

Dubin at Work

A HALF-CENTURY AGO Harry Dubin bought his son a camera, and together they made a remarkable series of photographs of a city full of blue-collar workers all of them Dubin
BY JEFF KISSELOFF

WILL ROGERS MAY NEVER HAVE MET A MAN HE DIDNT like, but Harry Dubin evidently never met one he didnt like to be. Fifty years ago his protean inclinations inspired an extraordinary series of color photographs that have only recently surfaced.

The project came about because Dubin, like his subjects, knew about hard work. In the midst of the Depression, he attended New York University law school at night while toiling in a grocery store during the day. But graduating law clerks earned only five dollars a week; Dubin had a family to feed, and so his legal career ended before it started. Instead he managed a store in the Busy Bee grocery chain and eventually opened his own grocery on the Upper East Side. The Regent Food Shop was a kind of elegant full-service market rarely seen today. Most orders came in by phone, and many were delivered to the service entrances of Rockefellers and Astors. William Paley sent his chauffeur to the Regent for his bulgur wheat.

But working six days a week left Dubin little time for his son, Ron. “Sunday became the day to do something together, and, to give a little focus for our time, I bought Ron a cheap little Kodak thirty-five-millimeter camera. I just thought we would photograph the kids riding around the park or the animals at the zoo,” Dubin remembers.

Their plans changed abruptly on their first outing when they passed an Italian shoeshine man. At first Harry thought it would be nice to have Ron take a picture of him getting his shoes shined, but as he sat down on the wooden box, Dubin decided it would be more fun if he was the shoeshine man. All it took was a dollar tip to persuade the gentleman to surrender his plaid jacket and De Nobile cigar, and in the postwar tradition of Brando, Dean, and Steiger, Dubin revealed himself to be a Method actor. “I wanted to really feel what he was doing, so I offered my services as a shoeshine boy. When I finally got a customer,” Dubin notes with pride, “I used two brushes, the way the professionals do it.”

A project was born, and soon a routine developed where Harry and Ron would discuss over the dinner table during the week the subject matter for the upcoming Sunday.

“We always went out with a plan, says Ron, who now heads his own investment firm in Connecticut. “Dad would say, ‘Let’s do a fireman this week or a street sweeper.’” But a plan was one thing; inducing the target to remove his clothes in a nearby alley and hand them over to a total stranger was another.

“My father has a very nice way about him and is a very gentle man, so people were not intimidated,” Ron Dubin says. “Still, the strongest memory I have is of being somewhat

embarrassed by all this. When my father would approach them, I'd be hiding behind a car or a tree, hoping that it would all be over quickly."

The men needed varying amounts of persuasion. Harry Dubin remembers that the street sweeper was particularly resistant. "He said, 'Listen, sir, you want me to lose my job? I can't give you my uniform. I'm being paid by the city.' I told him he was sabotaging our big undertaking for the city. We got the picture."

The hansom-cab driver agreed, but only on the condition that he get to play the passenger. "He was afraid Dad would run away with his horse," Ron says with a laugh. To heighten the realism of his role as a hurdy-gurdy man, Dubin taught himself a few lines of *O Sole Mio!*, earning some coins. "The hurdy-gurdy man invited me home for a true Sicilian dinner. He wanted me to meet his niece. When I told him I was married, he said come anyway, but leave the boy home."

The photographs are impressive for many reasons, not the least of which is they were shot by Dubin's son, Ron, when he was between fourteen and sixteen years old. But most important, the pictures resurrect in pristine color an era that has long since disappeared. Street sweepers have been automated out of business. The hurdy-gurdy man's organ is now a boom box, and no taxi driver will take you anywhere for twenty cents a mile.

BUT THE PICTURES CHARM IS NOT ONLY IN their subject matter or in Dubin's antics but also in the details picked up by young Dubin's camera. Note the theater marquee in a shot of Dubin selling notions on the street, the haircut price on Dubin's sandwich board, the styling of the Shell gas pumps, and the sign on the mail truck welcoming returning soldiers.

Eventually Ron shot nearly thirty poses. They were developed as slides and shown to friends. When Ron went to college, he put the slides away in a tin box, where they stayed for more than forty years. A few years ago he came upon them accidentally and had them reprocessed and placed in an album as a Christmas present for his father. Last year the Museum of the City of New York heard about them and added them to its permanent collection.

"They were just something that was fun for us to do. I never thought they would have any historical value," says Harry Dubin. He still has the acting bug, and over the years he and Ron have talked about a series of pictures based on the children's rhyme *Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief*.

"We might do it yet," he says.