

PHOTO: MICHAEL JACOBSON-HARDY

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LOOKING DEEPLY THROUGH A LENS: MICHAEL JACOBSON-HARDY

Michael Jacobson-Hardy's newest book of photographs, *Walking with Thoreau*, 2018, (available in the Harrisville library) is a contemplative look at the natural environment paired with excerpts from Thoreau's writing. Some of the photographs were taken locally while exploring the woods along Cricket Hill Road, not far from the Manse where he and his wife, Ruth, spend part of the year. These photographs seem to be about something different, at first glance, from the work he started doing 30 years ago in industrial settings, schools, and prisons. But all his photographs ask the viewer to stop and pay attention, to look closely at the world and think about our relationship to it.

As a boy, Michael felt a strong pull to the camera and the powerful story that a photograph could tell. His maternal grandfather, who came to America with Michael's mother from Rovno, Poland (now in Ukraine), in 1936, was an amateur photographer. "Whenever he came to visit, he had this camera strung around his neck. . . . We opened up his photo albums and looked at his pictures, pictures of the old country," Michael recalled. From these black-and-white photographs he learned about Poland. He heard what it was like to come from another place and to live here in America as an immigrant, and he learned the stories, through pictures of family groups and friendships, of good-hearted people from a time and a place that no longer exists. "We're talking about the Holocaust. . . . My mother was fortunate to get out."

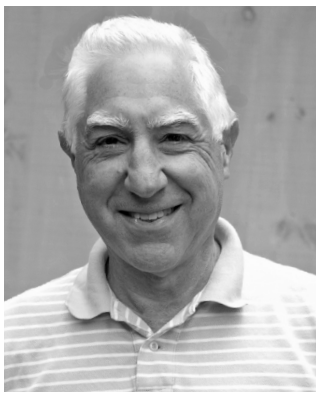

PHOTO: REBECCA UPJOHN SNYDER

Michael Jacobson-Hardy

Michael met Ruth Hardy in 1972 at the University of Rochester. He first came to Harrisville as a college kid looking forward to a summer break. Reverend Richard Hardy, Ruth's father and owner of the Manse, handed him a paintbrush and put him to work. "The idea was that in New Hampshire you have to have something to show for yourself every day," Michael said with a laugh. But it is a work ethic he values and one that reflects his own experience growing up in a partly immigrant family.

Michael's relationship with the Monadnock region solidified. He taught guitar at Conval High School in the evenings, in the adult education program. He played music all over the region and later built handmade guitars. In 1975 Michael and Ruth were married at the Manse by Ruth's father. By this point, Harrisville was well and truly in his heart.

The photographs in *The Changing Landscape of Labor, American Workers and*

Workplaces, 1996, (two photographs were taken in the Harrisville Spinning Mill) depict people working in industrial jobs and tell their individual stories. (This book is also available at the Harrisville library.)

Michael's desire to photograph in factories came from wanting to gain a deeper understanding of capitalism and the economics driving the divisions between people. A friend told him that to understand any of this he'd need to go into a factory to learn. In 1989, armed with a 4x5 view camera and photographing mostly in black and white, he started on a three-year project of making portraits and recording the stories of industrial workers all over New England. "This was a time when jobs were fleeing the region," he said. Not only was he giving these workers a voice, but he was also recording the disappearance of industrial manufacturing in New England.

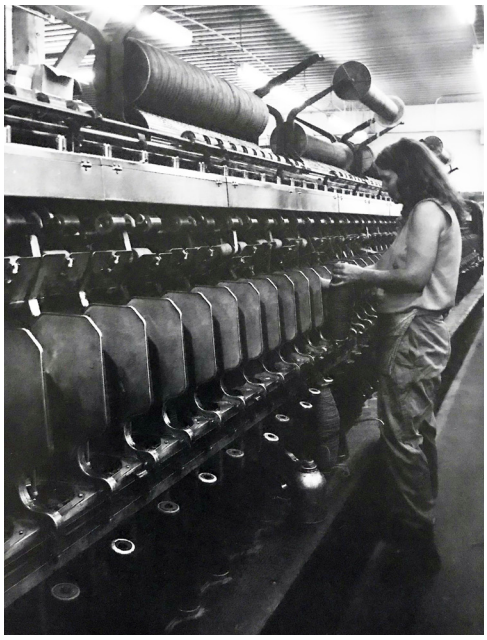

PHOTO: MICHAEL JACOBSON-HARDY

Joyce Davis removing the wooden spools from the textile machine at Harrisville Designs, 1993.

In 1991, after a student protest in reaction to a vote against a Proposition 2½ override for education funding, Michael received permission to spend most of a year photographing elementary, middle, and high school students in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Despite the experience of poverty, racism, and violence that surrounded some of the children, the portraits in *Facing Education: Portraits of Holyoke School Children*, first published in 1993 (mjhmediaone.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/facing-education-mjh.pdf), show the open faces typical of kids in school. But their writing reflects their lived experience, and they don't shy away from this reality or their earnest desire to see it change.

One middle school student wrote: "Growing up in Holyoke, I have seen a lot of hate. I have seen a lot of people discriminate against black people and Puerto Rican people. I don't think it's fair, and if I could pick one thing that [could] change in my community to make it better for young people, I would end all racism and hate. So then the black children, the Puerto Rican children, and the white children can grow up together and be friends. . . . Maybe I can't change it, but if we all work together maybe we can."

Five hundred students wrote about what they'd like to see improved in their community. The project, including Michael's photographs, was displayed at the State House in Boston during the week of Education Reform Legislation. The politicians voting had to pass by the words and pictures of the students. Some of the photographs were removed during the week; but Michael's father told him that if the pictures hadn't been good, they wouldn't have been taken down. Michael said with a laugh, "Holyoke got $8 million back at the end of that week."

For five years Michael photographed inside some of the Massachusetts county jails and state prisons. He started in 1991 with the Deer Island jail in Winthrop, which was slated for closure. "I walked in and [saw] cages and cages of humans locked up behind bars in three tiers," Michael said. "I couldn't believe I was in the Boston area. I grew up in the suburbs and I'm looking at something that is shocking and I said, this has to be done." The stark realities of existence for those incarcerated here are clear. These are photographs of people's lives, people who are marginalized, people who are not normally seen. These are not people with open faces. Hope and optimism are gone.

"The remarkable portraits Michael Jacobson-Hardy has made inside prisons in Massachusetts represent visible evidence of invisible populations, invisible worlds, " writes Angela Davis in her introductory essay to *Behind the Razor Wire, Portrait of a Contemporary American Prison System*, 1996, (Harrisville library). "Who is at risk?" Davis continues. "Who is affected, and why . . . who lives in the world portrayed here? What circumstances led these individuals to prison?" All these questions are brought to mind while looking at these pictures.

After his years of photographing in schools, prisons, and factories, he took a job teaching. He taught at Northampton High, but he also taught at the Paulo Freire Social Justice High School in Holyoke. He was particularly interested in supporting the students who fall through the cracks, the ones who drop out of school. "I wanted to do something for those kids." He built a program with computers and took them out on nature walks. He ran a video festival where they could show their videos. And he built a recording studio within the school where the students recorded rap music. "It was a form of music that caught them and they loved it. And it brought them to school."

His current work offers a reconnection to the natural world, where he started as a boy, wandering the town forest behind his home in Needham, Massachusetts. "I spent all of my childhood exploring, looking for Indian heads, cutting trails, looking up at the sky from the top of High Rock," he said.

Subsequently, Michael became director of the Needham outdoor living camp in the same town forest. "This was all land I knew well, and I took campers out every day on hikes in the woods. We would talk about nature and tell stories and make believe." It cemented his connection between the forest and his desire to share an appreciation for the land.

He read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau in school, and although he didn't think about it consciously at the time, Thoreau's activism, study of nature, explorations on Mount Monadnock, and writing all resonated with Michael, something he realized more fully when he turned back to the forest more recently to make photographs there.

"The nature photography is very much related to what is happening right now in terms of conservation and climate change. This is now a big social justice issue. It's tied into the idea of the factories [which moved elsewhere], prisons being built everywhere, becoming private. Oil—all of this

grabbing the environment and wringing everything you can from it. It's all connected in terms of social justice and economics."

His lifelong use of the camera has taken him to extraordinary places, giving him a tool to do work he might not have done otherwise. "The camera is the excuse to travel, to capture things I would never have gotten up close to. To meet people I would never have met," Michael said. "I'm used to dealing with people in hard situations; it prepares you to not just accept everything at face value but to look a little deeper." And photographing continues to deepen his relationship with the world.

"This is an especially important time for people to stay grounded. And that's why the forest is so important. . . . People are suddenly talking about nature again because we need it."

Although the photographs in *Walking with Thoreau* are different from his earlier work in many respects, they ask the same thing of the viewer that Michael has always asked: Stop and pay attention, look closely. See here, see now, this is what we have.

To learn more about Michael's work and his books: *mjhmediaone.wordpress.com*

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder

Annual Appeal 2019

Common Threads, undeniably the best newsletter in Harrisville, keeps you informed of the lives, loves, and sundry happenings in this busy town.

Once a year, we remind you that *Common Threads* is entirely dependent upon donations and advertising. Each issue costs about $1,400 to produce and is sent out to Harrisville residents and property owners. More than two-thirds of this expense is paid for by your donations. The remainder comes from our loyal advertisers.

We have enclosed a self-addressed envelope to make it easy for you to send us a check. We thrive with your donation, but even more than that, we interpret every donation as a voice saying that *Common Threads* is appreciated and valued.

We have a goal this year of creating a website for *Common Threads*, so that no matter where you are, you have access online. If you are technically savvy and website work intrigues you, please contact me, Deborah Abbott, *commonthreadsharrisville@gmail.com*

Poetry in Harrisville

Having had a delightful afternoon with Andrea Cohen and Maggie Dietz during last May's *The Loom Poetry* reading, we are gearing up for the next two poets who will read in Harrisville at *The Loom* poetry series. On November 10 at 4:30 at St. Denis Hall: *Ellen Doré Watson* and *George Kalogeris* will read for us and talk with us.

Although both Ellen and George have worked in academia (Ellen at Smith College and George at Suffolk University in Massachusetts) and both translate poetry (Ellen from Brazilian Portuguese and George from Greek), you will find many lively differences in their poetry. George's work seamlessly aligns classical Greek cultural legacy and his own immigrant Greek family legends and rituals. If your experience is like mine, you will find yourself lured and lulled into a world where time seems to move differently from our own. The world of *Guide to Greece* is complex and fraught, but known—having happened. Kalogeris becomes our trustworthy guide—speaking in measured orderly lines and in that way alone, evoking a calm majesty. His voice is charming.

Ellen's voice is sassy, wildly inventive, inquisitive, leaping from meditative to demanding, from intimate to communal. Her most recent book, *pray me stay eager* is a prayer, a plea, a hope, an insistence that through all the trials of living, of aging, of seeing loved ones aging and dying, through all her time, she remains eager, fervent, earnest, and irreverent. She's a feisty and brilliant writer.

Each poet who has read for *The Loom* has commented on our attentive, engaged audience here in Harrisville. I hope you very much enjoy both of these fine writers.

If there is sufficient interest (five to ten people), I'd be delighted to facilitate a discussion of several poems by Ellen Doré Watson and George Kalogeris the Sunday before the November 10 reading. Please let me know your interest by October 10. Email *RebeccaGibson55@gmail.com*. As always, *The Loom* will donate a book of poetry by each of our readers to the Harrisville library.

Rebecca Gibson

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