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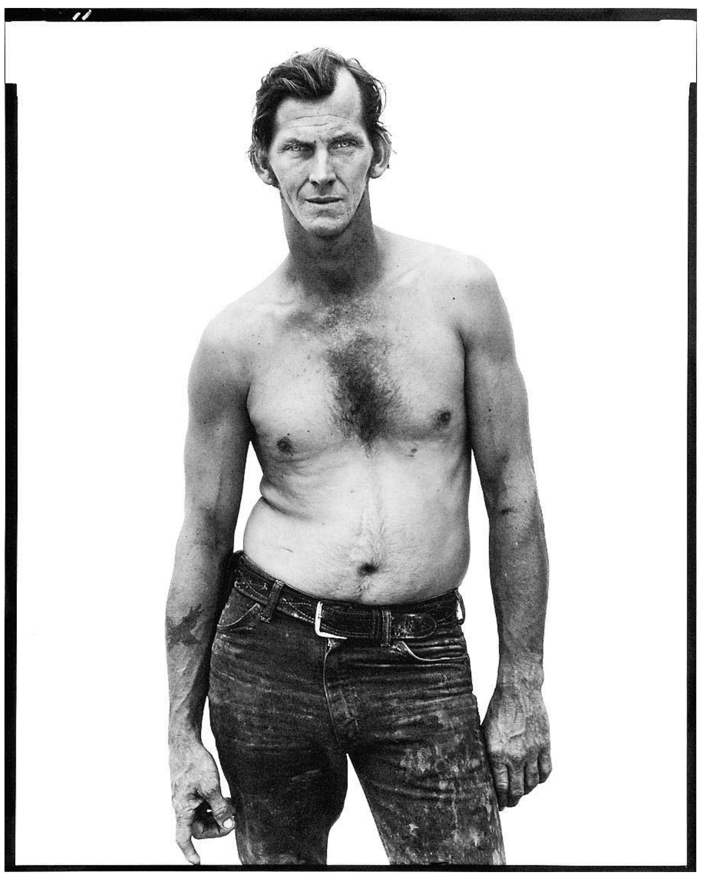
SECTION G

IN THE AMERICAN WEST • 1985/2005

Avedon's Lone Stars

STORIES BY ANDREW MARTON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JILL JOHNSON
STAR-TELEGRAM



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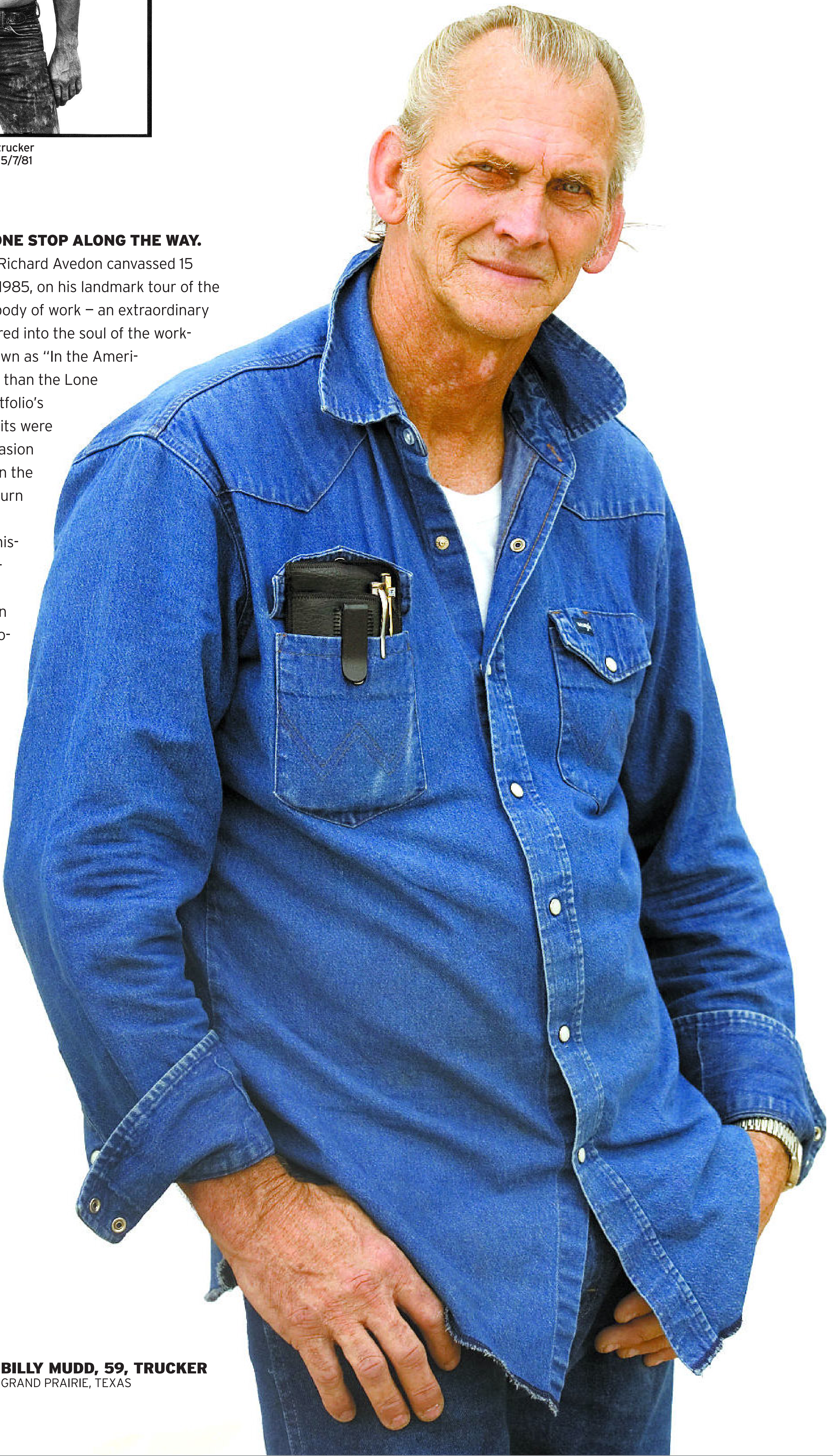
Billy Mudd, trucker
Alto, Texas, 5/7/81

TEXAS WAS JUST ONE STOP ALONG THE WAY. In all, photographer Richard Avedon canvassed 15 states, from 1979 to 1985, on his landmark tour of the West. The resulting body of work – an extraordinary collection of images that stared into the soul of the working class and came to be known as "In the American West" – was even bigger than the Lone Star State. Still, 18 of the portfolio's most starkly beautiful portraits were of our neighbors. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of "In the American West" – and its return this weekend to the Amon Carter Museum, which commissioned and first exhibited it – the *Star-Telegram* sought to track down those homegrown miners and farmers and factory workers whose lives, unglamorous by every other measure, were illuminated, touched and irreversibly changed by a chance encounter with a New Yorker and his camera. Here are some of their stories.

PROFILES OF AVEDON SUBJECTS, 2-9G.



BILLY MUDD, 59, TRUCKER
GRAND PRAIRIE, TEXAS

FROM THE COVER

BILLY MUDD, 59, TRUCKER

GRAND PRAIRIE, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, AUGUST 16, 2005

With the last wisps of summer still lingering on a September day in 1985, Billy Mudd and his wife, Jeane, were strolling toward the majestic entrance of the Amon Carter Museum. "Just look up," Jeane said to her husband, "but don't say a word."

There, looming in front of the then 39-year-old truck driver was Richard Avedon's portrait of him – flood-lit, stark and staring at him like some invasive X-ray.

It shook Mudd to his core.

"When I looked up and seen that life-sized picture looking back at me, it was the very first time I had really seen myself," Mudd now recalls about the opening day of Avedon's "In the American West" exhibition at the Carter. "It felt like I had left my body, that I had died, and my spirit was looking at the photograph. My heart skipped a beat; I got weak all over."

Mudd's visceral first encounter with Avedon's unsparingly detailed, forensiclike image would prove to be so much more than a casual intersection of art with its subject. It detonated a cluster bomb of emotion; it was catharsis and epiphany rolled into one.

"Richard's photograph just hit me," admits Mudd, whose reticence suddenly gives way to a torrent of emotion and words. "This man's photograph showed me who I was: a lonesome person, a depressed person. He really introduced me to myself and that changed everything in my life.

"His photo saw through me," Mudd continues. "I used to be a workaholic, never spending too much time with my wife or thinking about life. I was just a nobody. I even thought about suicide. But Richard woke me up. He got me to straighten up and realize that I ain't who I am in that photo."

If Mudd sounds born-again, he won't deny it. But what he will also make doubly clear is that it wasn't some parish minister who helped refurbish his frame of mind. Rather, his spiritual renovation came through the lens of Avedon's camera – and the resulting photo and relationship with Avedon himself all but implored Mudd to infuse his days with meaning.

"I really owe my life to Richard," says Mudd, who relishes cataloging the ways in which their unlikely bond brightened his once glum existence. "Richard so opened up life for me. When I go down the road now, I really hear the birds sing. Everything has some beauty, and I never used to look at a world with beauty."

Today, the 59-year-old Mudd, father of six, grandfather to 15, and great-grandfather to seven, recognizes how whimsical destiny placed him on a path to meet Avedon back in May 1981. Then 35 years old, Mudd had temporarily snagged a job on an oil rig in Alto. Six months into his job, he was singled out to have his picture taken by Avedon – someone Mudd thought worked for an oil field magazine.

"I remember asking Richard if I should put on a shirt, and he said, 'No, just stay like you are,' so I just stepped over in front of the camera and stood like I always stand," recalls Mudd.

It would be four years later, during the opening of the Carter exhibition, that Avedon and Mudd would launch their lifelong friendship. Theirs was as close a camaraderie as one could imagine between an anonymous Texas trucker and a worldly photographer.

"From the moment I met Richard, we just clicked, as if we'd known each other all of our lives," says Mudd, who remembers with a laugh how he and his wife had to stop at a Fort Worth Target for some suitable clothes before attending the opening.

"Me and Richard had so much fun, just carrying on," recalls Mudd, who was shattered by Avedon's death a year ago, at 81. "He was just this really down-to-earth person; always happy-go-lucky. He became closer to me than a brother could ever have been."

Road to destiny

From the time Billy Mudd was born, in 1945, just outside of Houston in the little town of East Bernard, he literally and spiritually drove thousands of miles to get to his crucial encounter with Avedon. Mudd's father worked for Tennessee Gas, doing pipeline inspection. Curtly, Mudd says that he and his father were "not close." In fact, so estranged was Mudd from his parents and only brother that by 5 he was being raised by his grandparents on a ranch 250 miles away in Medina.

On 2,800 acres, Mudd cleared land, built fences and tended cattle and sheep. By the time he was 12, he was in charge of breaking most of his family's wild mustangs, turning them into much-desired cutting horses.

Mudd dropped out of school at 16, "from when I was big enough," he now says. "I did what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it." At 19, he took to the highway as a trucker for the first time.

"I always liked it because nobody bothers you out here," Mudd says, calling from his rig somewhere in New Mexico. "I'm a whole lot of a loner."

But soon Mudd, a Marlboro man of craggy individualism, would meet the woman of his dreams, Jeane Ellen Salter, on the road between San Antonio and Houston, in Gonzales. And as Mudd eased into his new-found role as provider to a fast-growing family, Avedon would provide inspiration.

"Richard reminded Billy how much of a family man he was, pushing him to be even more of one," Jeane recalls. "He got Billy more confident in life, more positive about moving on with whatever it is he wanted to do."

If anything, the trucker, who still crisscrosses the country with abandon, seems more enthused now over his road-warrior experiences than when Avedon first immortalized him 24 years ago. Encounter Mudd today and his 6-foot-2-inch frame unfolds with the same combination of aw-shucks lankiness and hips-cocked defiance displayed in his portrait. He remains an inspired assemblage of spare parts, his widow's peak pointing down to arresting ice-blue eyes, with little crow's-feet scampering away in fear of those piercing orbs. His endless arms are graced with articulate, heroic hands that could have been borrowed from Michelangelo's *David*.

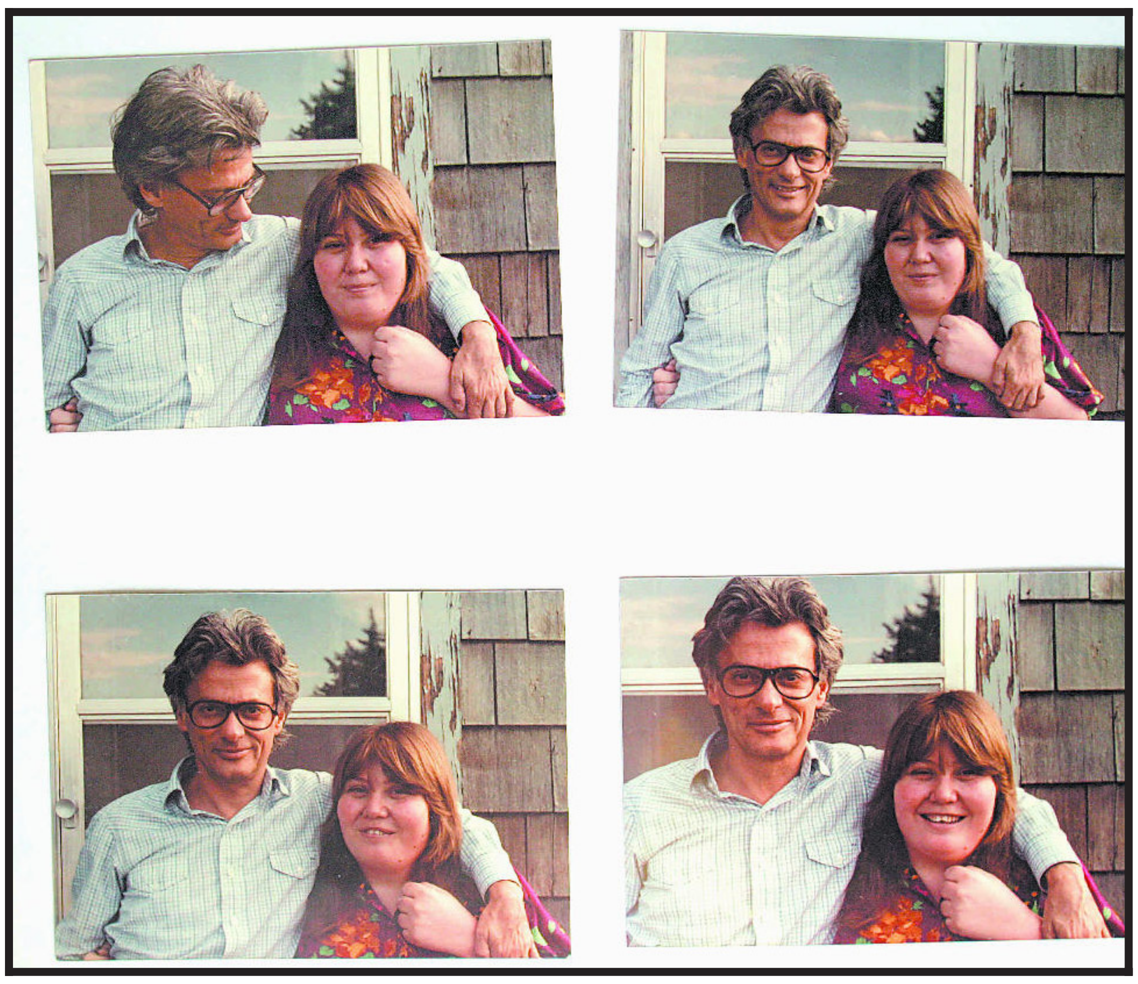
Though not an overtly religious man, Mudd does confess that "me and God have had a lot of talks while I'm sitting behind this wheel. And now I talk to Richard, because I feel his presence. I have so much I didn't get to tell him about the ways my life has changed. I never really could thank him the way I would have liked to."

Now brimming with delight in the simplest pleasures, Mudd has set his own compass, even for his final journey.

"When the good Lord is ready for me," he says, "I hope Richard is standing alongside my grandparents just past those pearly gates."

Andrew Marton, (817) 390-7679
amarton@star-telegram.com

"His photo saw through me. I used to be a workaholic, never spending too much time . . . thinking about life. I was just a nobody. I even thought about suicide. But Richard woke me up."



Mary Watts, one of Avedon's earliest "West" subjects, basks in his company during a 1979 return visit to Sweetwater. "You have a quality of deep feeling that . . . few people bring to the camera," Avedon wrote to her.

Portraits of friendship: Avedon's lasting impression

For many of the Texans portrayed in Richard Avedon's "In the American West," their relationship with the restlessly creative photographer didn't end with his camera's last shutter snap.

Instead, over a quarter-century, through a stream of letters, photographs, magazine and newspaper clippings, expensive coffee-table-book collections of his work and, to a select few, phone calls, Avedon assiduously kept in touch with many of his Texan subjects.

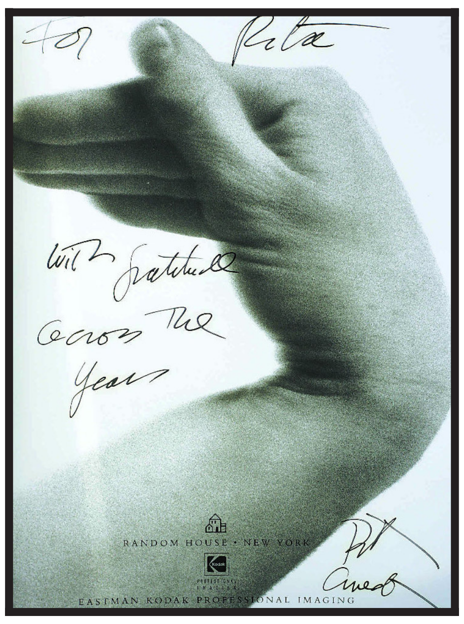
Like curators of their own Avedon archives, they have carefully preserved mementos charting their relationship with the photographer. His letters, occasionally ending with the rousing "yours in the struggle" before signing off "Best, Dick," are still intact, despite being typewritten on fragile onion-skin paper.

To his young and adult subjects alike, Avedon was unfailingly flattering. In a July 6, 1979, missive to Mary Watts, only months after taking her picture for "In the American West," he wrote: "Photographing you is like photographing a fine actress."

To young Melissa Harrison, he wrote, 11 years after first photographing her, "you have the long throat of a swan or a ballet dancer."

What becomes a legend most? In Avedon's case, an ineffably human touch.

– Andrew Marton

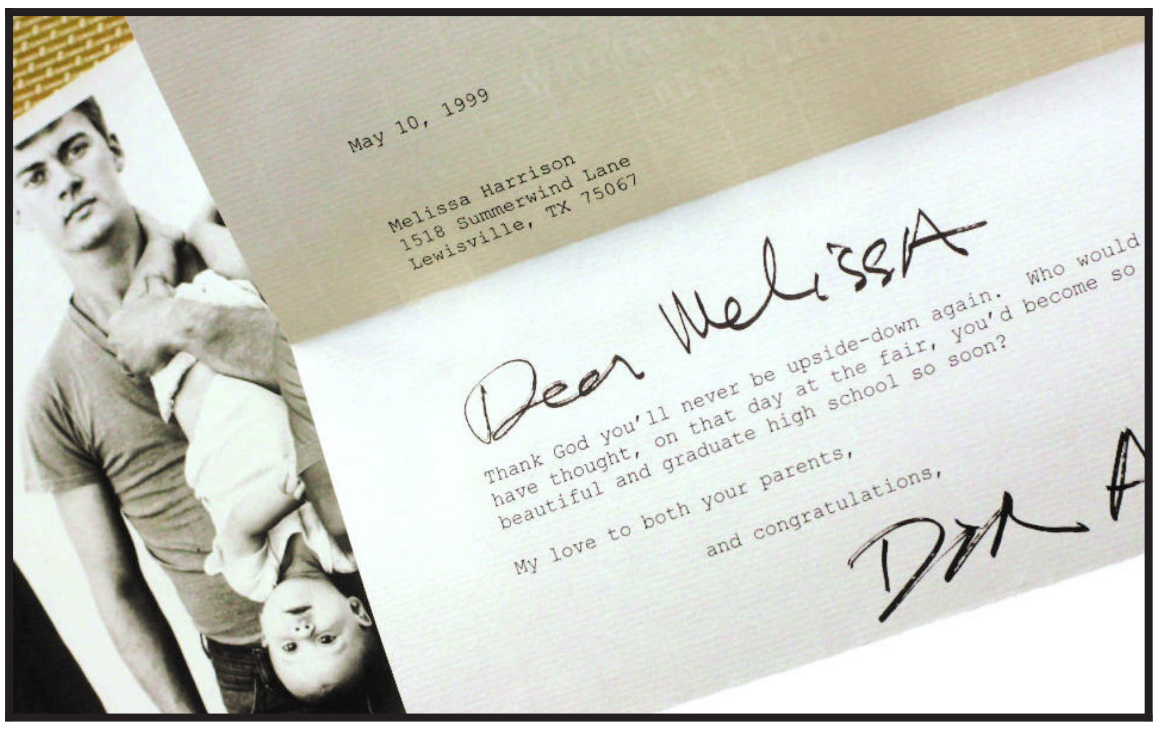


"With gratitude across the years," Avedon wrote poetically, in dedicating a copy of "In the American West" to Rita Carl.

Avedon was so enthralled by Mary Watts's niece, Tricia Steward, that he returned to Sweetwater only months later to snap these pictures of the sweetly playful 4-year-old.

There's no mistaking the flair of the photographer's signature, this one on a print sent to Rita Carl, one of his favorite subjects.

Avedon was careful to send a signed copy of the "American West" monograph to as many of his subjects as he could. Boyd Fortin not only kept the book but also its original box.



May 10, 1999

Melissa Harrison
1518 Summerwind Lane
Lewisville, TX 75067

Dear Melissa

Thank God you'll never be upside-down again. Who would have thought, on that day at the fair, you'd become so beautiful and graduate high school so soon?

My love to both your parents,

and congratulations,

Eighteen years after Avedon snapped her picture, Melissa Harrison received a letter from the photographer poking fun at her memorably inverted pose and congratulating her on her high school graduation.

MYRNA SANDOVAL, 41, PHYSICAL THERAPIST
CLAUDIA SANDOVAL, 38, CUSTOMER SERVICE REP

EL PASO, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, AUGUST 31, 2005

There was a time 23 years ago when a man in his 50s roaming the grounds of Bowie High School in El Paso would not arouse the suspicions of two teen-age sisters. It was under those exact circumstances that Richard Avedon approached 18-year-old Myrna Leticia Sandoval and 14-year-old Claudia Araceli Sandoval about taking their picture. "Right away, he asked us if we were twins," recalls Claudia.

"I remember he had a ponytail," adds Myrna. "And, no, we weren't scared at all to be approached by him."

Considering the almost suffocatingly protective atmosphere of the Sandoval household – growing up, the sisters weren't allowed to date and their most consistent social activity was Sunday church – it was surprising that the girls were allowed to participate in Avedon's project.

Within a few days of their first encounter with Avedon, the Sandovals, whose family came from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, met the photographer near the school's library, where he had already hung his white seamless backdrop.

"Having those pictures taken was intimidating, even as it was making us famous for a while," recalls Claudia.

"I remember feeling important," says Myrna, "because out of a school full of crazy Mexicans, he chose us."

Tuning out their razzing classmates, the sisters gave Avedon their undivided attention. They quickly fell under the photographer's gaze as he instructed them to be as natural as possible. Pleasing Avedon meant not smiling, which went against the Sandovals' instincts. "He told us to look very serious, even depressed," recalls Claudia.

Today, from Claudia's El Paso living room, the two sisters gasp at the sight of the original Avedon image. They draw the same comically horrified conclusion about their 1982 fashion sense: their ruffled shirts, caked makeup and, most strikingly, Berlin Wall of bangs.

"That was us every day, with our clothes and hair – it was terrible," recalls Claudia. "I remember when I first saw us in the book, I felt important, but then I thought, 'Oh my God, what were we thinking?' That hair, it had to go."

"We had a nickname back then: 'The Lionesses,' " Myrna says. "If I could go back in time, I would certainly change both my hair and makeup. I mean, that lipstick was so red, and our faces were so light. Trust me, even if I were dead, you wouldn't catch me looking like that now."

As with so many of Avedon's other subjects, the Sandovals now look at the picture with mixed feelings about the glum expression they wear.

"It looked like somebody slapped us," says Claudia. "We look mean. Looking back, I'd have liked to smile more. But I was trying so hard to look like my sister – kids do that."

Suddenly, the sisters use the picture as a kind of Rorschach test of what they might truly have been feeling at the time Avedon snapped them into artistic immortality.

"What I actually see now is a lot of sadness in our eyes and in our faces, already at that age," reveals Claudia, her mouth forming a thin line of resignation at the memory of their repressive adolescence. "The picture does make us look like we've been through hell and back," agrees Myrna. "I can see it now; I really didn't see it then."

© 1982 THE ESTATE OF RICHARD AVEDON

Myrna Sandoval, eighteen year old, and
her sister Claudia, fourteen year old
El Paso, Texas, 4/20/82

"If I could go back in time I would . . . change both my hair and makeup," says Myrna, left, of the Avedon image. "Trust me, even if I were dead, you wouldn't catch me looking like that now."

> “[Avedon’s] voice was very soothing and he made me feel totally at ease. Here he was, one of the most famous photographers in the world, and he was just a normal, friendly, polite person. . . . I really do think I was attracted to him. He was a very good-looking man, and I loved his real New York City accent. He just seemed exotic.”

© 1979 THE ESTATE OF RICHARD AVEDON

Rita Carl, law enforcement student
Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79

RITA CARL, 56, RETIRED SOCIAL SERVICES OFFICER

SWEETWATER, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, SEPTEMBER 2, 2005

The product of a Mexican-American father and a German-American mother, Rita Carl cuts quite the Scarlett O’Hara figure residing in Sweetwater’s only multicolumned, porticoed, ersatz plantation mansion. Carl’s “Tara” shows off her deeply embedded roots in West Texas, where she grew up working the family farm, fishing and playing lots of cowboys and Indians. “I always wanted to be the cowboy and the hero,” Carl reminisces.

During a chilly March day in 1979, Carl was taking in the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup at the Nolan County Coliseum. The annual event — part carnival, part reptile rodeo and the source of Sweetwater’s renown — would prove to be a fertile hunting ground for Richard Avedon, who found several of his “American West” subjects there in one day.

Carl — who was 30 years old at the time and would soon travel to Los Angeles, and back, in pursuit of a law-enforcement career — remembers a salt-and-pepper-haired man with large glasses trailing her through the roundup, persistently requesting to take her picture.

Repeatedly, she turned Avedon down. Finally, several of Carl’s friends at the roundup all but dragged her back to Avedon’s photo encampment — a tranquil side of the coliseum that he’d rigged with his signature backdrop and beloved, if bulky, 8-by-10 Deardorff portrait camera.

“I trusted his intentions,” remembers Carl, “but I really wondered, ‘Who am I?’ I asked him, ‘Why have you chosen me?’ And he said, ‘Because you are very beautiful.’ He was just so full of compliments.”

During the shoot, Carl remembers being befuddled over what to do with her hands. She had no concerns about her hair. “I have to admit it looked good,” she says. “I think I all but invented that Farrah Fawcett flip look. But I was worried because it had been a long day and my makeup had almost melted off. But I thought that he’s such a famous photographer he’ll probably fix my blemishes, and I’ll be beautiful.”

In working with Carl, Avedon, as with all his subjects, cultivated an easygoing, comforting atmosphere. “His voice was very soothing and he made me feel totally at ease,” Carl recalls. “He had a lot of patience. Here he was, one of the most famous photographers in the world, and he was just a normal, friendly, polite person. I really felt like I could talk to him for hours. I really do think I was attracted to him. He was a very good-looking man, and I loved his real New York City accent. He just seemed exotic.”

Sitting in the living room of her alabaster-white home — one filled with an eccentric mix of estate-sale antiques, kitschy collectable plates (with scenes from *Gone With the Wind*), dozens of sepia-toned pictures of her family, a menagerie of 100-year-old and contemporary dolls, and a drawer full of Smith & Wessons and .44 Magnums — Carl considers how Avedon captured her likeness in the spring of 1979.

“I think it is a very good picture, though it does make me look like I’m mad,” she says. “I did wear a lot of makeup and those eyelashes back then. I would love to have taken the blemishes off, otherwise it’s a great picture. I look at this picture and I remember that I just didn’t see myself as beautiful, like he was telling me. It sure did mean something special coming from him because he knew so many beautiful woman and here I’m nobody. He treated me like I was a celebrity. It really did affect me.

“Looking at this picture today, I see myself, obviously, younger, and even though he shot so many pictures making us look like unhappy people, at the time I was not unhappy at all. I was in college, planning a big career with lots of possibilities and lots of plans. My life was going to be fantastic.”

JOHN HARRISON, 45, BOAT PARTS SALESMAN
MELISSA CAMERON, 24, RECEPTIONIST

SEABROOK, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, AUGUST 29, 2005

Back in the fall of 1981, John Harrison was a 21-year-old father toiling in a lumber yard to support his young family, including his firstborn, a 7-month-old baby girl named Melissa.

On an October day, John, along with his wife, Cheryl, and their daughter, were strolling through the State Fair of Texas in Dallas when Richard Avedon's assistant, Laura Wilson, asked them if they'd consent to have their picture taken.

"My first thought was that if he's such a famous photographer, how much would it cost, since the fair always had all kinds of hucksters," recalls Harrison.

Fully assured that the photo would be gratis, father and daughter began posing for Avedon, with Harrison cradling Melissa in a traditionally protective embrace.

Seemingly content with what he got, Avedon began packing up when he noticed Harrison hoisting Melissa upside down, in a playful way that always got her to giggle.

" 'Hold on, hold on,' I remember Richard saying, as he got his camera out again," recalls Harrison. " 'That is what I'm looking for.' "

Avedon soon snapped several Polaroids to serve as memory guides for a future shoot with the Harrisons. Sure enough, the photographer visited them in their Lewisville home two months later. Once there, he asked John to dress in precisely the same light cotton shirt and grubby jeans, with Melissa in her tiny T-shirt and diaper – the original garb of their earlier State Fair session.

"Whenever I would hold Melissa upside down, she was giggling, and Avedon just liked the way it looked, the way she wasn't afraid," says Harrison from his Seabrook home, which is filled with a vast collection of Nativity scenes and where one wall is lined with Avedon images marking that special time. "We were doing it in just a playful way, and Avedon saw something in our relationship and that became the picture in his mind."

As for Harrison's thousand-yard stare in the picture, he now remembers that seriousness came naturally to him.

"I just didn't smile much for family or other pictures – it was my look," Harrison says. "So for me, Richard never had to tell me, 'Don't smile.' "

Harrison's first impression of Avedon was that he carried a "real show-business look about him. He looked like a celebrity to me, like he was somebody, yet he somehow wasn't pretentious."

Looking back at the picture today, Melissa – now a married woman with shoulder-length chestnut hair who favors blue jeans, peasant blouses and flip-flops – can't recall the actual photo session but has some memories of the 1985 Amon Carter exhibition.

Remembering how paternalistic Avedon was at the show's splashy opening, Melissa muses: "He held me in his lap, helping me count my fingers and toes."

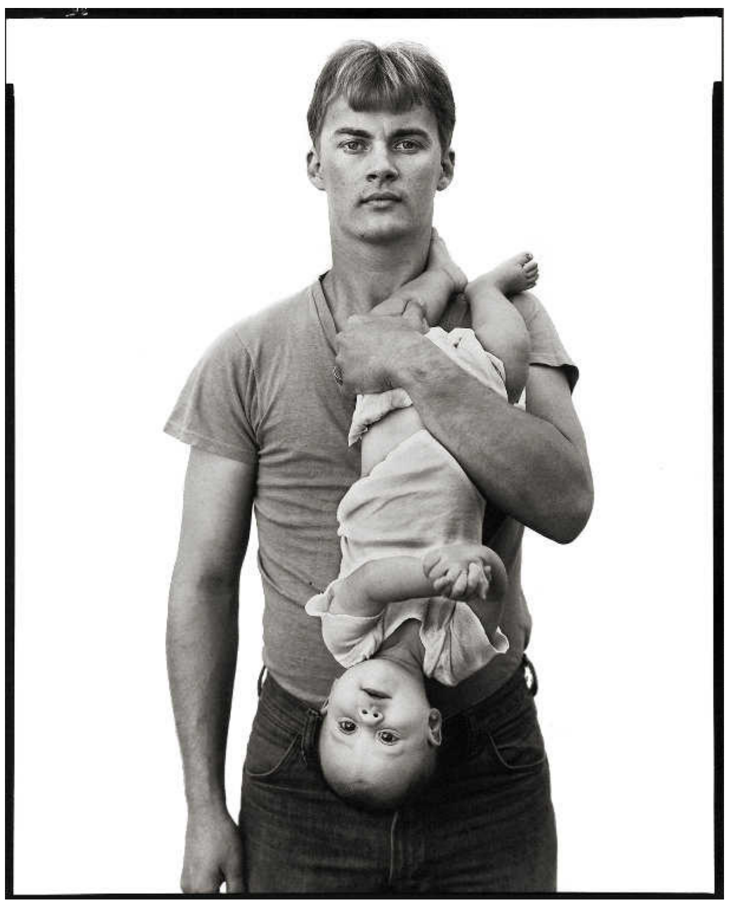
Looking at the iconic shot today, Melissa blurts out: "Boy, I was a tall baby." Then after a considerable pause to reflect on it, she admits: "It does look so sweet. She looks so trusting – I mean me. I just seem so content."

Harrison's gut reaction to the photo is a welter of impressions, some flip, others more carefully molded.

"What kind of hairdo exactly was that?" he wonders. "It really does seem like just a slice of time – one-60th of a second or however long it took to take that picture – and it is unrelated to anything else in my life."

Except, perhaps, to his heart and soul. A particularly potent emotion resonates through Harrison as he relives that day more than two decades ago.

"I do know one thing by looking at that picture," he says. "I sure did love that little baby."


John Harrison, lumber salesman, and his daughter Melissa
Lewisville, Texas, 11/22/81

© 1981 THE ESTATE OF RICHARD AVEDON

> "My first thought was that if he's such a famous photographer, how much would it cost, since the fair always had all kinds of hucksters," remembers Harrison.

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Boyd Fortin, thirteen year old
Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79

BOYD FORTIN, 40, ENVIRONMENTAL SPECIALIST

MIDLAND, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, AUGUST 31, 2005

It doesn't take much prompting for Boyd Fortin to conjure up youthful summers in Sweetwater, filled with baseball and his fervent involvement in raising stock show-worthy pigs and hogs.

Fortin's recollections of that Sweetwater day 26 years ago when Richard Avedon snapped his picture are just as vividly etched. At age 13, Fortin was already a Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup mainstay, having racked up four years in the festival's infamous skinning pits, deftly chopping up the reptiles into bite-sized segments, readying them for frying and a hungry public.

On that brisk March day in 1979, Avedon was trawling the roundup for suitable subjects; Fortin was a natural.

"When he asked to take my picture, I said 'Sure you can,' even though I didn't know who he was," recalls Fortin. "I also remember him saying, 'I will make your picture famous,' to which I replied, 'Yeah, whatever.' "

Avedon led Fortin back to a white backdrop taped against a remote corner wall of the coliseum. Three times that weekend, Avedon would shoot Fortin.

"By his third session with me, I really wanted him to hurry up. The weather was in the upper 40s and my hands were getting so cold I was going to have problems skinning the rest of the snakes," says Fortin.

Avedon experimented by posing both a smiling and scowling Fortin holding several snakes. Finally, Avedon arrived at a perfect expression and precise composition: one gutted snake held up by a brooding, frigid Fortin.

Part of the final image's distinction is the artful arranging of the snake's entrails, almost like a string of medals across Fortin's adolescent torso.

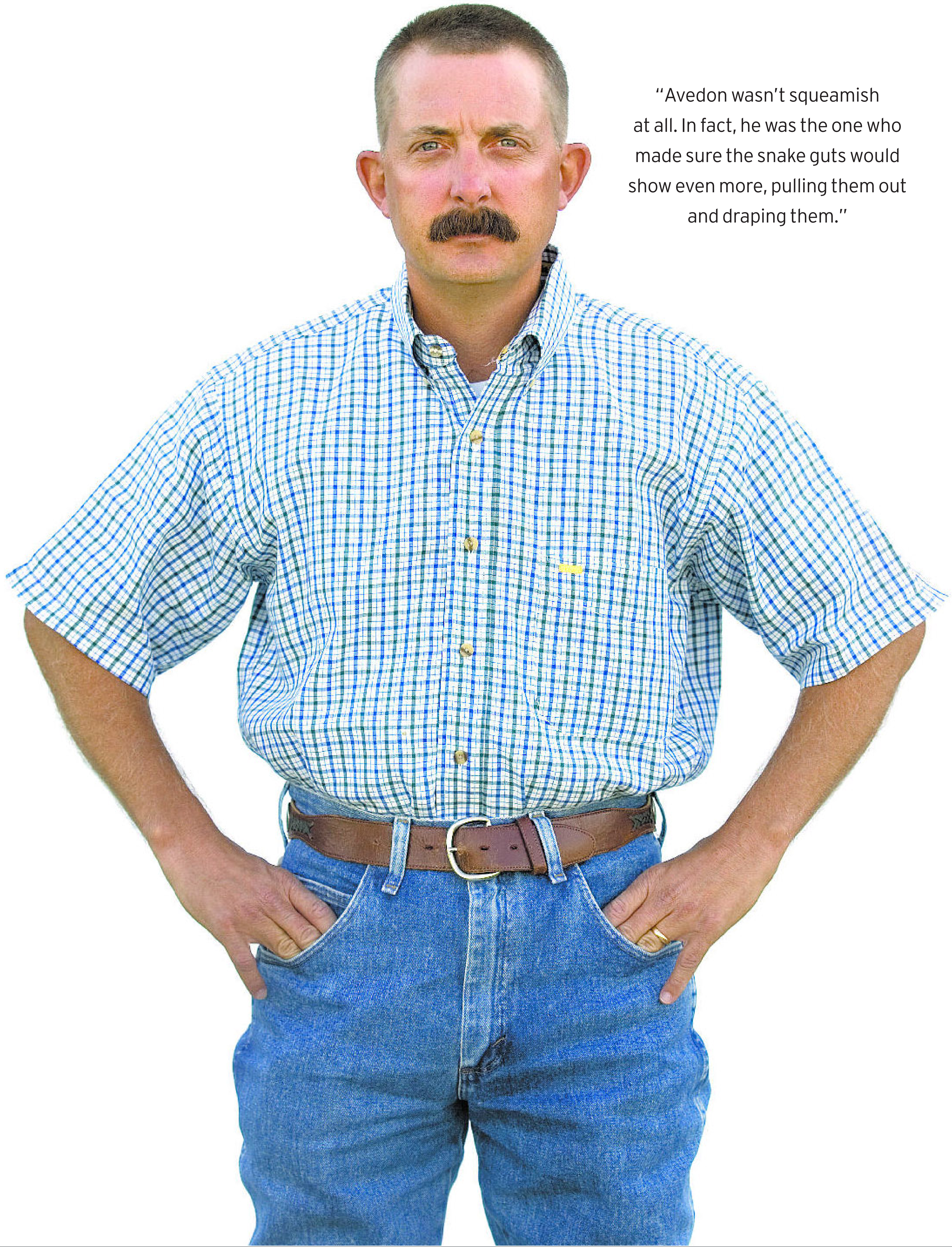
"Avedon wasn't squeamish at all," Fortin remembers. "In fact, he was the one who made sure the snake guts would show even more, pulling them out and draping them. He also made sure I put that bloody apron back on. I think he really was going for the blood and guts."

Taking in the picture today, Fortin – a father of two and rabid NASCAR fan who seems primed to skin another snake, clad in his blue jeans, leather belt and boots – can't help but compare his first impressions of the photo to how he feels about it today.

"When I first saw my picture along with all the others," he says, "I realized that Avedon's vision of the West was not more of the cowboys, cattle and horses portrait in my mind – but rather he was after workers.

"Now when I look at it, I see an angry little boy, a 13-year-old who to me looks like he's kind of mad at the world. But I realize now that when you look at what Avedon got in all of his pictures, it was a sternness in everybody's face. Since mine was one of the earliest he shot, I like to think my expression helped lead to the look he wanted to capture. . . . I'm very proud of this picture."

"Avedon wasn't squeamish at all. In fact, he was the one who made sure the snake guts would show even more, pulling them out and draping them."



MARY WATTS, 49, FACTORY WORKER
TRICIA BERRY, 30, SECRETARY

SWEETWATER, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, SEPTEMBER 2, 2005

Mary Watts, factory worker, and her niece Tricia Steward
Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79

© 1979 THE ESTATE OF RICHARD AVEDON

Mary Watts' earliest memories of growing up in Sweetwater revolved around family and loyal churchgoing with her mother and grandmother.

Weekends were an ideal time for Watts to bond with her 4-year-old niece, Tricia, something she did often while taking her on shopping excursions or trips to the movies, even the circus. On Saturday, March 10, 1979, the 23-year-old Watts took her family's first grandchild to the Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup.

Twenty-six years later, Watts still remembers many of the details from that blustery day. She recalls that not long after both she and Tricia had exhausted themselves riding the local Tilt-A-Whirl, they shoehorned themselves into a teeming Nolan County Coliseum to enjoy the pandemonium of the snake roundup.

Out of nowhere, a woman named Laura Wilson tapped Mary on the arm. Would she and Tricia consent to having their picture taken by Richard Avedon?

"I remember saying, 'Oh, why not,' even though I had never heard of him," recalls Watts, who, when Wilson approached, had Tricia perched on her shoulders, affording her the best view of the snake pit.

Wilson led Watts and her niece to Avedon's makeshift photo studio. Watts has a vivid recollection of Avedon's glasses and just how softly he spoke, making only the subtlest of suggestions about how to pose.

"I still remember him saying that I should think about a really pleasant day, perhaps out by a lake," she recalls. "I certainly know that he didn't want a happy expression."

Tricia's wide-eyed mien is due, according to Watts, to the nearby presence of a trash can crammed full of ornery rattlers agitating to get loose.

Today, at 30, Tricia Berry – nee Steward, married and the mother of two – remembers her Sweetwater youth as being marked by a certain level of poverty. Her family dwelled in a run-down house, had a barely running Buick, and her clothes were garage-sale vintage.

"It was a time where I would not get any new shoes until my old ones were pretty holey," she recalls.

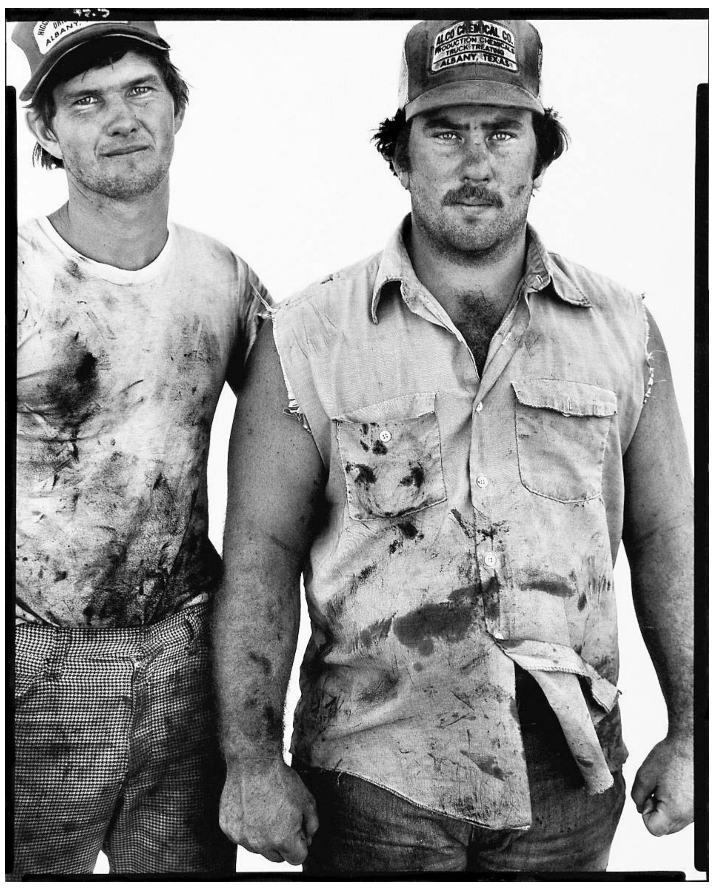
Looking at the picture today, Watts' first reaction is one of almost incredulous modesty.

"I now remember thinking back then, 'Why would anyone want to take my picture? I'm just plain Jane,' " says Watts. "And then it turned out to be one of the highlights of my life. Everybody has their 15 minutes of fame and that was mine."

As for Tricia, the picture immediately triggers an almost visceral recollection of "that ugly, '70s-style garage-sale shirt" she posed in. "And the picture also reminds me that my face, especially my nose, were all covered with cotton candy, and my hair was really windblown – kind of pitiful. I was first smiling real big because when you're a kid you smile for your picture, but he told me not to smile."

"I'm now very proud of this picture," says Watts, who over the years has collected a box full of Avedon-related memorabilia, including the *Vogue* issue in which he paired the actress Nastassja Kinski and a suggestively coiled snake. "It's so funny looking at it to realize that if our hair had been neater and our clothes had been neater, we probably wouldn't have been picked for the picture. Richard was looking for hard-working people – a little different people."

"I now remember thinking back then, 'Why would anyone want to take my picture?' " says Mary Watts, seated left. "I'm just plain Jane."



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Stan Riley, James Law, oil field workers
Albany, Texas, 6/10/79

JAMES LAW, 47, PROPANE COMPANY OWNER

ALBANY, TEXAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE STAR-TELEGRAM, SEPTEMBER 3, 2005

It was all but preordained that James Law would forge a life for himself from the rich oil and gas reserves of Texas. Born in Abilene but a loyal son of Albany, he spent much of his youth playing baseball, dove hunting and creek fishing. But throughout those seemingly carefree days, Law was an astute observer of his father's career as an oil and gasoline dealer and rancher.

A student at Texas Tech, first majoring in petroleum engineering before finally settling on animal science, Law was not a particularly dedicated student. "I like to say that I crammed four years into six at school," quips Law, who would return home from college every summer looking to land any menial oil-and-gas job he could find.

On a wiltingly hot June day in 1979, Law and his longtime friend Stan Riley were clocking many hours as roustabouts for the C.E. Jacobs Co. when they were instructed to report to the warehouse. Grease-smeared and clad in a blue denim work shirt, its cut-off sleeves accenting his trunklike arms, Law had been handpicked by Richard Avedon to pose for one of his pictures.

"I didn't know Richard from Adam," recalls Law. "He just herded us to a certain spot in the back of the warehouse, took his few pictures, then loaded up and left. There was almost no small talk. He just shook our hands, said 'Thank you,' and sent us on our way."

Law's encounter with one of the world's most revered photographers lasted all of 30 minutes. The impact Avedon's image had on the footloose 20-year-old was far more enduring.

Seeing it enlarged and mounted at the Amon Carter's 1985 exhibition, Law "suddenly started to feel humbled by being included in this collection." What he remembers most vividly is how, taking in Avedon's images – made up largely of blue-collar workers, including himself, wearing the premature ravages of aging on their charred faces and grease-stained coveralls – shook him out of his youthful complacency.

"Seeing myself and the other photos at the exhibition," recalls Law, "I decided I had to do something with my college degree. I just didn't want the rest of my life to be like what I saw in those photos. Looking at the other folks – many in their 40s to 60s, and seeing their expressions, beaten down in that blue-collar way – I just wanted to see better things for my life."

On a recent bone-dry hot Saturday morning in Albany, Law sits in the cluttered shedlike office of the propane company that bears his name. Taking in the Avedon picture now, Law – who has added gold-framed glasses to his robust look – is again reminded of how determined he became to advance beyond the purely menial aspect of the oil-and-gas field.

"This picture really reminds me of the toughness of the job and how, when I used to get within 2 feet of something that was oily, greasy and dirty, I would just *have* to get dirty," recalls Law. "I also see in the photo someone struggling to make it to the next paycheck by holding down a job that he is not really satisfied with. That oil-field job was hard and nasty work."

Law pauses, then brings some levity to this moment of reminiscing: "Looking at this picture now, I realize all the hair I had and how much better shape I was in."

News researcher Marcia Melton contributed
to this feature package.

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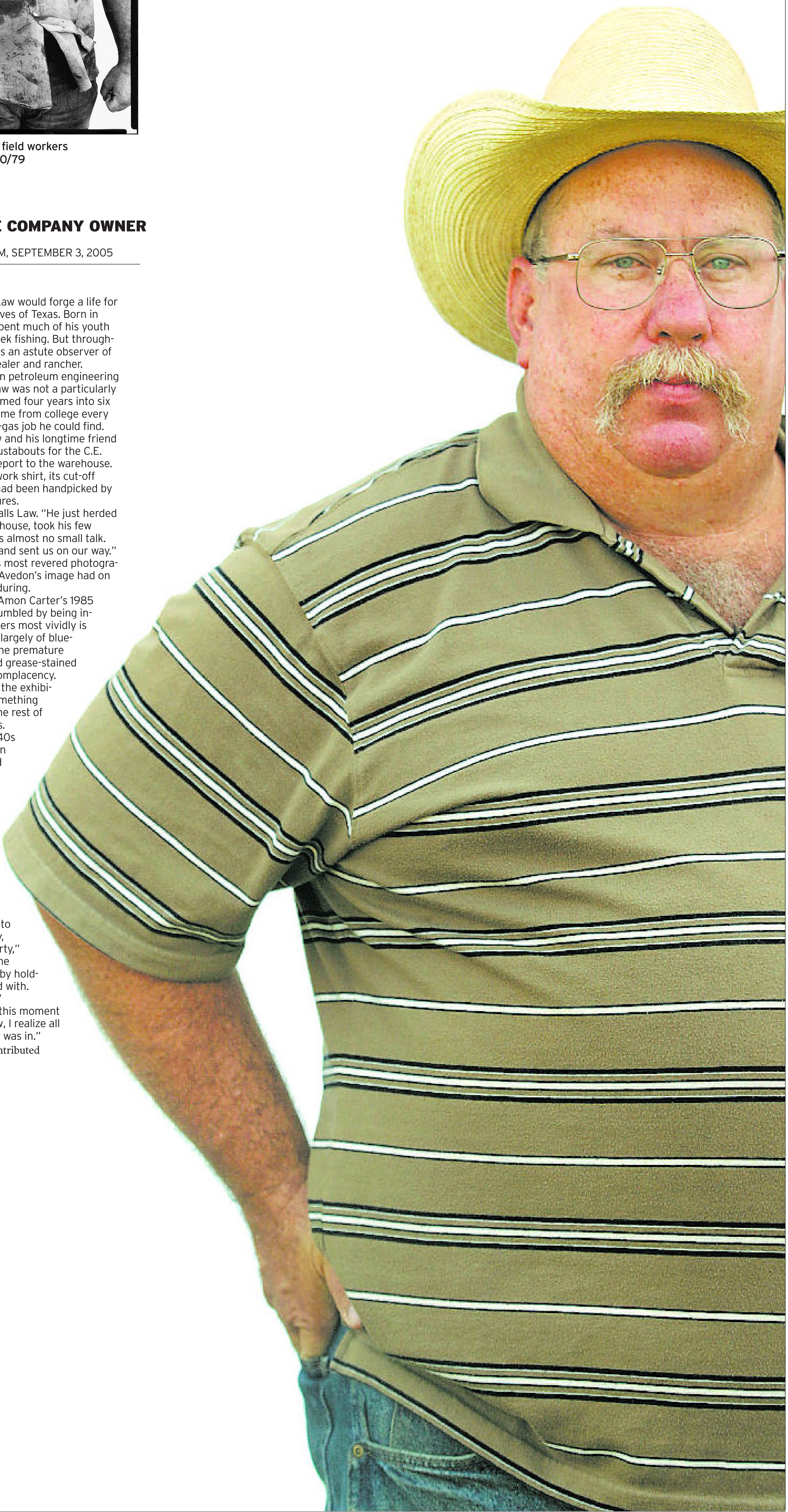
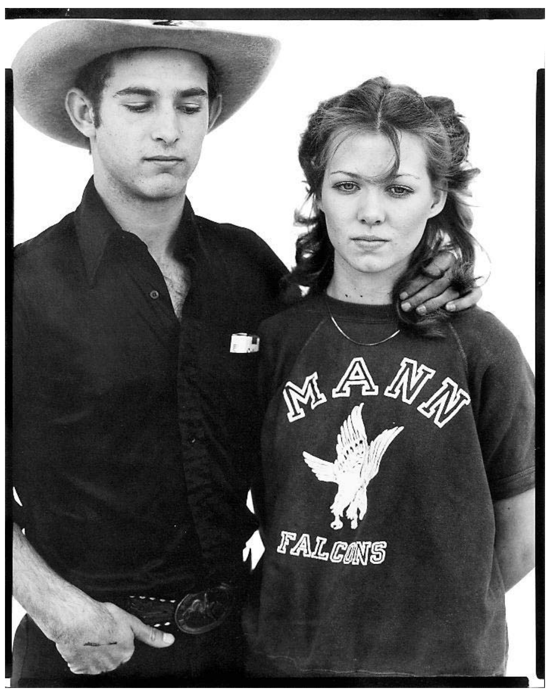


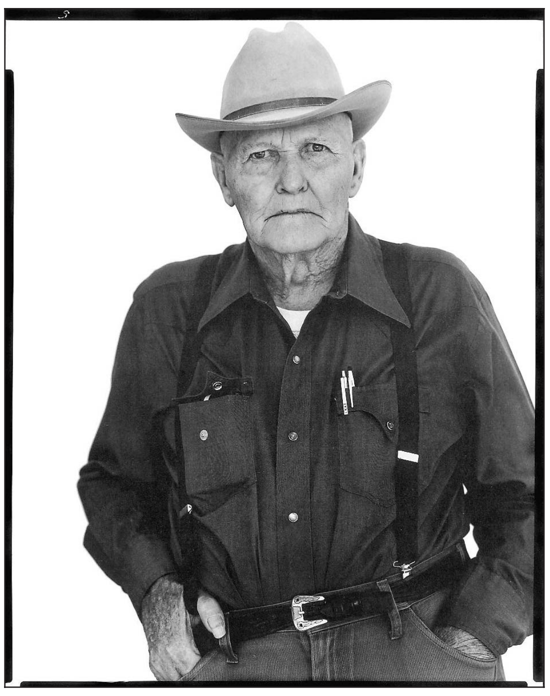
Avedon's lost stars

When bridging a chasm of 25 years in the hopes of finding Richard Avedon's 18 Texas subjects, tenacious phone work is required. But for every successful contact, frustrating dead ends can abound. The Bexar County Jail is no longer hosting either Jesus Cervantes or Manuel Heredia. Peggy Daniels has long since left her cash register in Giddings. And dozens of calls to every Lopez in Sweetwater and Morrison in Albany could not turn up either a gypsum miner named Jimmy or an oil-field worker named "Bubba." Here, then, are the rest of the Texans who caught Avedon's eye a quarter of a century ago but who managed to elude our search.

– Andrew Marton

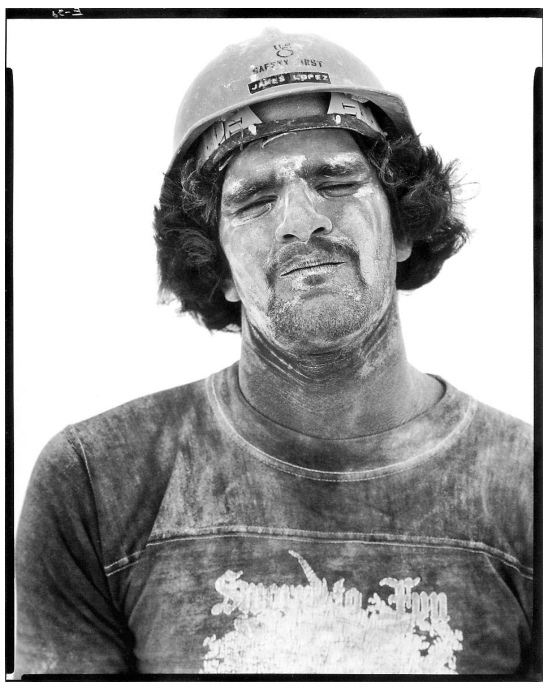


Russell Laird, Tammy Baker, seventeen year olds
Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79

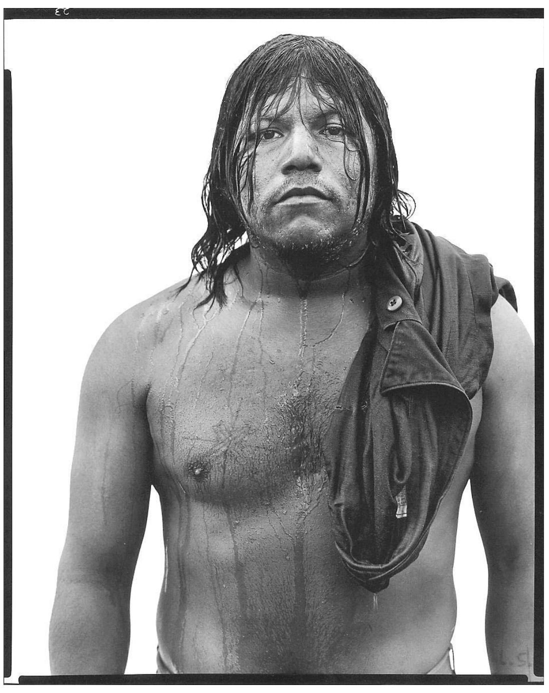


A.L. Bean, cotton farmer
Sweetwater, Texas, 3/10/79

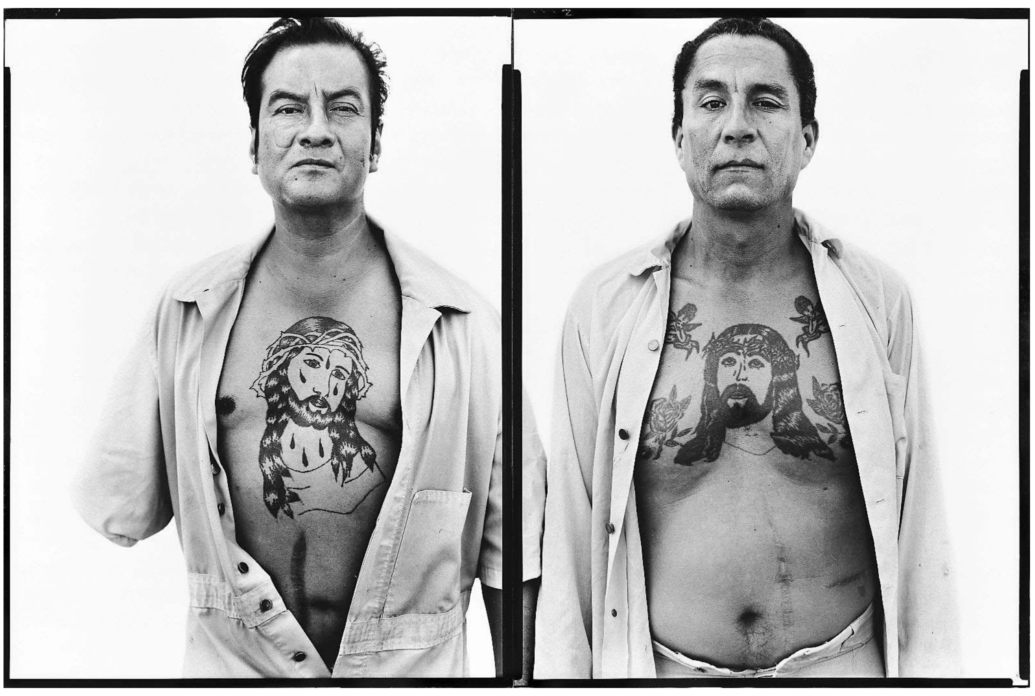
Bubba Morrison, oil field worker
Albany, Texas, 6/10/79



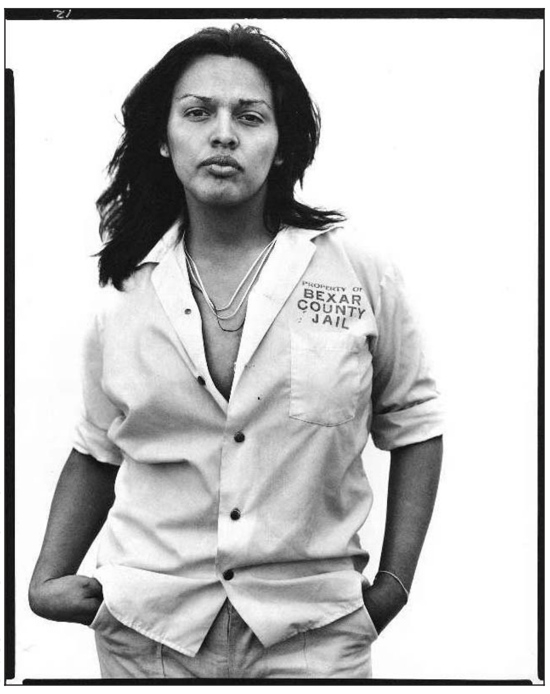
Jimmy Lopez, gypsum miner
Sweetwater, Texas, 6/15/79



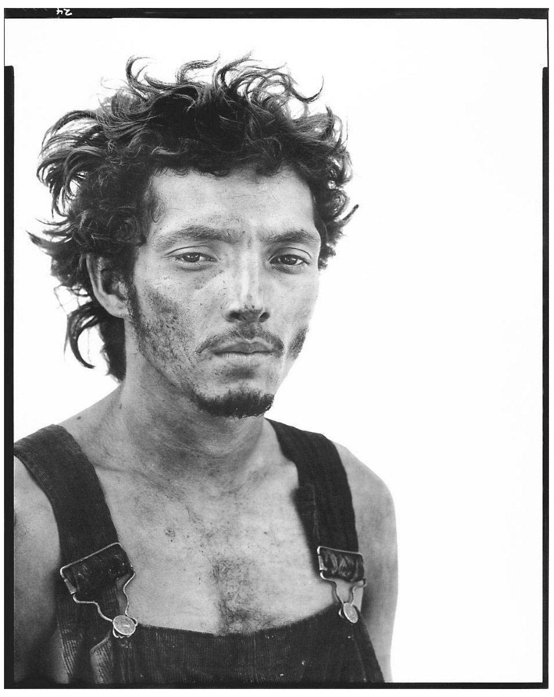
Unidentified migrant worker
Eagle Pass, Texas, 12/10/79



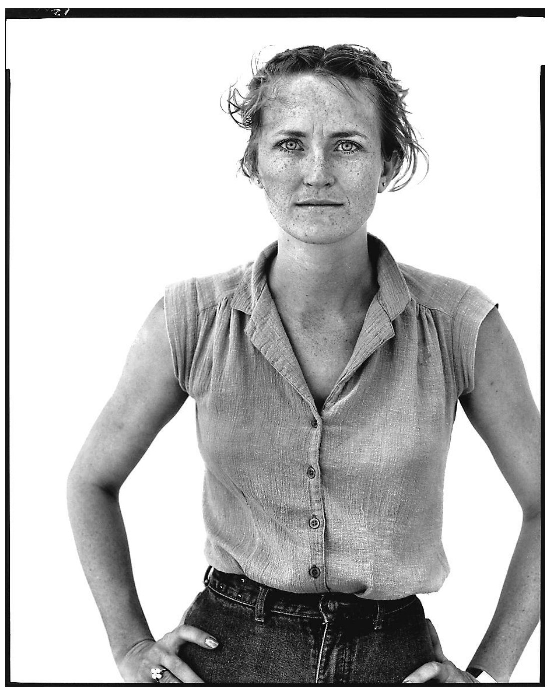
Jesus Cervantes, Manuel Heredia, prisoners
Bexar County Jail, San Antonio, Texas, 6/5/80



Robert Gonzalez, prisoner
Bexar County Jail, San Antonio, Texas, 6/5/80



Roberto Lopez, oil field worker
Lyons, Texas, 9/28/80



Peggy Daniels, cashier
Giddings, Texas, 5/7/81

Petra Alvarado, factory worker
El Paso, Texas, on her birthday, 4/22/82

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