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D700 Project Paper: Realism
Wells Street Photographic Documentary
My realist art project is a photographic documentary of Wells Street and its neighborhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Wells Street is one of the most historic areas in the city of Fort Wayne, but has largely been overlooked because of the working class character of the residents of the area. That has finally begun to change under the influence of local business owners who have been fixing up their buildings, and who have successfully petitioned the city government to invest in the infrastructure of Wells Street.

**Photography: The Realist Art**

Realism has been an important motive in photography from the beginning of the medium’s history in the early 19th century. Photography’s inventors were painters in France and Britain who sought a way to make pictures that were more detailed and faithful to the reality that they saw in front of them when they drew and painted.

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre were familiar with an artists’ tool known as the camera obscura. This was a box that used a pinhole or a glass lens to project an image onto a ground glass surface. Artists would trace the image onto paper placed on top of the glass. This device, invented during the renaissance and improved in the 18th century after lenses could be produced to replace the dim pinholes used by earlier versions, made it easy for artists to draw complex scenes quickly.

Advances in the science of chemistry in the late 18th century brought about the discovery that some chemical compounds are sensitive to light. By the 1820s, artists such as Niépce in France and chemists such as William Henry Fox Talbot in England had finally realized the longstanding dream of capturing the realistic image produced by the
camera obscura’s lens in a way that was much more detailed than any handmade drawing could be.

Photography quickly came to be used to document the world. Early photographers documented places that few Europeans and Americans were able to visit in the era before the large airliner made travel to places like Egypt and India within reach of ordinary people. This opened the minds of people who had little knowledge of other cultures by showing them the people, architecture, religion, and way of life of non-European peoples. Photographers of the American Civil War, such as Matthew Brady and his employees, dispelled the myth of glamour that surrounded war by photographing the dead on the battlefield.

Photographers also photographed their own cities and neighborhoods. French photographer Eugene Atget spent the last decade of the 19th century photographing buildings, streets, and people in Paris. This was a time when many old neighborhoods were being demolished to make way for more modern housing and commercial buildings. He worked in obscurity, his work unknown until the 1920s when American photographer Bernice Abbott got to know the then-retired Atget after becoming his next-door neighbor. After his death in 1927, she took Atget’s negatives to the United States. She printed the negatives and arranged for them to be exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, where the original glass negatives and Bernice Abbott’s prints from them still reside.1 Today the more than 10,000 photographs that Eugene Atget made of Paris in the last three decades of the 19th century are regarded as a priceless record of a place that has largely disappeared.

1 http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/Eugene__Atget/A/
In the 20th century, photography would become even more important as a realistic documentary art. In the early 1930s, as Nazi persecution of Germany’s Jewish population began, Roman Vishniac took up the camera to preserve the memory of the unique culture of eastern Europe’s Jewish communities. Vishniac was born in Russia in 1897 and fled to Germany in 1918 after the Communist Revolution. After Hitler’s rise to power, Vishniac spent about 5 years traveling between his home in Berlin and the various Jewish communities in Poland. He photographed Jewish life in big city ghettos and in rural Jewish villages. Unlike most other European countries, where most Jews were urban professionals, Polish Jews were largely farmers and poor laborers. The culture of small town rural Jews and the old urban ghettos was destroyed completely during the Holocaust. The 2000 negatives that Vishniac managed to save when he and his family fled to the United States in 1940 are considered by many historians to be one of the most important visual records of Jewish life in eastern Europe.²

A more recent documentary photographer whose work has influence mine is David Plowden. Plowden, who was concerned over the death of small town life in the Midwest and the plains states, traveled through the rural United States photographing stores, churches, homes, schools, and people in small-town America from the 1960s to the 1990s.³ The subject of Plowden’s work is most familiar to me. He photographed the United States, and many of his photographs were made in and near Indiana. Many of them were made during my lifetime. Many of the places that he photographed are gone.

³ [http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitallibrary/plowden.html](http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitallibrary/plowden.html)
Realism in My Work

Realism and documentary have been very important in my own work. For most of the last sixteen years, I have sought out and photographed the commonplace things that people take for granted and overlook in the areas where I have lived. I have photographed small towns, farms, churches, signs, and people. As with Plowden’s work, many of the houses and other buildings that I have photographed have since been demolished.

I have also done quite a bit of landscape photography in northeast Indiana. Lifelong residents of this part of the country often state that the landscape here is featureless and unexceptional. To prove them wrong, I have sought out and photographed beautiful landscape scenes in rural areas of Allen County.

*Figure: A view looking east from Branstrator Road in Allen County, Indiana.*
I am often told by Fort Wayne residents, upon seeing one of my photographs on exhibit, that they have driven past the place for years without noticing its existence. Others will compliment a photograph and ask me where I found such an interesting building. I’ll tell them the location of the photograph’s subject, and they’ll react with surprise because it is in their neighborhood or hometown. The commonplace is ignored, yet there is beauty in the ordinary. I bring that beauty to the attention of the viewer.

![Ft. Wayne Fire Dept. Station #10. Corner of Anthony Blvd. and Crescent Ave. One of the firemen told me that one of his colleagues got bored one day and painted the face on this chair, which sits in front of the station.](image)

I have also met and photographed many very interesting people whose lives would have passed un-noticed had I not documented them with my photographs. One of the most interesting was Richard Youse, an 87 year old man that I encountered in the winter of 2000. I was driving east on Barkley Road in southeast Allen County, near the town of Hoagland.
My intended destination was an abandoned one-room schoolhouse that I had discovered on Barkley Road a few months earlier. As I drove east from Hoagland, I noticed a roof and chimney sticking up above a stand of trees to the south on Emenhiser Road. The roof looked bad, the house had to be abandoned. I decided to go there and look around instead of going to the less interesting schoolhouse that I originally had set out to photograph.

I stopped at the house, which definitely appeared to be abandoned. I hung my camera bag from my shoulder, and walked around the house with my tripod in hand. As I went behind the house, I was surprised to see an elderly man sitting in a plastic patio chair with a cat on his lap! The old man told me his name and story. He was 87 years old, never married, and had no children.

He lived alone in the ruined old house with 15 cats that patrolled the yard to keep mice and snakes at bay. The house was very old, but he didn’t know for sure how old. His parents bought it in the 1920s, and he thought the house had probably been built in the mid 19th century because of its manner of construction. The house had some of the siding missing, revealing the wooden frame and insulation inside the wall. The frame was...
made of heavy rough-hewn wooden beams. The spaces between the beams of wood were filled with woven sticks covered in dried mud!

Mr. Youse died in January, 2005 and his house was bulldozed. All that remains today is the old metal windmill tower that stood in the yard behind the house. The field that surrounded the yard has been expanded over the former yard by the farm’s current owner; leaving the windmill tower standing like an island in the middle of the plowed field and obliterating the evidence that a home had stood there for more than a century.

The power of documentary photography to preserve the memory of people and places that no longer exist was demonstrated in a personal way when two members of Richard Youse’s family, a niece and a nephew, contacted me at the beginning of 2010.
They had been looking for more information about their uncle on the internet. A Google search of his name brought them to my website and the photographs that I had made of Mr. Youse nearly a decade earlier. Few photographs had been made of him by his family, so they expressed their appreciation for my work.

**Wells Street**

Wells Street and the neighborhood that surrounds it is one of the most interesting places in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I had long planned to photograph it, but other projects and my move to New Mexico kept me from getting started. I finally began working on Wells Street at the end of the summer, around the beginning of the fall semester, 2010.

Wells Street is named for William Wells, a military officer who was important in the history of the Midwest. He was kidnapped by the Miami tribe as a child, and as a young man he fought on the side of the Miami against the American Army in several battles, including the defeat of General St. Clair’s troops in 1791 near the location of the modern town of Fort Recovery, Ohio. He later joined the U.S. Army under Anthony Wayne, the founder of Fort Wayne. Wells served for a time as the Federal Government’s Indian Agent to the Miami and lived in the new town that grew around the fort that General Wayne ordered built near the place where the St. Mary’s and St. Joseph rivers come together to form the Maumee. He died during the war of 1812 while leading a group of Miami warriors in support of American troops under British siege at Fort Dearborn near the modern city of Chicago.4

For most of my life, the Wells Street area has been a poor working class area full of rundown houses and dilapidated storefronts. I have noticed a lot of changes on Wells

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4 http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=403
Street in the last couple of years. Many of the storefronts have been fixed up and new businesses have moved in. A group of business owners formed the Wells Corridor Business Group. The group, led by Great Panes Glass Company owner and local artist Judi Wire, lobbied the city government to improve the infrastructure along Wells Street. New sidewalks, signs, bus stop shelters, bicycle racks, and benches were installed along both sides of the street along the oldest section of the road between the bridge and the former YWCA campus.

Wells Street begins just north of downtown at the bridge over the St. Mary’s River. It continues north to Lima Road just south of Lima’s intersection with Coliseum Blvd. I have chosen to concentrate on the oldest section of the street, the area that was improved by the city. The northern section of Wells is a mostly industrial area dominated
by the Allen County Juvenile Justice Center and several industrial businesses, including a trucking company and an Edy’s Ice Cream plant. The older southern section, with its old houses and small locally owned retailers, bars, and restaurants, is much more interesting and historically significant.

![Image of Paleteria La Michoacana, the Mexican ice cream shop on Wells Street. La Michoacana is a popular brand of ice cream in Mexico.](image)

Two trends that I have seen recently on Wells Street are an influx of Hispanic businesses and businesses catering to creative people. There are three businesses on Wells Street owned by Mexican immigrants. Don Chavas Mexican Grill is located in an old building that once housed an American Legion post and later a succession of bars. The Hispanic owners have extensively remodeled the once dilapidated old building, which now looks like a new building. The Indiana Mexican Panaderia (bakery) occupies the former Osborne Harley-Davidson building. I cannot remember what was in the
building next to the panaderia that is now the home of Paleteria La Michoacana ice cream parlor. I believe that it was abandoned when I moved to New Mexico at the beginning of 2006. The Paleteria was there when I returned to Indiana.

There are several newer businesses catering to a more creative group of customers, including the Bean coffee shop and its sister business, Cloud-9 Hookah Lounge. The two shops are located next door in a building on the southern end of the street just north of the old iron truss bridge, which is now a pedestrian bridge in a park-like setting. The Brewer’s Art Supply, a store that sells beer brewing equipment and supplies for home hobbyists, recently moved into the old brick building that was long home to Artistry In Ink Tattoo. Judi Wire’s stained glass studio, the Great Panes Glass Company, and Sam Hyde’s used bookstore, Hyde Brothers, both have longer histories. Both Sam and Judi have been active in promoting the renewal of Wells Street.
Wells Street still has a lot of the working class bars, tattoo shops, pawnshops, tobacco stores and junk shops that long characterized the neighborhood. Packrat’s Mini Flea Market is a small store that is a treasure trove for collectors of Lego building sets. He has over a thousand complete sets, many in the original boxes. In addition, he has hundreds of thousands of individual Lego blocks and several thousand Lego Minifigures (the little lego people that come in many of the sets). He uses his store to obtain sets from customers who sell them to him, and he sells his duplicate sets in the store. My son, who is crazy about Lego, has several sets that we bought from “Packrat”, as the owner insists on being called.

Burger Dairy Store’s parking lot. The store, which has been on Wells for many years, started as a convenience store, but is now mainly a discount tobacco shop.

In addition to photographing businesses, I have sought out details that show the character of the neighborhood. As in many working-class neighborhoods, God and
country are important to the residents of the Wells Street area. Many of the houses have American flags displayed alongside symbols of Christian faith, such as crucifixes, the Ten Commandments, and the Virgin Mary. There is a storefront church that also repairs and sells appliances. The church actually operates the appliance repair and sales business to support a charitable ministry that provides free appliances to the poor. Money earned repairing and selling appliances to paying customers is used to buy broken appliances that they repair and give to needy families in Fort Wayne.

![Storefront Church and Appliance Repair Shop]

Living Faith Ministries holds Christian services in this storefront that also serves as a used appliance store. They give free appliances to needy families, a charitable cause supported by offering sales and service to the public.

A documentary project of this type is really a long-term commitment. I have spent years on similar projects, many of which are still in progress. The few months that constitute a university semester have allowed me to merely begin a documentation that will eventually consist of hundreds of photographs and a much deeper presentation of the people and places that make up this fascinating and historically significant urban area.
The 27 photographs\(^5\) that I now have completed are merely a brief overview of a complex story. I will continue photographing Wells Street as long as I continue to live in Fort Wayne, or until I feel that the story has been properly told.

\(^5\) I presented 26 photographs in class, but added one more a few days after my in-class presentation. The entire project can be seen on my website http://www.chriscrawfordphoto.com/fine_art/portfolio/wells-street/