interviewed more than 350 people to get the whole truth and is working on doing the same in Oxford.

"What's amazing about this project," Bloom says, "is the ability to see back 20 years and then in the future 20 years. It gives you a sense of eeriness. Oxford is a close-knit family that's both exhilarating and suffocating." It's Bloom's job to get to know the person behind the portrait. As a staff-writer with the *Sacramento Bee*, *San Jose Mercury News* and *Los Angeles Times* he has honed the craft of interviewing. He's not interested in recitation of facts, instead he strives to get to the heart of the matter – the moment Linda Cox fell in love with her husband to be, or when Jim Hoyt liberated the Buchenwald Concentration Camp during World War II. Bloom gets excited about the clickety-clack of how words fit together and his work on "The Oxford Project" is a glimpse into the mind of both a wordsmith and an artist.

Feldstein is known for his exploration of the use of symbols and his work in cliché verre, a type of photographic etching that dates back to the begin-

ning of photography and was used by a few 19th century French artists. Most of his professional career – the last 27 years – has been spent working out of his Oxford studio. "The Oxford Project" is a welcome distraction from his photographic endeavors and he says it's taught him a lot. "I know that a lot of my point of view comes from the respect that I've come to have for the people here," Feldstein says. "I used to think very differently about many of my neighbors than I do now. Actually a lot of these feelings started when I began talking to people just before the last election. I found myself quite surprised at the depth of concern, the awareness and intelligence of many people. This project has also taught me that everyone is truly related to someone else." His studio is right off the main drag and is full of proofs and images.



Stephen Bloom and Peter Feldstein outside Feldstein's studio in Oxford

Bloom and Feldstein are currently in talks for what they believe will be a nationwide museum tour. Fifteen completed pieces have already been sold to The University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics for permanent placement in its gallery. The Oxford Project has been getting national attention in recent months. ABC News, *The New York Times*, NPR and *The Smithsonian Magazine* have all featured the project. The men have more work to do, more portraits to be taken and more interviews to complete. But they're onto something big, something that will put Oxford, Iowa, on the national map and something that will propel small-town America into the consciousness of the big city art scene.

At its core, The Oxford Project is really about community, real-life America. While some may not be Paris Hilton perfect, these Americans are beaming with beauty. The images and text provide total access inside America's sublime soul.

www.oxfordproject.com