

MADE OF STEEL

*Garages, Machine Shops,
and the Men Who Work There*

Brooks Jensen



Dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandfather
John D. Shaker
whose machine shop was the gateway to finding Made of Steel.

With more gratitude than I can ever express,
I thank the men who are made of steel.

Mr. Dollar
Joe Sasak
A. J. Dunne
Felix Muñoz
Kenny Heckman
Vernon Barrow
and all the others



My Grandfather, John D. Shaker
February 1941

Two-Bit Johnny

My Grandfather was known as “Two-Bit Johnny.” He found himself unemployed and hungry in the middle of the Great Depression. With only two-bits in his pocket, he purchased two used car batteries from a junk yard. Salvaging pieces from both of them, he made one good battery which he sold back to the junk yard for a profit.

From this “two-bit” beginning, he eventually built a successful automotive machine shop which he operated until he retired. I can still

smell his shop and hear his voice echo in the tall ceilings. He was as strong as his Armenian accent. From him I learned to love tools and the smell of fresh oil and grease and metal filings. I guess he also taught me to love the stories and manners of old, greasy, machine shop guys. I enjoy just hanging around and listening.

Joe Sasak, A.J. Dunne and the others seen here are the kinds of men whose choice of life dedicated them to steel and grease, work and



long hours. On the surface they toil. Look a bit more carefully and they build, they create, they solve, they re-solve, and they invent.

For some reason, most of these men I've met in my travels have had little formal education. At first, they may seem unintelligent; their intelligence just takes another form. They can visualize parts within metal, where you and I see only metal. They feel a way to build something and make it work, where you and I may only see the need. These men are visionaries — visionaries with an inclination to the practical and the useful.

While I photographed Joe Sasak, one of his neighbors came by to pick up a newly

repaired axle Joe had just re-welded. I looked closely for the weld line in the new sheen of ground metal and couldn't find it.

"Of course you can't find it. I wouldn't be no good welder if you could!" he said, and then spit to punctuate the comment.

"Old Joe, he can fix anything," the neighbor said. "He's been fixin' everything around here for as long as any of us can remember."

"Yeah darn, I have. And what are you guys gonna do when I croak?" He asked it as a practical question, not a philosophical one.

It's a good question.

Introduction

The photographs in this book span a couple decades of work. At the time, I had no idea I was working on a “project,” nor that the concept was rooted in my childhood memories. I simply photographed these men and their shops because I couldn’t *not* photograph them. Sometimes, listening to the whispers of our inner Muse is wise.

The first photographs in this project were done in Washington state. The largest collection was from my home state, Oregon. I traveled quite a bit on business during those years, often hauling my 2¼x3¼ Arca Swiss monorail camera, light meter, film, and tripod with me. I’d spend my weekends wandering the back roads where I’d stumble upon a machine shop or garage without even looking for one. The photographs from Texas, Kansas, and Indiana all come from such trips.

I’d introduce myself and talk about my Grandfather and the machine shop tool he invented called a “shoe pole tool.” A spark of recognition was common. “Oh, yeah, that was a good one. We used to have one around here and used it all the time. That was your grandfather, eh?” It was an ice-breaker that started many of these photographic sessions — often ending in dinner and swapping more stories.

It was on such a trip that I stumbled upon Joe Sasak. I thought I’d make a few photographs; I stayed for three days. A couple of years later, I returned for two more days. As I approached the shop on that second trip, Joe said, “You’re back. I thought you’d forgot about me.”

Years later, I received a phone call from Joe’s nephew. Joe had died, he explained, and as the executor of his will, he was doing an Internet search using “Joe Sasak” as the keyword. My photographs, unknown to the family, were in the results. It was one of the greatest joys of my photographic life to send each of Joe’s remaining family members a folio of prints from my days spent photographing Joe and his shop. He deserves his own section in this book. No, I’ll never forget Joe.

I married into a family of North Dakota farmers. I thought farming was planting and harvesting. I quickly learned that a big part of farming is keeping the machinery running. Every farm has a shop and every farmer is a bit of a machinist by necessity. Uncle Kenny fits in right well with the others in this project.

Washington



Dollar's Workbench

Port Townsend, Washington, 1982

Thank You, Mr. Dollar

It was a lousy day for attempting landscape photography and my efforts were decidedly soggy — both physically and emotionally. I threw in the towel — literally — and decided to head north into town. I'd never been to Port Townsend on the Olympic Peninsula, so I had no idea what I might find there. I hoped I might find a dry place a dripping photographer could warm up and perhaps even find a cup of cocoa. Off I went, feeling sour that photographing was likely over for the day. Little did I know that a decades-long project was about to begin.

Across the street from my window seat in the coffee shop, I could see Dollar's Garage. It didn't look much like a garage. In fact, it looked like more a store front, complete with generous display windows and a regu-

lar-sized front door. Inside the front window, I could just see an elderly but fit-looking man, leisurely reading the newspaper. Behind him was a dark blank that offered no hint of the "garage" one would have expected.

I can offer no explanation what drew me out of the coffee shop and across the street. I only know that I walked over and opened the door. Fate turned in an instant — and so did the entire direction of my photographic and art making life. It was the aroma of grease and oil, tools and machines that hooked me.

I introduced myself and started a conversation. He asked about my vest. I explained that I was a photographer.

"So, you're a photographer, are you? Lots to

photograph 'round these parts." I'm sure he meant the landscapes and water's edge of Puget Sound.

"Yes, there is. Would you mind if I took a few photographs in here?"

The newspaper lowered and he gave me an uncomfortably long look. "Why would you want to photograph in here?"

I had no idea — or I should say, I had no conscious idea. "It's dry," I said, as though that was excuse enough.

"You want I should turn on the lights?"

"That'd be helpful," I replied.

He reached over and flipped up the switch. In the back of the garage, hanging down from the ceiling at the end of two bare electrical cords, a couple of dim and grimy bulbs came to life. He lifted the newspaper back to reading height.

He peered, silently, over the top of his paper and watched while I set up the first compo-

sition, aiming my bulky view camera toward his tool bench. I pressed the cable release and tightened the set screw for the 20-minute exposure. "This will take about 20 minutes," I explained.

At one point in the afternoon, he got in his car and drove off, leaving me the place all to myself. I was impressed by his trust in a total stranger and thought it must be nice living in a small town like this.

When he returned, he said, "I 'spose every job's got its own tools," and went back reading the paper. Several hours later, I packed up my gear and thanked him for allowing me to work for so long. "Would you like me to send you a photograph?" I asked.

"I'd rather have a sandwich," he said. I returned with two and we chatted over lunch on the workbench. We'd become comfortable with one another.

Thus this project began in Mr. Dollar's garage. The rain and his permission to photograph opened the door to Made of Steel. I think about him often.

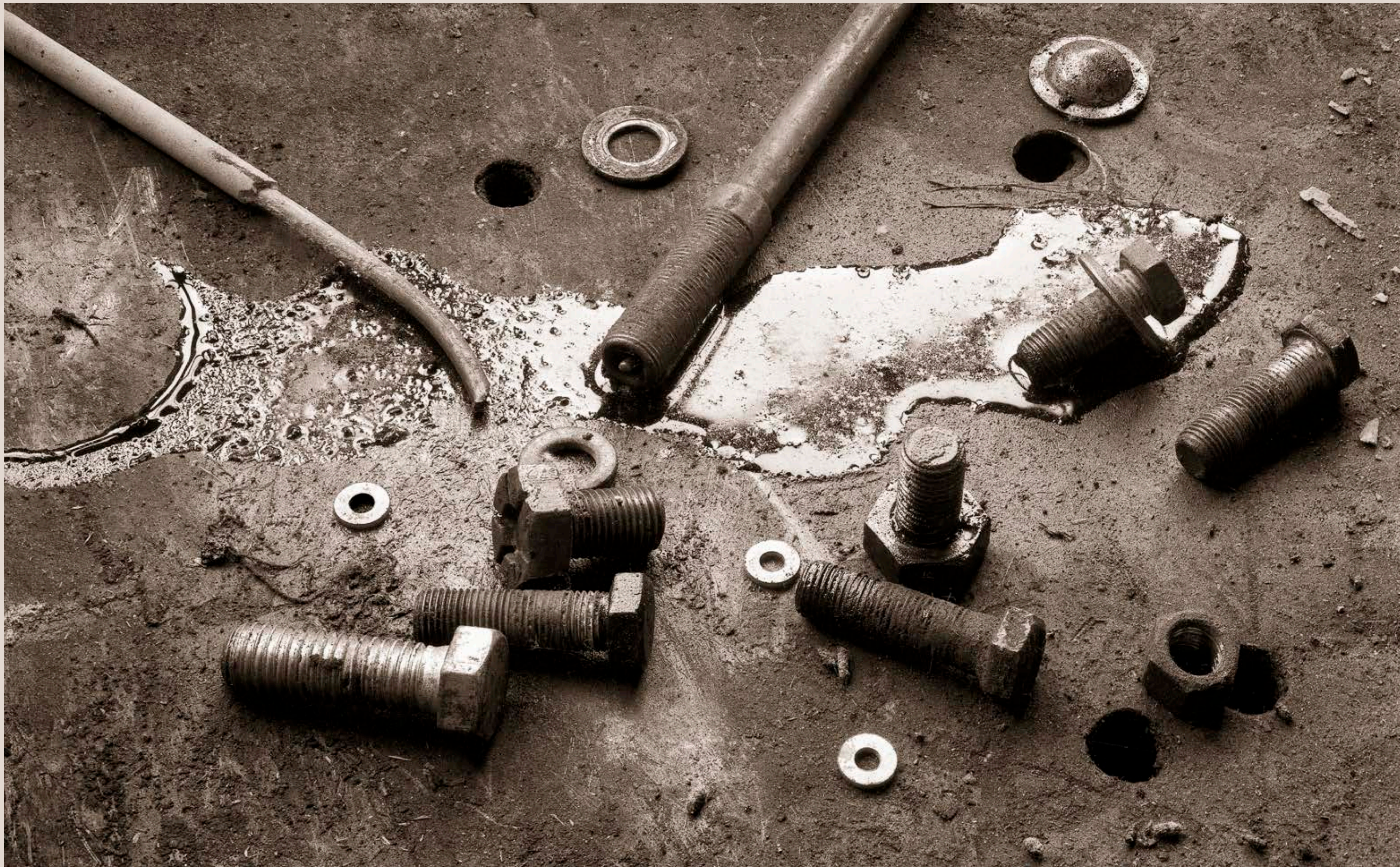




Seattle Junkyard

Seattle, Washington, 1986

I asked him if he owned the place. "No, but I'd sure like to. The owner's gone right now. I'm just hanging out here 'cuz I like it."



Bolts, Oil & Coffee Cup Ring

Wes Gibson's Garage, Thorp, Washington, 1988

"Coffee and oil," he proposed, "Two of the most important fluids of life."



The Lost Boot

Roslyn, Washington, 1988

“One of these days I’ll find the other one,” he said.
Then there was a long pause. “I mighta left it at the tavern.”



"Pensive Mood" Calendar

Hockinson, Washington, 1987

It says, "Lift Here." Her clothes are painted on a plastic overlay.



Flag & Lost License Plate

Wes Gibson's Garage, Thorp, Washington, 1988

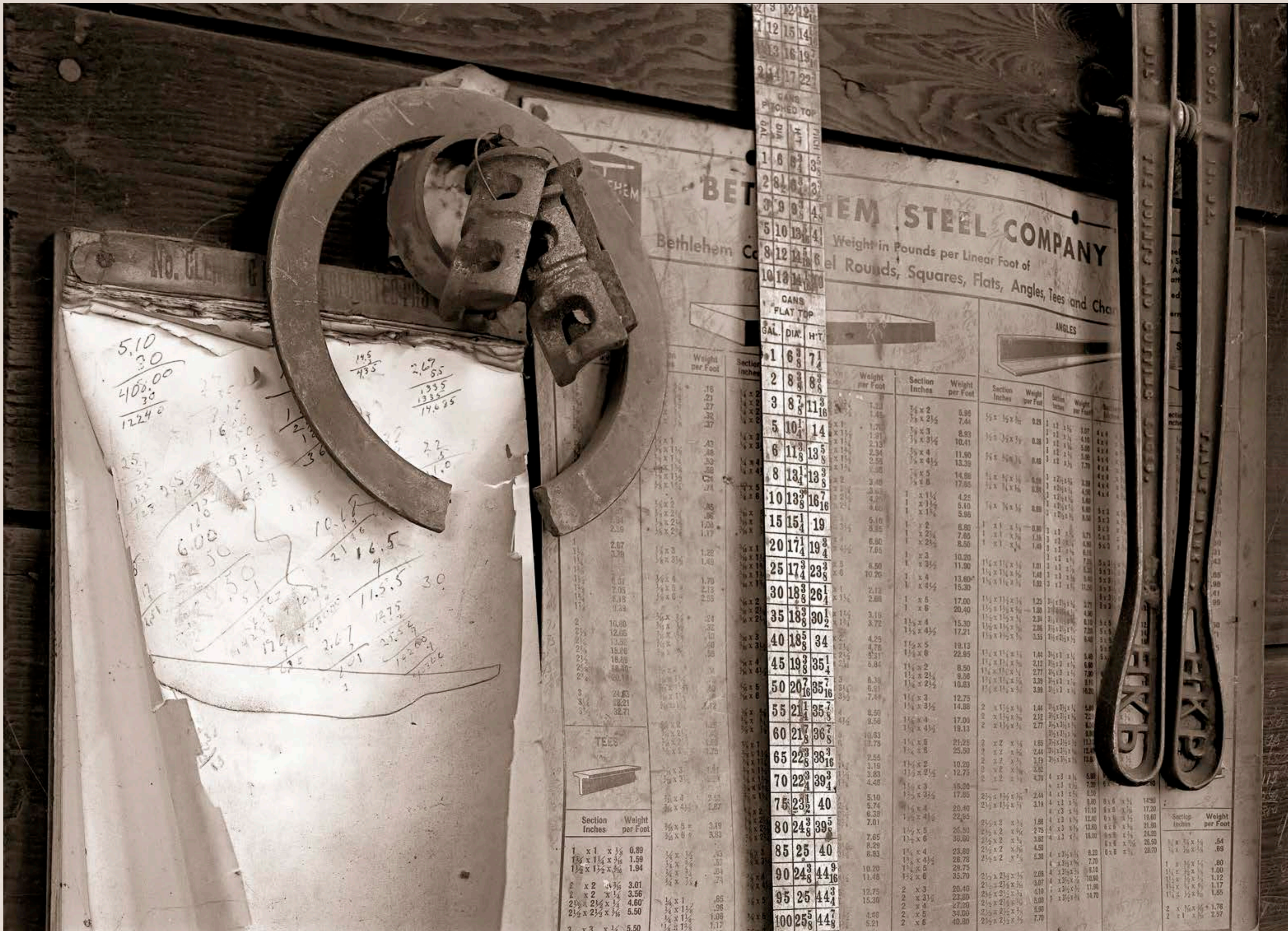
"My Dad and I are rebuilding a diesel out back.
I'm gonna be a trucker when I grow up, too."
Wes smiled and ruffled the boy's hair.



Cardboard Workbench

Hockinson, Washington, 1987

“Of course, it goes without saying that they don’t make nothin’ like they used to. A guy could fix the old stuff. Nowadays, ya can’t fix nuthin’. Ya just throw it away. The kids can’t even fix the old stuff. Wadda they gonna do when I croak?”



Scratch Pad

Hockinson, Washington, 1987

"They used to give me them conversion charts there for free. Not any more. Now I gotta pay for 'em little shits so I just use my noodle and figure it out for myself. That'll learn 'em."



Shell Premium

Battleground, Washington, 1990

“Everybody’s got their favorite, I guess. Me, I like Shell and Chevy’s. My brother’s a Ford and Richfield man. But then, he chews Red Man, too. He never did know nuthin’.”



Chucks

Ellensburg, Washington, 1986

I walked up with all my photo gear in hand. "What's your name?" he asked.
"Brooks," I said, "What's yours?" He said "Chuck."
Without thinking I asked "Do you mind if I photograph your chucks, Chuck?"
We looked at each other and both started to laugh.



Standing Drill Bits

Ellensburg, Washington, 1986

Two weeks after I photographed this metal shop, it burned to the ground. Welding sparks splattered on the wooden floor, they said.





Three Drills

Hockinson, Washington, 1987

He advised that a good drill would last me a lifetime. I suspect he was right.

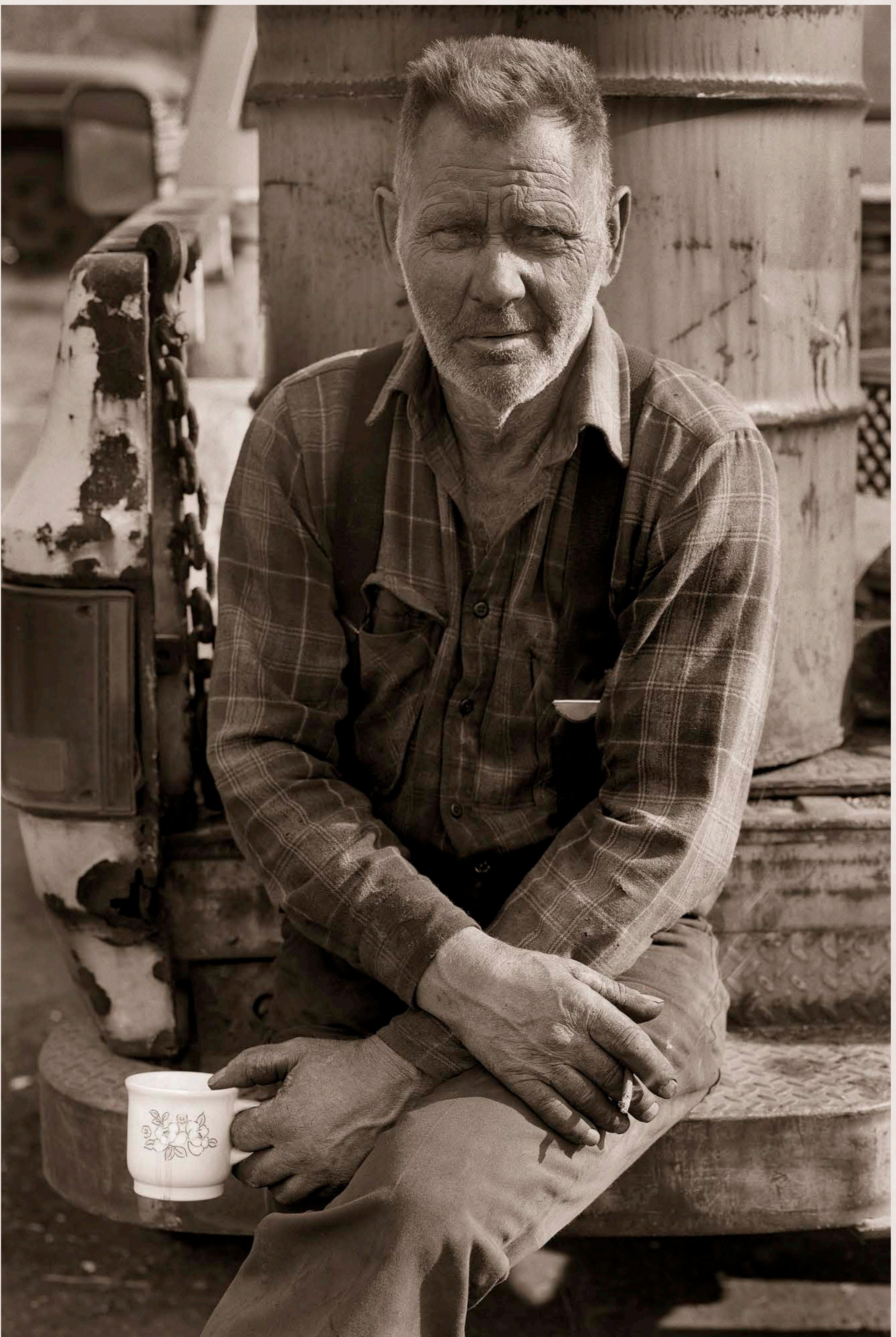


Pump Face

Mitchell, Oregon, 1986

"Ya cain't make no money pumping gas. I do like the smell of it, though."

Oregon



Metal Scrap Salvager

Warrenton, Oregon, 1990

He rolled a cigarette, spit, swore and then asked me if I wanted some tea.



Eat Cafe

Kent, Oregon, 1986

Forty miles to the south and 30 miles to the north there is nothing but sagebrush and dirt.
But here at the Eat Cafe is a meal you plan for, and don't mind the drive.



Kitchen Door at Frank's

Eastern Oregon, 1990

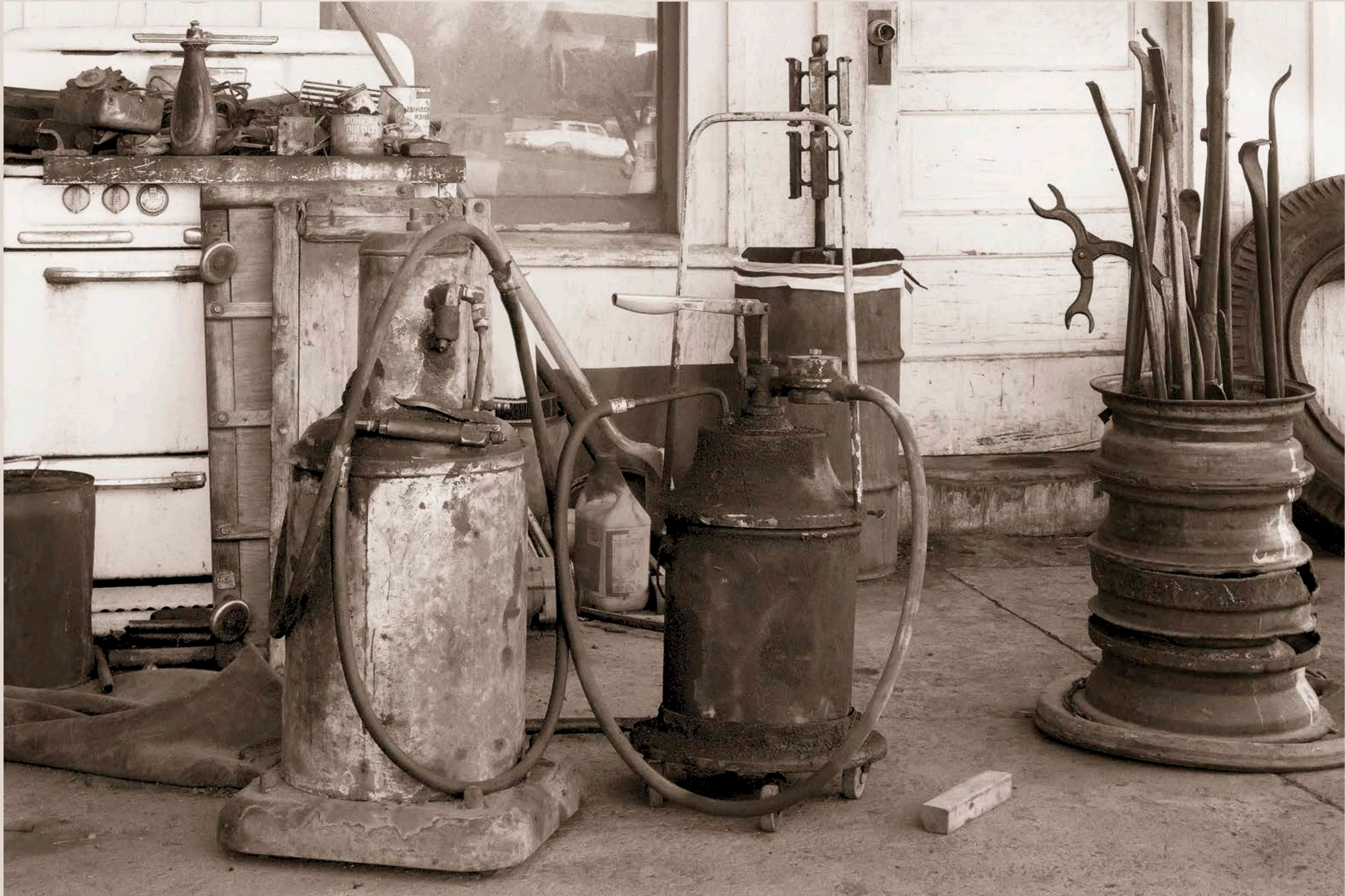
The garage/shop was just on the other side of his kitchen door. The odor was a strange mixture of bacon grease and axle grease.



Frank's Dresser

Eastern Oregon, 1990

While I was there, a neighbor stopped by to check up on Frank. In the other room, they started telling each other the raunchiest jokes I'd ever heard. I got to laughing so hard I could hardly focus the camera for the tears in my eyes.



The Service Bay

Long Creek, Oregon, 1988

Whistling is a fine art and this guy was as fine a whistler as I had ever heard.

It was a true concert and I found I didn't want to leave even though I was done photographing. He stopped just long enough to say "Bye" and picked up the tune without missing a beat. I could still hear him as I backed the car out.

I can still hear him right now.



Broken Window & Rags

Tygh Valley, Oregon, 1987

They looked vaguely like boxer shorts. I decided not to investigate more closely, but I did wonder why only *one* of the holes were plugged.



Brooms & Shovels

Banks, Oregon, 1989

I was all set up to photograph when he walked over with the push broom and placed it in the picture where you see it. "I thought it might add a nice touch" he said. He was right.



A. J. Dunne

Paisley, Oregon, 1987

Mr. Dunne sold Chevron products. He showed me his
50-year Dealership Plaque with pride.



The '38

Fuego, Oregon, 1990

"You seen my old '38 out back? Pretty soon I'm gonna fix her up and then you'll have somethin' to photograph."
He was 83 years old.



Better Than Paint

Grass Valley, Oregon, 1990

He explained that he'd started off priming it for a new paint job. But after he got it all ready, he got to looking at the patterns and decided he couldn't do any better so he just left it this way. I told him he was an artist and he laughed and slapped me on the back.

"That's a good one," he said.



A Great Car

Wheeler, Oregon, 1987

He said, "That was a great car. I wisht I'd never sold it."
It left me wondering why he still had the mirror, but I didn't ask.



Garage Door & Rope Lock

Paisley, Oregon, 1987

He walked up to me as I was photographing this door, but didn't say a thing. Finally, after several minutes he said, "We all know each other 'round here," smiled and walked back to the house without any other explanation.



Corner of Flemming's Garage

Grass Valley, Oregon, 1990

"Mostly I jes' use it now to store hay in."



Back of Flemming's Garage

Grass Valley, Oregon, 1990

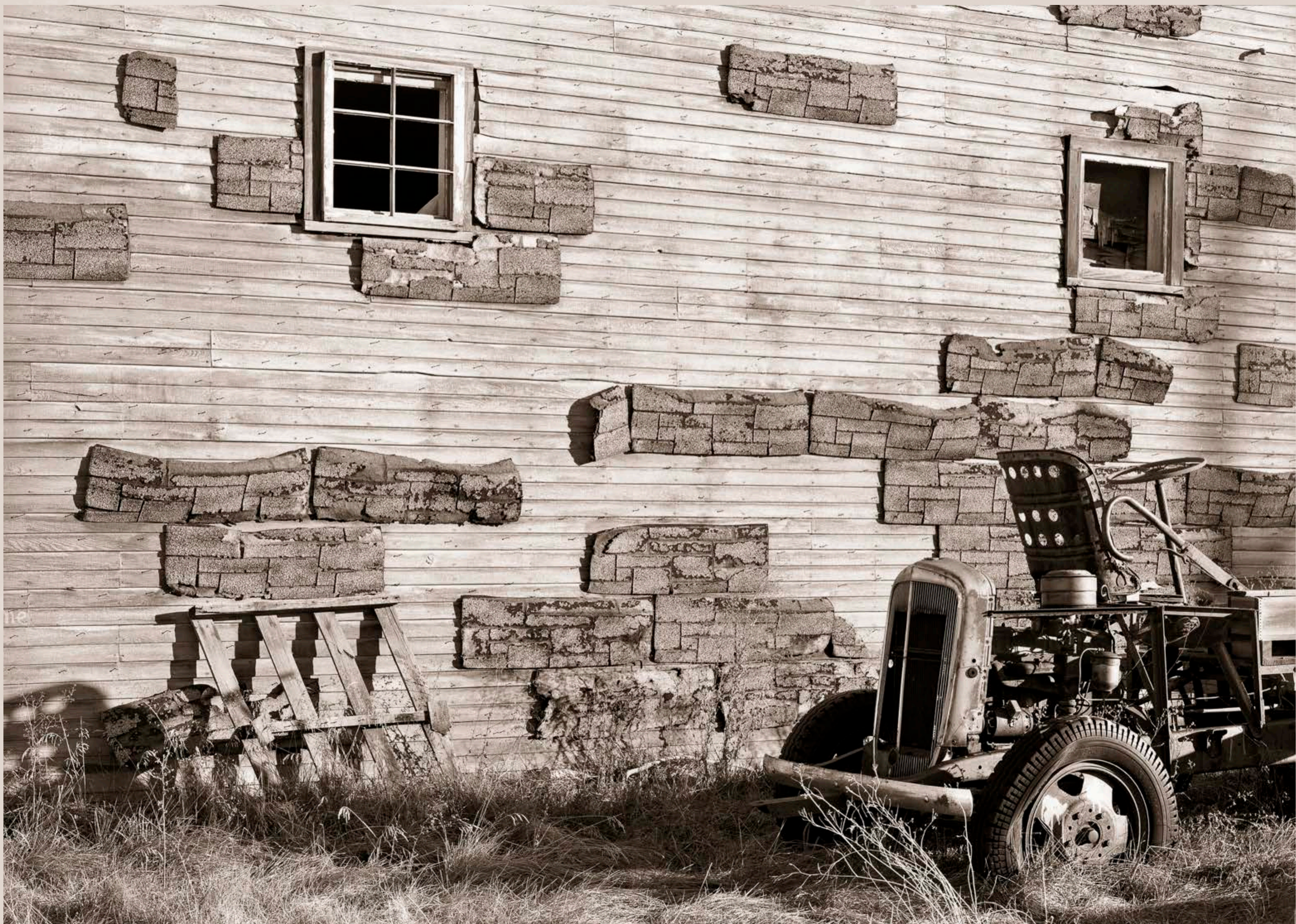
"Cars is a luxury. Trucks is fun. But tractors is a man's livelihood.
You hear?"



Man with a New Cowboy Hat

Grass Valley, Oregon, 1990

He couldn't hear a thing, but when I motioned that I wanted to photograph him, he pointed to his hat and smiled.



The Backwards Mobile

Long Creek, Oregon, 1989

I asked around for a couple of hours. No one could remember why he'd built this thing to go backwards, but the consensus was that "he was just that kinda guy."



Melvin and Susie

Eugene, Oregon, 1990

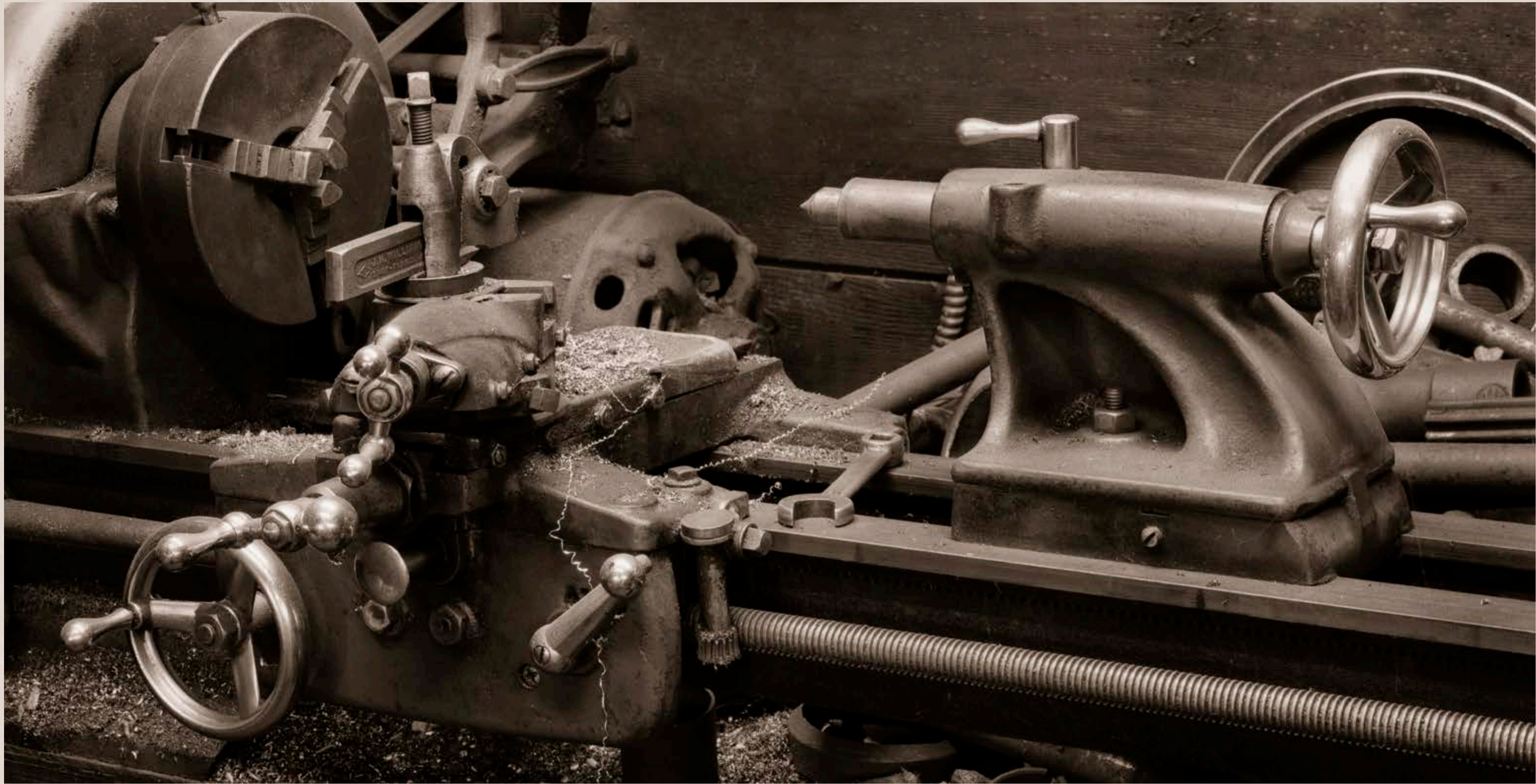
He raises sheep in his spare time. She raises cows.
They still like each other.



Lathe Wheel & Handle

Eugene, Oregon, 1991

While I photographed, he was shearing sheep out front. "Sheep are born with a will to die," he said. "Don't go into raising them if you can help it." I've followed his wisdom with dedication.



Melvin's Lathe

Eugene, Oregon, 1990

"Can I photograph your lathe?" "Sure, I guess. Why you wanna take a picher of that?"
"Because it's art." "Oh . . . (pause) . . . I didn't know."



Greasy Doorknob

Long Creek, Oregon, 1989

Nothing smells quite like a shop — the oil and grease, the metal and rubber. To me, it's a clean smell of well-cared-for machines. I mentioned this in conversation and he looked toward the shop for a moment. "I never thought of it that way, but you're right. It is kind of a clean smell."



Four Overalls

Spray, Oregon, 1989

I meant to ask why there were four pairs of overalls for his one-man shop. We got to talking about other things, and I never did ask him. I suppose it's for the same reason that he had a large drawer filled with crescent wrenches.



Wet Workbench

Wheeler, Oregon, 1987

There was a leak in the ceiling. It didn't seem to bother him at all.



The White Wall

Banks, Oregon, 1989

"A shop is a dirty place and can get disorganized very quickly," he said with a staccato clip. "Clutter is your enemy. Fight it. Keep things clean and ordered and you will be rewarded."

The lessons were coming quickly in a series of motivational slogans.

"A tool for every use and a place for every tool. Organization, both in work and in mind, is the key to success." I wondered if I should have been taking notes.



Guaranteed Repairs

Klamath Falls, Oregon, 1986

I guess they didn't want the cow to wander off.



Can't Kink

Wheeler, Oregon, 1987

Earlier, I'd asked a particularly silly question exposing my mechanical naiveté. Later, as I made this photograph, he looked at me with dead seriousness and said, "They can't kink, you know." Pause. Then he winked and laughed.



Richmond's Gas Station

Madras, Oregon, 1986

We needed gas desperately, but the station had gone out of business years ago. I couldn't help but wonder if the antlers, the spider webs, and the smoky, greasy windows might have contributed to his business woes. No gas, but I was grateful for the photograph.



Gas Pump

Eat Cafe, Kent, Oregon, 1986

"These pumps bring back a lot of nice memories," he said and then quietly walked off and left me standing there wondering.

North Dakota



Uncle Kenny

Everyone has an “Uncle Kenny” — or should have, a man who works hard — with his hands — his entire life. Kenny was actually my wife’s uncle, or I should say, one of her many uncles. On my side of the family, there was Uncle Lee — hardworking, slow talking, with hands so strong he had to consciously shake hands with a gentle touch. By the time I met Kenny, decades on the farm had taken its toll. His hands reminded me of his old tools — bent and scarred, a testament to years of use.

Kenny and I immediately hit it off when he learned that I like to play cribbage. He loved to play cards — wait, let me re-phrase that. Kenny loved to win at cards. Oh, he was a good loser, too — as long as you allowed him an opportunity to triumph before the night was over. We’d stop by their home and he’d invariably have the board out and the cards

all ready. We played best of seven and I always lost. I’d enter the fray with enthusiasm and determination — and end with Kenny still the reigning champ. He enjoyed my visits — but if truth be told, not as much as I enjoyed losing to him and sharing his company.

I’d spent several days photographing the farm, Kenny’s shop, the old homestead, his tools and coats and barns. He tracked me down out back by the grain bin. “I thought you might want a portrait of me,” he said, standing a little straighter than normal. I noticed he’d dressed up for the occasion. “Why, sure I do. Where would you like me to photograph you?” Without hesitation he pointed, “In my shop.” He knew exactly the pose he wanted; I could tell he’d been thinking about it a while. I was glad — no, honored — to oblige him.





Kenny's Crescent Wrenches

Alkabo, North Dakota, 2004

Kenny was a farmer his whole life. He explained what that really means: he was also a mechanic, a carpenter, and a gambler, too. "They're all part of farming."



Kenny's Crescent Wrenches, #2

Alkabo, North Dakota, 2004

I made two photographs of these same wrenches. I like them both. For the longest time, I tried to decide which I liked better, and then I realized that Kenny had more than one crescent wrench and didn't worry about it. Why should I?



Jar of Ball Bearings

Heckman's, Alkabo, North Dakota, 2004

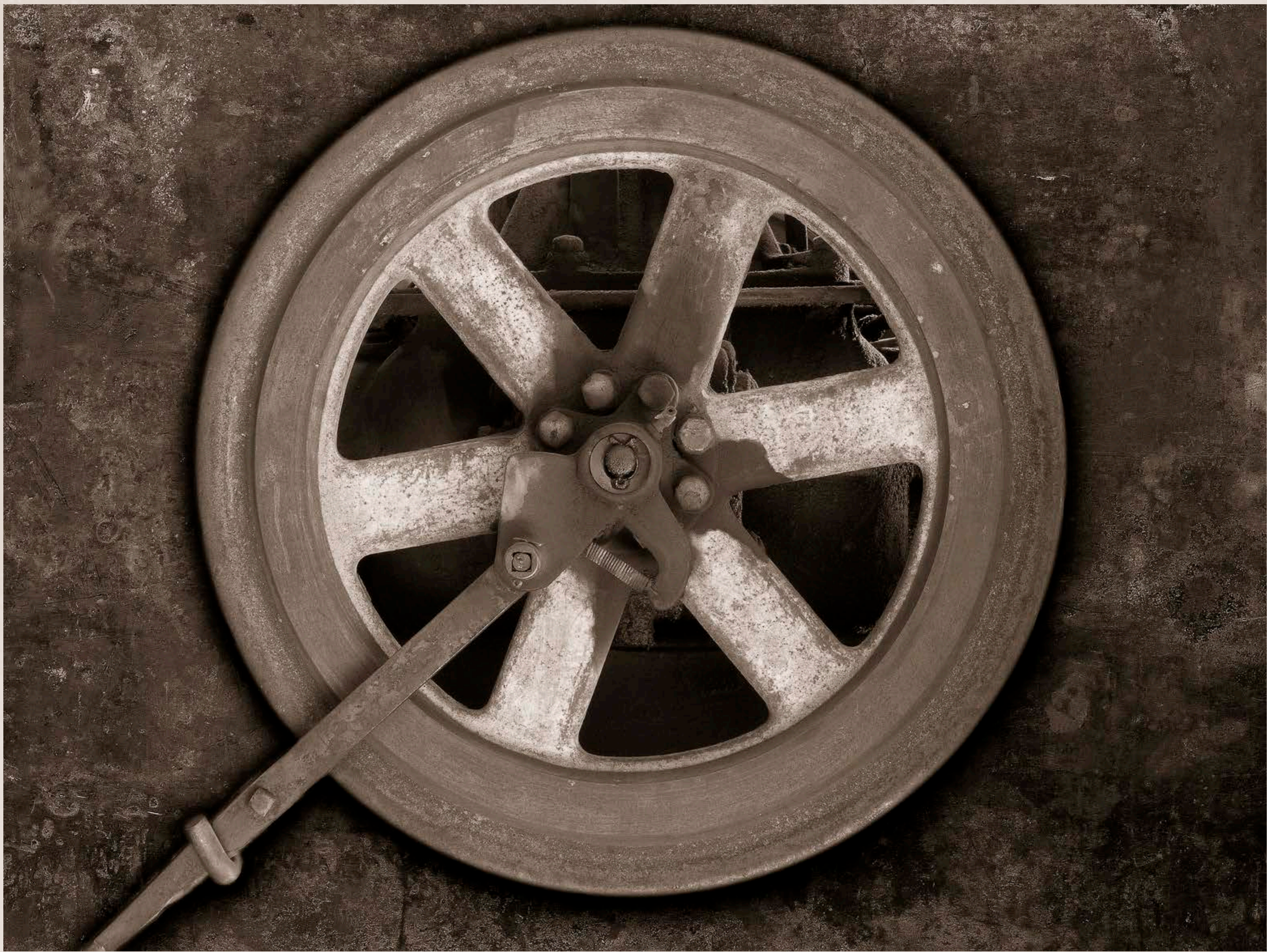
Every machine shop is a history of the parts used, parts salvaged, parts saved, parts tucked away, just in case they are needed someday. You can tell a lot about a man by which parts he saves and how he saves them.



Shop Wall & Soot

Alkabo, North Dakota, 2004

I tried to imagine this shop — without insulation, without even tarpaper on the walls — in winter. No wonder the rough boards were covered in black soot.



Circular Logic

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

“The day God invented the wheel, well, that was a good day,” he said.



Buick Grill

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

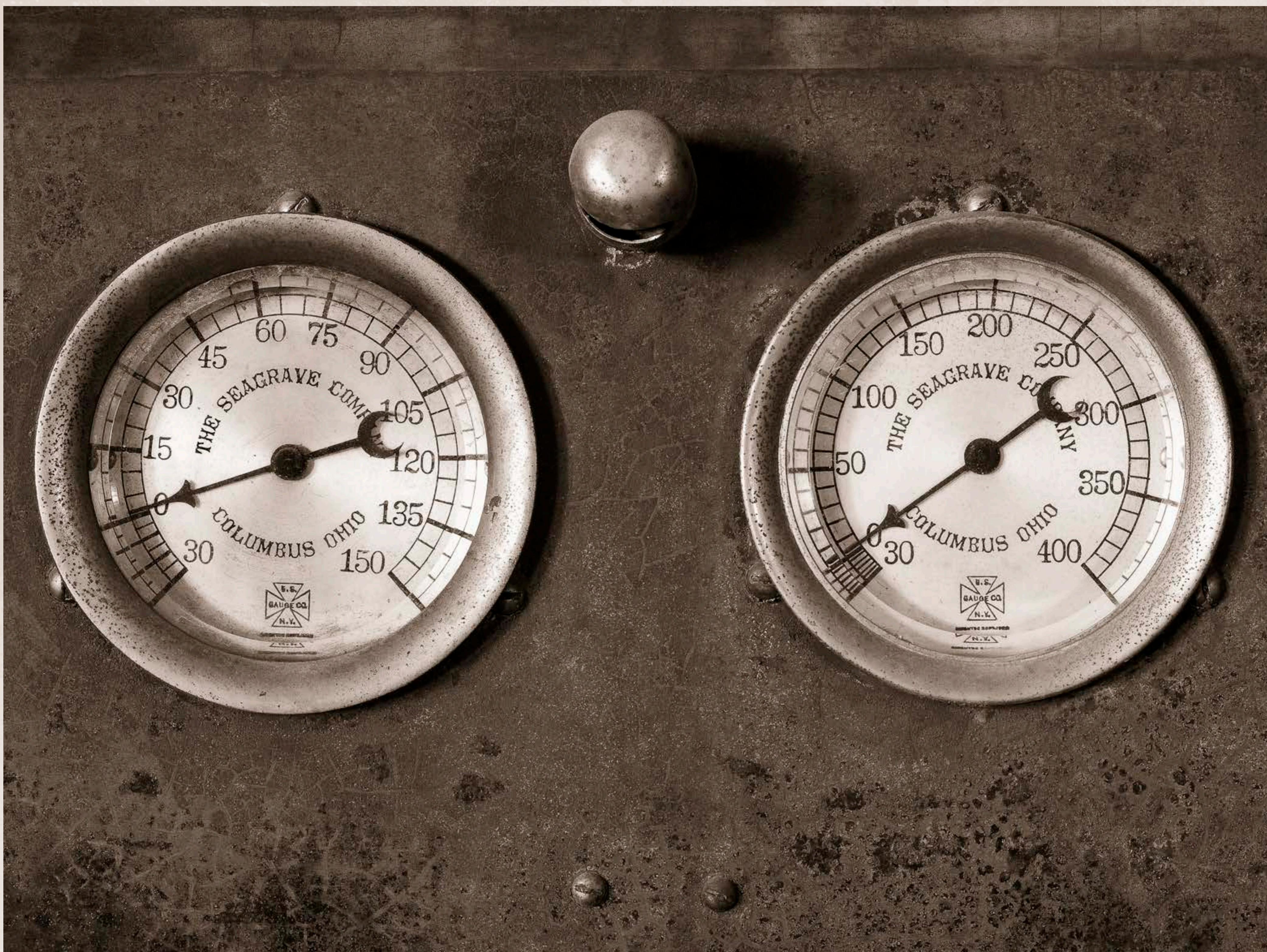
He was not so much a mechanic as he was a collector. The barn was filled with cars, motors, grills, and parts of every kind — all covered in thick dust.



Fender and Headlight

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

"Old cars are a thing of beauty, a thing of beauty, I tell ya."
Long pause, accompanied by a distant look. "Curves like a woman.
A real thing of beauty . . ."



The Seagrave Gauges

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

From a strictly functional point of view, the fancy lettering and curved pointers are not necessary. "They do add something, though," I commented, "that is aesthetically pleasing." "Hell, yes," he agreed. "Ain't no virtue in being ugly."



Ford, Made in USA

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

I reached out to reposition the metal parts for the photograph. "Here," he said, handing me some gloves. "Those things get pretty hot in the sun on a day like this."

Boy, was he was right.



Door Handles

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

It was so dark inside, it was almost black. During the long time exposure,
I listened to the newborn birds being fed in their nests in the tin roof.
Outside was the constant trill of the crickets in the grass.
Another year, another cycle.



The Magic of Grease

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

“Folks think that being a mechanic is all about metal. Nope.

The best mechanics know about grease and oil.”

I mentioned that I thought this was very Zen-like of him.

“I don’t know about that, but I do know about grease and oil.”



Broken Window Shards

Alkabo, North Dakota, 2004

He'd been a bachelor all his life. He had a stroke and they took him to a nursing home where he died. The shop just deteriorated on its own for the next 30 years. There wasn't much left.



Tysee's Shop

Crosby, North Dakota, 2004

A friend told me about Tysee and all his stuff. The place was open, so I let myself in and started photographing. For several hours, I kept hoping he'd show up, but he never did. I have a feeling I missed some good stories.

Texas



Felix Muñoz

Cuero, Texas, 1988

He drank a Dr. Pepper and rubbed bacon on a rusty, black bean pot as we talked.



Kerosene Lamp

Yoakum, Texas, 1990

It is so easy to forget that many of these guys were born before there were cars — or before there was electricity.



The Cool Spot

Cuero, Texas, 1988

“We get plenty of hot around here. That corner there is the coolest spot in the building.” The authority with which he stated this fact led me to believe this was the result of thorough testing.



Light for the Bolt Bins

Yoakum, Texas, 1994

He was out on a call, fixing a flat tire. His mother gave me permission to photograph, but he was suspicious of me when he came back. He said he thought I might be from the Government, and then asked me to leave.



Bolt Bins

Hallettsville, Texas, 1988

A customer came in and asked for a $1\frac{5}{32}$ " hex nut. He walked over and, without looking, pulled out a drawer and handed over the nut — first drawer, first time.



Gears

Richter's Garage, Yoakum, Texas, 1994

He said, "There ain't nothin' to takin' 'em apart." Then he looked at me from the corner of his eye and smiled a knowing smile.

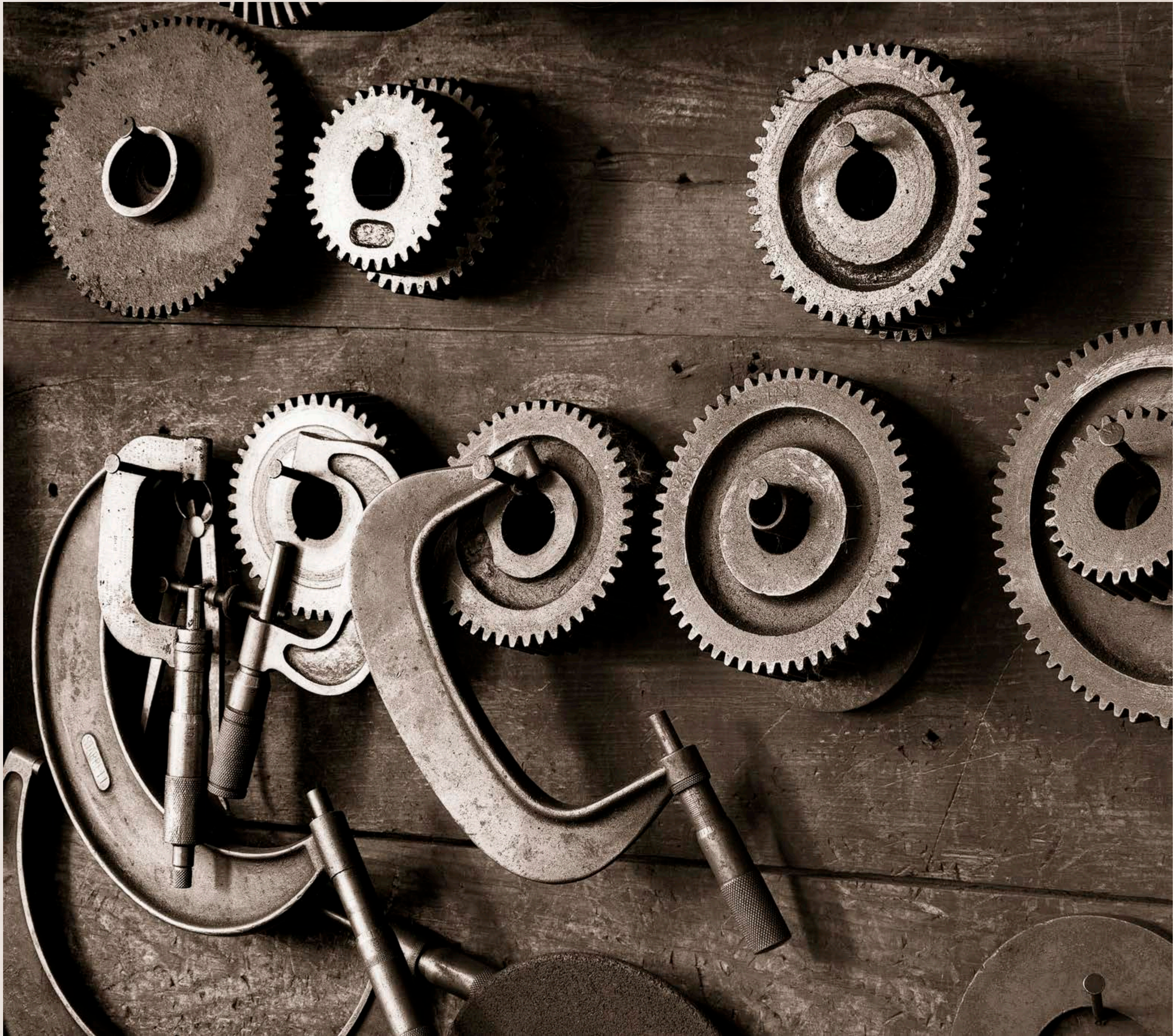


The C-Clamp

Hallettesville, Texas, 1988

"A man's only got two hands," he said.

This is one of the reasons I like these guys. Their no-nonsense logic is irrefutable.



Calipers & Gears

Hallettsville, Texas, 1988

I spent several hours photographing there and during the whole time an unlit cigar never left his mouth – even during the long story of his war years in the Pacific.



Texaco Station & Repair

Walnut Springs, Texas, 1990

He spent about 20 minutes on each gas fill-up, talking and gossiping.
He'd known everybody in town all his life.



Three Chairs

Texaco Station, Walnut Springs, Texas, 1990

"Most of the boys are retired now
and they just like to come down and
watch and shoot the breeze.

I kinda like it."



Office Desk

Texaco Station, Walnut Springs, Texas, 1990

It was 103°. Everything was old, cluttered, musty, dry, and dusty. Except, that is, the Dr. Pepper dispenser which was new, functional and, thankfully, dispensed ice-cold sodas. Fortunately, I had a pocket full of coins.

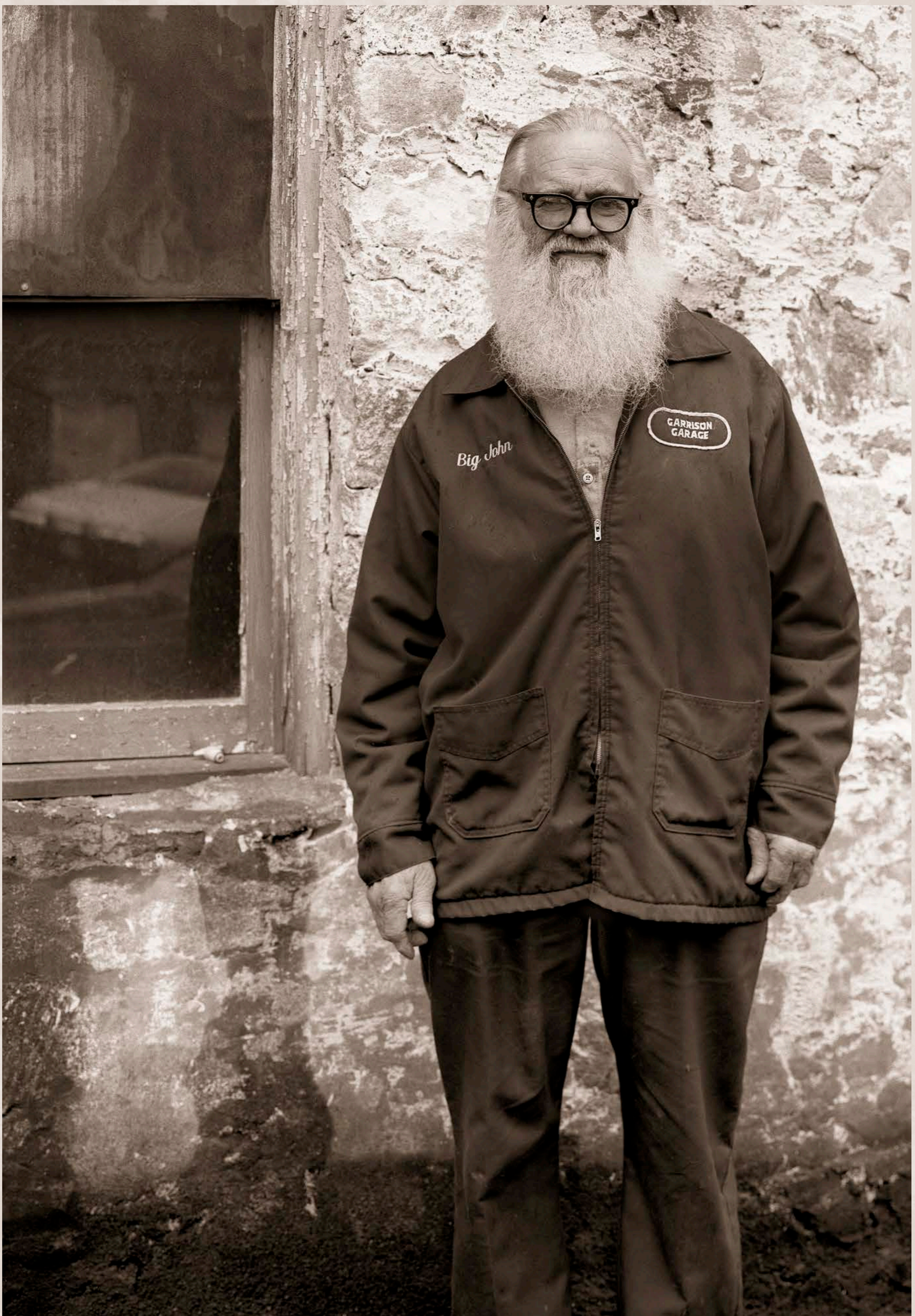


7-up

Cuero, Texas, 1988

“You know, it’s funny,” he said. “For a long time I’ll drink 7-up. Then I get tired of it and go for Orange Crush for a while. But I always come back to 7-up. I don’t know why.”

Other Places



Big John

Garrison Garage, Garrison, New York, 1990

He and his wife lived upstairs above the garage. He showed me a Christmas card with a Santa on it that he thought looked just like him. It did.



The Coffee Portrait

Superior, Arizona, 1992

I asked if I could make their portrait. "Sure, we're just having coffee." They then moved these seats into position, sat down, and kept right on talking.





Vernon Barrow & Grandson

Denison, Kansas, 1989

As we talked, Paul Harvey spoke on the radio. Every commercial, he'd say to his grandson how much he liked "Mr. Harvey." I called him Mr. Barrow and he seemed to like that.



Where the Rag Box Was

Durham, North Carolina, 1988

"I used to keep my oily rags in this wooden box. I guess that wasn't too smart.
The box finally just rotted away."



Cash Register

Sedalia, Indiana, 1989

He looked like Custer with long, flowing white hair and moustache.
The register was empty. He kept all the money in his pocket.



Pepsi Bottles

Sedalia Garage, Sedalia, Indiana, 1989

He said he preferred the taste of Pepsi rather than beer, a good pie rather than a hot romance, and clean socks every week.

He was 96 years old. Who was I to argue?



Work Apron

Sedalia, Indiana, 1989

It was a present from his wife. She had fits getting the grease out of his overalls. She died in 1949.

Joe Sasak



Joe Sasak

In 1989, north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin about sixty miles, I was wandering the back roads with no particular photographic agenda in mind. I saw lots of farms and fields, barns and silos. I'd made only a few exposures.

Absentmindedly driving on Day Two, I noticed a field with a long driveway that wound around a farm house toward an unusual looking building. As I drove past, I spied Joe standing outside, eyeing me in my rental car. "Interesting," I thought. A few miles later down the road, I thought "Very interesting." Another 10 minutes. "Really, very interesting." Arriving at the intersection of County Road Y and County Road YY (I will resist the temptation to propose any philosophical symbolism about this), I turned around in the town of Leroy, Wisconsin. I drove back, and turned down the driveway. Joe was still standing there, almost as if he was expecting me. I introduced myself as a photographer, told him about my grandfather, pointed to Joe's shop and asked if I could see inside. Two days later, with a couple dozens rolls of exposed film in

my bag, we said goodbye and retracing my entrance around the farmhouse, I continued again on County Road Y — with negatives, stories, and memories.

Joe told me just a bit of his story — enough to tantalize and fascinate me with him, but not enough to totally satisfy my curiosity. He was born in 1915 and was 73 years old; he'd never been married; he'd lived his entire life in Leroy, Wisconsin. Joe's father immigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia. Of all the towns in America he could have chosen for his home, for some unknowable reason he chose the town of Leroy, built a house and raised a family there. Joe was born in the house his father built before the family got so large he needed to build the new house. From my observation the term "new house" was only relative to the "old house." The new house looked old and the old house looked, well, abandoned.

The old house was converted years ago into the shop. It's now a structure containing more



tools than you could count in a week, thousands of scraps of metal collected over the years, and plenty of grease. It also contains the records of Joe's life, which can be seen on every shelf and tucked away in every tin can and drawer.

He took me underneath the shop where the earth was excavated away on the lee side of the hill. He showed me where he had to prop up the floor with 10-inch diameter tree

trunks to support the weight of all the tools and metal scraps he had stored above.

"Yeah that leettle sheet was 'bout ready t' c'lapse so I decided it would be a goot thing if I wasn't in it when it went. Since I spend all my time here, dere's only one t'ing t' do an' that was t' prop it up." Practical wisdom is a constant theme with all the men made of steel.



Joe Sasak

Leroy, Wisconsin, 1989

“Oh, dat. I don’t t’row dat away. We use dat yet. We can still make sumpin’ outta dis guy. You can make a collar outta dis one yet — bore the t’read out — cut dis flat — maybe cut deese here corners off yet.” He thought some more during a pause, “I could make a smaller nut outta dat yet, too. Never t’row anything away,” he advised, “you never know when you might need it.” There was another thoughtful pause after which he added with a grin, “Or if you’ll be able to find it.”

As evidence of this wisdom, he pointed toward the door. “I made dis here door handle outta ol’ beer tap.”

Then he turned and slowly walked around the shop, more searching his mind than the nooks and crannies of his shelves. Finally, from off in the corner I heard, “Here’s dat leetle fart. I knew I had it somewheres.”



Joe Sasak's Shop

As we talked, a formation of Canada geese flew overhead and I mentioned how loud and how pretty they were. "Oh sheet dere here by da millions. Christ, when dey come da sky is all black with 'em. Once an' a while you'll find a whole field black with geese. When, those leettle sheets come dis time of year you here 'em first in this window and then they fade over to this window and that means dere headin' north. It's always nice when they come dat way." He stared at me seriously as though he was teaching a great lesson. "But let me tell ya, when ya here 'em outa this window an' then over t' this window they're headin' south. Den dere not so nice, cuz ya know."

Here was a man who reckoned the spinning of the earth, the very global change of seasons by the sounds of the geese outside his workshop window. His workshop, his yard, his house, and the other few people in Leroy was a world big enough to satisfy Joe for 73 years. Some might scoff at this and say his was a restricted life. I admire him for knowing the definition of "enough."



Sasak's Gloves

"Eat it up.
Wear it out.
Make it do.
Do without."

As a young boy, I first heard these words of advice from my grandfather. How foolish they seemed then, in my youth. I doubt if Joe had ever thrown away a tool in all his life. Screwdriver handles were now serving as lever controls. An old beer tap opened his front door. An ice pick was now a cotter key. I mentioned he was about due for some new gloves. "Aw dem sheets are okay, yet. Dere okay. I use dem for a rag when dey get too bad."



The Stove

“Oh sheet yes it gits cold — down twenty t’irty b’low zero outside. But, it’s never cold in here.” Our conversation had arrived at a bragging point. “Sheet, yeah. This t’ing gits started in October an’ never goes out ‘til summer. I come out here in the mornin’ its sixty seventy degrees. I stand all my wood all up. Den I put a great big one on the bottom and den I giver a start an’ shut evert’ing off. Sometimes I doan hafta put not’ing in til two t’ree o’clock in the afternoon.”

Joe built the stove. The main belly was an old water main dug up in Milwaukee. The top came off a boiler from an old freighter. The grid was from an old Victrola. He welded it there one day after having burned his arm by absent-mindedly leaning up against the stove to rest and warm himself. “Now ya can lean up dere an’ stay toasty all day and never burn yurself no matter how hot th’ fire is.” I suspect it never occurred to Joe that, other than himself, this theory would never be tested.

“I used to have to put on my gloves to open the door cuz th’ handle was so hot. I fine’ly got smart one day and put on this new handle I made outa th’ top of a brass bed post.” I suddenly had this image of the bed in his room missing one post top. To a man like Joe, the practicality of a cool stove handle is much more important than the cosmetic of his bed. After all, he would handle the stove door every day, but who would ever see his bed?





The Repair

Dan, one of Joe's neighbors, came by to pick up an axle Joe had repaired. It had taken him three days of work to complete. "Oh, Joe can fix everything," he said admiring the new axle. Dan turned to me and began explaining Joe's work. "This thing here was built on a cast and when it came loose that cast iron all broke. Joe turned that piece out and made a steel one for me."

Joe was over in the far side of the shop, but I could see he was listening. When Dan had finished his description Joe came over and added the final touches.

"Den I couldn't hold the goddamn t'ing but I had enough on dere to machine it off and stick it on dere and cut dis out and den put dat in a chuck. Den I cut dis all back and stuck dis t'ing on and smoothed it out. Now it turns like new, only better. Oh, dem guys give me grey hair once in a while."



Wooden Handle Pipe Wrench

This was his favorite pipe wrench. He had inherited it from his father who had brought it with him from Czechoslovakia. Joe had tools everywhere and all of them looked quite used. It was easy to see that tools were the man's life.

"All your tools are old, Joe."

"Yeah, but dey all work. The t'ing is, you know, you gotta know how to use it. You could have a brand new one and not do nuttin' with it. You can break it by doin' nuttin' with it. Tools was meant to be used. Sometimes I buy old tools just to save 'em."

"You probably don't have anything that doesn't work."

"Nah, I jus' fix it."



The Pipe Cutter

Joe's is a world of iron and steel. His drills and saws turn slowly and with power. Like his tools, his every bodily movement is slow and sure and powerful.

He built his pipe cutter out of scrap and wanted to show me how well it worked. He stood still for four full minutes as the disc blade turned and sparks flew. Finally the pipe end fell off with a ring as it hit the floor. "Dat leetle sheet works gut, huh? You want me to cut a bigger one?"

Thirteen motionless minutes later, Joe smiled with pride as the cut end of the 2-inch solid rod fell to the floor. It glowed faint orange from the heat. "We'll just let it sit dere 'til it cools off," he said as he nonchalantly dusted metal bits off his overalls.



Sasak's Brush

"Whadya taking a picture of dat leettle sheet for?"

"I don't know, Joe. It's just an interesting looking brush."

"Oh. I never t'ought of it as being interesting. It's just my dust brush I use to brush the filings off my drill."

"Oh," I said. It seemed inappropriate to disagree.

"I got it from a friend. I'm pretty sure he painted with it, but it's no good fer paintin' anymore. But, it sure works just great to dust the filings off my drill press. Here let me show ya." He demonstrated, and it worked just fine.



Joe Sasak in Front of His Shop

Joe's expression left me doubting whether I was welcome or not. I soon learned to read Joe from his words and his actions rather than from his scowl. We spent two days together and were both sad when the time came for me to leave. He shook my hand and told me, "You come by anytime. I'll be right here." Two years later, I visited him again. True to his word, he was there.

"Where you been? I t'ought you mighta forgot about me."

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