

The book was found

LaPorte, Indiana



Synopsis

FOUND magazine editor Jason Bitner has made it a habit of picking up after us, walking down the back alleys of our lives, and accumulating all that we've thrown away or mislaid. One afternoon not long ago, after lunch at a small Midwestern diner, he stumbled onto a forgotten archive. In the back of the restaurant were box upon box of studio portraits of the townspeople of LaPorte, Indiana over 18,000 in total. Taken over four decades, the photos marked important milestones: a sailor in uniform, a graduate in cap and gown, a couple newly engaged while others simply made modest attempts at posterity. Each in their unique way reveals both a public and private face, a story untold, a secret to reveal. They are admittedly brief moments and ones in which people have purposefully posed for the camera. Smiling. Caring. Loving. Pensive. Serious. These are pictures of all of us in a way, reflections in a mirror of the everyday moments and events that define all of our lives. LaPorte, Indiana is a major cultural excavation and an opening into these lives, into this town, and into the heart of our nation. "These are real people. The grace and dignity one sees in their faces should be a source of hope for us all." John Mellencamp

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Customer Reviews

LaPorte, Indiana also presents a rare and striking collection of portraits meant to preserve memories and serve as tokens of affection. Bitner, cocreator of Found Magazine, an inspired showcase of lost-and-found items, was astonished to find a cache of 18,000 professional black-and-white photographs in the backroom of an Indiana diner. As Kotlowitz notes in his introductory essay, these

carefully posed portraits of the townspeople of LaPorte taken during the 1950s and 1960s capture the idealized self-images of middle-class midwesterners. Bitner describes the photographer, Frank Pease, as an "accidental historian." One might also say that Pease created what art critic Michael Kimmelman calls "accidental masterpieces." Certainly, the 200 lustrous portraits of people at every stage of life possess a mesmerizing power, running the gamut from sweet to hilarious, poignant to beautiful. Donna Seaman

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"These are real people. The grace and dignity one sees in their faces should be a source of hope for us all."

LaPorte, Indiana is a collection of portrait photographs taken throughout the 1950s and 1960s in a small northern Indiana town. Jason Bitner, who co-created Found Magazine, stumbled across a few 5"x7" black and white photographs taped to a pie case at a local diner, B & J's American Caf  . Finding the photographs personally appealing, he asked the waitress where they originated. She led him to an unused dining area of the restaurant where 22 boxes were stuffed with thousands of photographs. After looking over the 18,000 images, he selected a couple hundred of the most intriguing to create a story of the town. Frank Pease, co-owner of Mural Craft Studios made the images along with his wife, Gladys. Together they crafted anniversary photographs, senior portraits, kid's photos and any style portrait that included a formal sitting. Taken over four decades, they mark important milestones including graduations, engagements, new additions to a family and personal achievements. The way Bitner has laid out the book tells a story of the town's cultural history and how each individual wanted to be portrayed. Bitner considers himself an accidental historian. He states in the forward of the book "the collection reads like an incredibly beautiful census, with expertly lit faces replacing biographical data." He became a stenographer of LaPorte. Finding significant historical value, in each photograph, Bitner creates a story of the Midwest. With the subjects in their nicest clothes and their hair and make-up done just right, you soon realize that having a portrait made in that era and in a small town was an important event. The book contains no text to accompany the portraits. Bitner relies on the viewer to imagine each individual through gesture or costume and in the end, viewers imagine an entire town and way of life.

Jason Bitner's LaPorte, Indiana offers a glimpse of the small-town Midwestern personality that is touching in its simple elegance. The layout--one portrait per page, sized to occupy the full page--draws no attention to any one picture, makes no editorial comments designed to influence.

Each portrait is given equal status to the others, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions, intuit what he will about the soundless characters presented within. This lack of commentary (aside from a brief introduction and forward) is LaPorte, Indiana's second-strongest point, behind the selection of portraits themselves. We are shown what we were never meant to see--castoffs from a portrait studio, the shots that didn't quite make it. Still, we do not have completely candid shots. These are the just-less-than-perfect pictures of people who have presented perfect versions of themselves. This doesn't make them any less true, but the portraits' subjects are editorializing themselves, in a way, and any additional layers of comment by the author would be too much. The enjoyment and beauty of this collection goes beyond just the subjects, however. Comparisons and juxtapositions arise; the young from one page cascade into the old on another; men and women on facing pages, who may never have met, stare at each other across the book's binding. Beyond the individuals held in this book are the interactions held within it. One can trace a theoretical life through the pictures of the newborn, the youth, the adolescent, the middle aged, and the elderly. The reader can impose, discard, and impose anew themes and groupings on sections of the book, looking for what may connect these people. Overall, this is a gorgeous work. It's a wonderful preservation of a specific, overlooked bit of America. And it's beautiful way to pass an afternoon, reading it alone or sharing it with friends.

I am a huge fan of the Found crew, I find their unironic sentiment, enthusiasm and respect for people's findings to be utterly refreshing. The format of the book is gorgeous, the paper stock wonderful and so appealing to either flip through or go page by page to view the juxtapositions the author (or finder?) intended. It is a wonderful "coffee table" book and so intriguing for so many different kinds of people in your life to give as a gift. I inherited a large box of black and white photographs that my grandfather had left to me at his death years ago. As a 15 year old, shifting through photos of both his life and strangers was emotionally overwhelming. He was an amateur photographer and had made a darkroom from a closet in his suburban PA home. There are so many similar photos of children and women of the photographer of La Porte, Indiana and my own! Yet I am glad to see Jason was able to reproduce that sense of wonder at the joy and oddness of everyday people through the lens of an everyday man.

Upon your initial flip through this beautiful book, you will immediately understand why photographer Frank Pease didn't have the heart to toss out the treasure trove of portraits that are compiled here. Lucky for Jason Bitner, whose past exploits at Found and Dirty Found offer proof of his eye for

the lost, the forgotten, and the bizarre. Bitner has whittled down the collection of over 18,000 photographs into a fascinating look at the people of Small Town, USA. While wending through the pages of LaPorte, Indiana, the reader can almost feel the excitement Bitner must have had at finding such an amazing archive. Each page tells a story and that story is only inferred by the brief moment captured on film. It's an incredibly compelling book, filled with images of a time that seems to be lost forever.

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