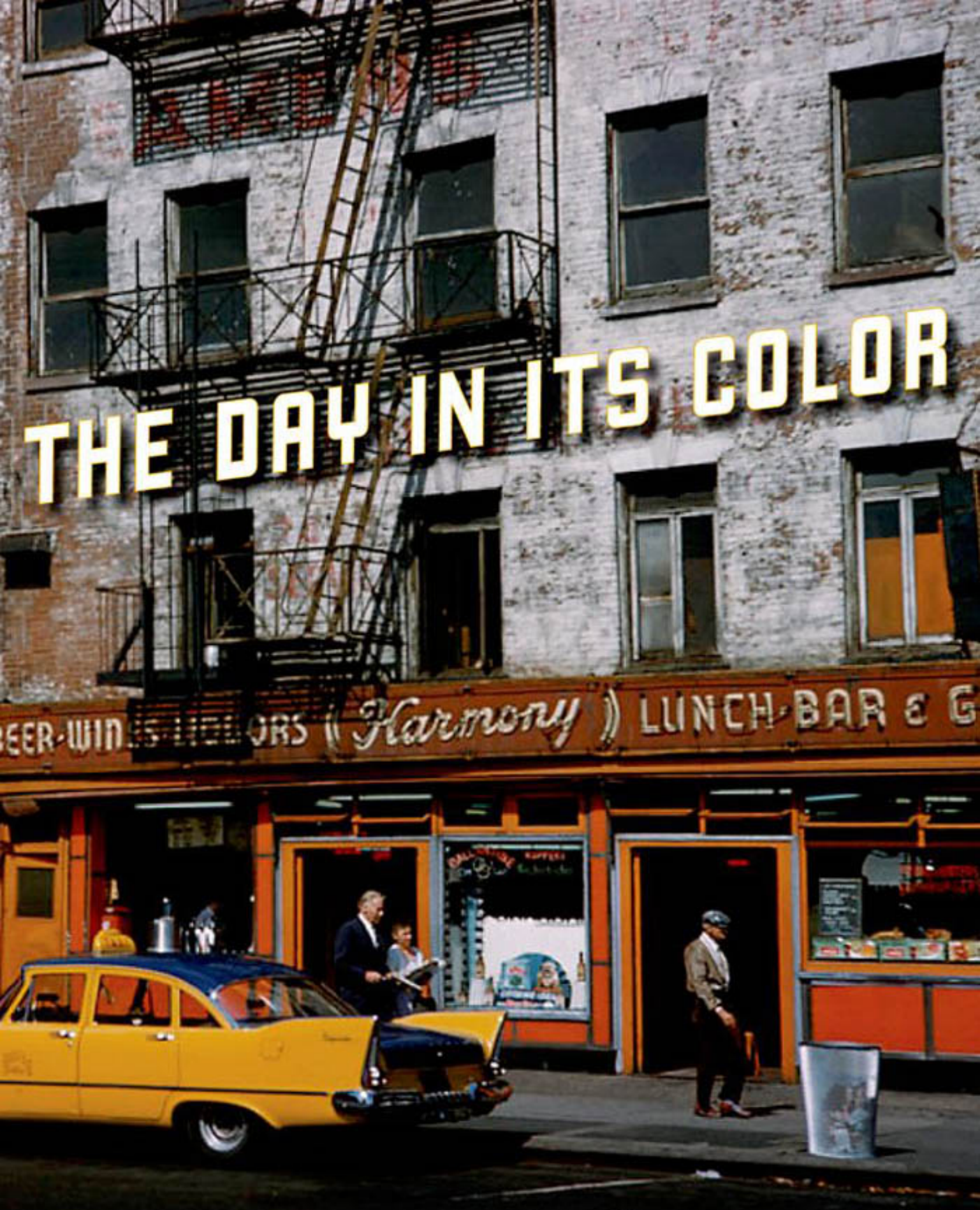


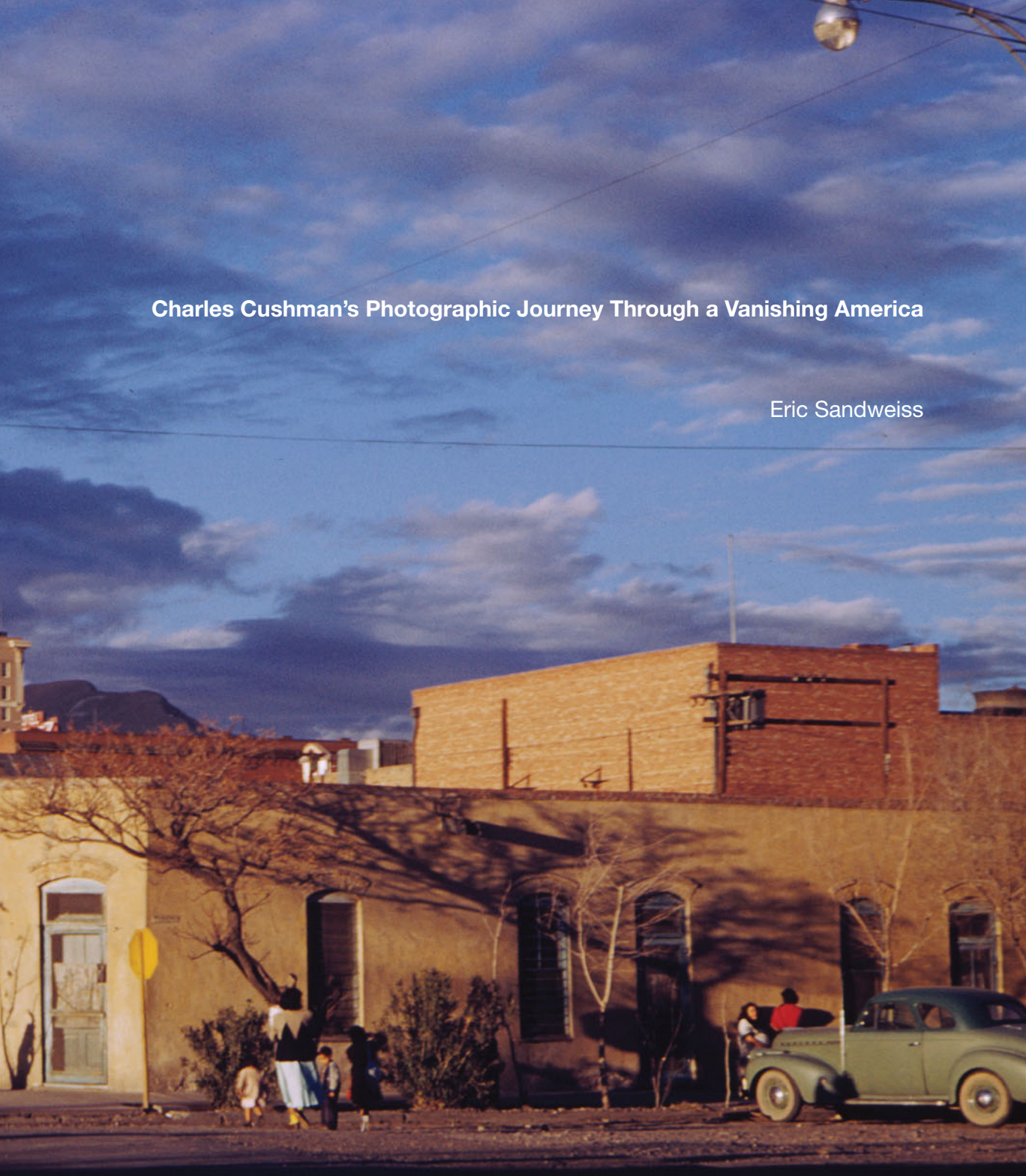
THE DAY IN ITS COLOR

Charles Cushman's Photographic Journey through a Vanishing America

Eric Sandweiss

THE DAY IN ITS COLOR

THE DAY IN ITS COLOR



Charles Cushman's Photographic Journey Through a Vanishing America

Eric Sandweiss

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2012 by Eric Sandweiss

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Sandweiss, Eric.
The Day in Its Color: Charles Cushman's photographic journey through a vanishing America / Eric Sandweiss.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-977233-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Cushman, Charles W., 1896–1972. 2. Photographers—United States—Biography. 3. Street photography—United States. 4. Landscape photography—United States. 5. United States—Pictorial works. 6. United States—History—20th century. I. Title.
TR140.C87S26 2011
779.092—dc22 2011002845

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

“But sometimes in a man or a woman awareness takes place—not very often and always inexplainable. There are no words for it because there is no one ever to tell. This is a secret not kept a secret but locked in wordlessness . . . And sometimes if he is very fortunate and if the time is right, a very little of what he is trying to do trickles through.”

John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The* East of Eden *Letters* (1969)

“America is a continent, a thing-in-process, elemental, ever changing, calling for further exploration, for constant rethinking . . . It cannot be caught or imprisoned in words of finality.”

Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928–1938* (1938)

“It is never the thing but the version of the thing:
The fragrance of the woman not her self,
Her self in her manner not the solid block,
The day in its color not perpending time”

Wallace Stevens, “The Pure Good of Theory,” *Transport to Summer* (1947)

RED HOT
FRANKFURTERS
AND ICE COLD
DRINKS
UMBRELLA SOLD BY A. M. ELKUS & SON, INC., 198 FLUSHING AVE., BROOKLYN, N. Y.
COLD SOFT DRINKS

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 8

Introduction: "A Fair Collection of Interesting Pictures": Rediscovering Charles Cushman's Day in Its Color 10

Dawn: Indiana Beginnings, 1896–1918 18

Morning: An Eye for Business, 1919–1940 30

Portfolio: From the Countryside to the Central City 82

Afternoon: Death at Midlife, 1941–1951 116

Portfolio: Chicago 128

Twilight: California, 1952–1972 150

Portfolio: San Francisco 154

Portfolio: California 182

Portfolio: Things to Come 200

Notes 213

Illustration Credits 227

Index 235

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go first to the staff of the Indiana University (IU) Archives—especially its curator of photographs, Brad Cook—for sharing their knowledge, assisting my research, and making available the images for this book. Kristine Brancolini, Kara Alexander, and many others on the staff of the IU Digital Library, who worked with the Archives to preserve the entire collection and to make it available online, introduced me to Cushman's work as they completed that project. As I did so, historian and photographer Rich Remsberg shared his knowledge of and his enthusiasm for the story, helping me to understand both the man and the significance of his photographs. The IU Institute of Advanced Study offered time for research, and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts underwrote some of my travels along Cushman's path. For sharing memories of one aspect or another of Cushman's life, I acknowledge Deborah Booker, Richard Dinning, Edward Laves, Elizabeth Laves Marcuson, John Moskowitz, Jr., Adolphe R. E. Roome IV, John M. Schloerb, Gerald Spore, Elsie Gergely Steg, Albert Steg, Catherine Vanderpool. Michael Corbett advised on the California research. Of the many librarians and researchers who assisted me at one stage or another in locating sources, particular mention is due to Steinbeck specialists Herbert Behrens and Carol Robles; Danielle Castronovo, California Academy of Sciences; Amy Ballmer, Art Institute of Chicago; David Pavelich, Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. My sister Marni discovered a key part of the story and also helped me better to understand American photographic history. Dan Carlinsky brought the book to press, and Shannon McLachlan and the staff at Oxford University Press took care of it once it arrived there. My wife Lee and my sons Noah and Ethan deserve special thanks for indulging me the spare hours needed to journey with "Cushman" when more pressing matters awaited at home. Portions of this book first appeared in the *Journal of American History*, 94:1 (June 2007).

Levy's
HENDERSON

INTRODUCTION

1. Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, 1938

On September 3, 1938, an out-of-work Chicago businessman named Charles Cushman pulls his new Ford Deluxe coupe into the northbound traffic lanes of the Golden Gate Bridge (fig. 1). The new bridge still sports the first coat of its distinctive orange-vermilion paint. The sky beyond it is a hazy, pale blue, suggesting the imminent arrival of the fog that pushes into the San Francisco Bay on warm fall afternoons like this one. The car is dark red; the nearby hillsides a parched brown.

We know a lot about the color of the day on which Charles Cushman and his wife, Jean, embarked on their trip up the Pacific Coast. We know it because of something they carried with them: a Contax IIA 35 mm camera, loaded with Cushman’s first roll of Kodachrome color slide film. First available two years earlier, Kodak’s new color film was, in 1938, still rare—for most amateur photographers it was too expensive and troublesome; for professionals, a novelty with little value for publication purposes. By the following year, the company’s “Ready-Mount” developing service—offering individually mounted slides rather than unwieldy strips of positive transparencies—would hasten the coming of the age of the color snapshot. Recently launched picture magazines, with straightforward titles like *Life*, *Look*, and *Holiday*, would begin mixing color images among their photographs. And, in a rite repeated daily on movie screens across the country, Judy Garland would awaken from her gray Kansas slumber into the many-hued Land of Oz. As Charles Cushman pointed the car toward Marin County, however, few people possessed the means to record the appearance of a San Francisco afternoon—even of the newly famed Golden Gate Bridge—in anything other than shades of gray.

More than three decades would pass before Cushman turned off his ignition for the last time, unpacked the camera gear, removed the last roll of Kodachrome from his Contax, and stepped back out into a world that we now imagine, without effort or surprise, in color. In the years since he began his travels, he had driven roughly a half-million miles—from Maine to San Diego, from Vancouver to Miami, past numberless points between. He had worn out three cars, two camera bodies, three

lenses, and, to judge from her expression in those occasional photographs in which she appeared, his wife's patience. He had collected, annotated, and carefully filed away his color slides—all 14,500 of them. And he had found his way out of the shadow of a personal event that nearly extinguished the light from his world altogether.

Charles Cushman was more than an obsessive collector, and his slides warrant more than the bemused indulgence that exotic collections customarily awaken in us. From 1938 to 1969, driving country roads and walking city streets, this Indiana native captured a dying America in living color. Boxed away at the time of his death in 1972, split into separate collections in the 1980s, finally reassembled and catalogued in 1999, and opened to public view only in 2003, his "fair collection of interesting pictures," as he diffidently labeled them, today startle the eye of anyone who imagines that an America untouched by the landmarks of our own time—the interstate highways, the shopping malls, the curtain-wall office buildings—must have been a quaint and distant place.[1]

Cushman's photographs, saturated in what Kodak shrewdly came to call "living" color, suggest something different. The United States that we thought we knew with photographic certainty—whether through the self-conscious artfulness of Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans or through the prosaic footage of recycled newsreels—is revealed as being but the gray shadow cast by a world no less full and tangible than our own. Ordinary subjects take on unaccustomed beauty, and beautiful colors are rendered surprisingly ordinary, as our eyes open onto an Oz filled not with magical creatures but with people who look like ourselves, living not in castles or talking forests but in apartment buildings and farmhouses—places we might even think we know as scenes from our own lives, until we see the tailfins of the car parked at the curb, notice the odd cut of a passing woman's dress, or recognize a building's location as the site we have known only as a parking lot. Looking at the photographs confounds the unspoken visual grammar that teaches us to recognize in black-and-white images something "past" and in color ones something familiar and accessible.

For its breadth of coverage and its sheer size, we know of nothing comparable to Cushman's thirty-year experiment in color photography. The recent spate of publications generated by new discoveries of other early color images—including those produced both by amateurs and by professionals such as the documentarians employed in the 1930s by the Farm Security Administration—has turned up nothing of the scale, consistency, and visual quality of the collection that this enigmatic man packed away into his slide boxes in 1969.[2]

What, besides the sheer novelty of finding such a large trove of images from color photography's earliest days, makes these pictures worth a long second glance? Perhaps it is the quality of the views themselves—sharply focused, well-exposed, intriguingly framed. Perhaps it is the voyeuristic thrill of discerning in them the habits and obsessions of a single personality over such an extended period. Whatever the source of the power that Cushman's slides hold for modern eyes, its ultimate effect is clear: in Charles Cushman's work, the past, free of the distancing scrim of black-and-white, becomes impossibly present. The foreignness of his subjects is *almost* negated by the familiarity of his medium. His camera captures a vanished America, a place lit for one moment by a brilliant flash of recall, only to fade once again into the obscurity to which we as a society have since consigned it.

Did Cushman mean to make such statements? One searches in vain for evidence that he approached his work with the self-conscious stance of professional "road" photographers in the tradition of Evans, Ben Shahn, or Robert Frank. Cushman was an amateur to the end, a traveling salesman and sometime financial analyst who happened to love taking pictures. His later correspondence confirms that he was not unaware of the quality of what he termed his "fair collection of interesting pictures," but it does not suggest that he saw himself attempting to leave behind a comprehensive historical or artistic statement. He never tried, so far as we know, to publish his photographs, nor to show them through local camera clubs. He sought neither fame nor money for what remained, to the end, a personal hobby. The very format of his chosen

medium—color slides—limited its visibility to small gatherings of that limited class of personal acquaintances whom one expects to accept without protest an invitation to sit for hours in a darkened living room.

Yet something powerful—operating both from without and within the man—motivated this singular, thirty-year quest. Something, that is, in what the immigrant journalist Louis Adamic called the "elemental, ever-changing" essence of pre- and postwar America impelled this particular individual to try to express, through the language of pictures, his own particular version of the "secret locked in wordlessness" that, as John Steinbeck claimed, awaits anyone willing to look deeply enough into himself. The nation's landscape, this man, and the tool of 35 mm color film came together in a peculiar three-decade-long relationship, the results of which today lie before us like the pieces of a broken puzzle.

It is in trying to reassemble those fragmented social, personal, and mechanical destinies that we discover in Cushman's slides a value distinct from that which accompanied them into their cases in 1969. We can, to be sure, enjoy and learn from the content of the images—the cars, the bathing suits, the tractors, the neon signs. We can, alternatively, assemble them along with a smattering of letters and personal records to reconstruct the details of one man's life—a life that in many ways embodies the emergence of that larger body of middle-class Americans who made their way from the rural world of the nineteenth century to the metropolitan milieu of the twentieth. We can analyze the pictorial and aesthetic qualities afforded by the combination of a well-crafted photographic machine and the sophisticated chemistry of coated acetate film. Ultimately, though, the collection's power extends beyond the sum of its data and into the realm of its emotional effect upon latter-day viewers—us.

Even the most impersonal of Cushman's pictures, viewed today, radiates a poignancy that is likely greater than any he intended at the time. That poignancy derives not from the immediacy of a tree's fleeting blossom or a child's innocent gaze but from the very distance that now separates us from him and his subjects alike. We cannot look at these

images now without knowing that the suddenly vibrant world they seem to bring to life is in fact unreachable; that even as we first make its acquaintance, that world, and the people in it, have already receded before us in a manner that not even the miracle of living color can reverse. That reminder of our own mortality—bedecked in lively reds, yellows, and blues—is surely a lesson as powerful as any conveyed in the actual content of the pictures. At some level, it is also a lesson that the photographer had, himself, to have learned.

This is a book, then, about Charles Weever Cushman (b. Poseyville, Indiana, 1896, d. San Francisco, California, 1972), a man whose life and career encompassed, at a personal level, many of the developments witnessed in American society at large during the nation's most prosperous—and most perilous—century. It is also a book about the built landscape through which Cushman and other Americans moved in the middle years of that century, and a story, finally, about the particular tool—a 35 mm camera loaded with color film—that Cushman chose to help him mark his place in that world. Like a photographic exposure calculated for maximal depth of field, Cushman's tale, if perfectly told, would depend for its coherence upon attention to all three of those points of reference. To understand the man who stands in the story's foreground—scant though we will find his (nonpictorial) legacy to be—is to understand better the motivations that impelled his particular, sustained view of the American landscape. To learn more about the roads, farmlands, towns, and cities that lie on the other side of his lens is in turn to appreciate the important role of even familiar and ordinary places in framing the choices and experiences by which people define their lives. To look more closely at the technical medium that connected him to those places is to realize the great extent to which we construct the world around us with our eyes, and not just our hands.

Finally, this is a book about ourselves, inheritors of the legacy of Charles Cushman and others like him who sought to capture the American "thing-in-process" before it proceeded to turn into something quite different. Whatever pride, nostalgia, or bitterness his pictures may call to

mind, the transformations of the half century since his death assuredly color our understanding of Cushman's visual record. Like a distant cloud, our retrospective view of his images shades the work he has laid before us. To ignore the role played by our own hindsighted perceptions, to appreciate the images solely for their documentary or artistic or biographical value, is to deprive ourselves of the self-discovery—the rekindled awareness of our own choices, our own limitations, our own wordless secrets—that this powerful storyteller sought to obtain from his own life's work.

Charles Cushman was not the only mid-twentieth-century American to cloak his artistic impulses in gray-flannel and oxford cloth. In contrast to the self-conscious rebel heralded or parodied in popular images of the time—the action painter, the beat poet, the bop musician, the Method actor—Cushman and others like him willingly bridged the worlds of necessity and fantasy, of social engagement and critical detachment. Today, such part-time artists seldom engage the attention of scholars eager to explore a more fully realized expressive world, one as distinguishable from the presumed mediocrities of mass society as black is from white. Yet for Cushman and millions of others before and since, a connection to the "straight" world, an embrace of things as they happen to be, by no means necessarily lowered the level of their attentiveness or the sharpness of their critique.

A few years after Charles Cushman crossed a golden bridge into green and brown hills, another and better known businessman-artist of the day sat at his desk in the executive offices of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, filing the notes for his new poem in the right-hand drawer as he went about his work day. For all of our efforts to understand the world, wrote Wallace Stevens, we see only "the version of the thing . . . [t]he day in its color not perpending time."[3] Yet it is unclear if Stevens considered that inevitable limitation on our perception, that acknowledgment of our inability really to know the world, to be a tragic thing. With an eye attuned both to corporate balance sheets and springtime flowers, and with a dedication rooted both in statistical thorough-

ness and obsessive wanderlust, Charles Cushman took pleasure, and found a sort of grace, in the process of gazing at his day in its color. Today, the challenge awaiting anyone confronted with his collection of pictures is to look not only at them but through them: through to the place where this enigmatic man of the American Century still stands, challenging us to understand ourselves amidst the color of our own day.

DAWN

Indiana Beginnings, 1896–1918

Writing later in his life, Charles Cushman recalled that he had been raised "pretty close to the soil," and once you have been to Posey County, Indiana, you know that he meant the phrase as more than a figure of speech.[1] Approaching Cushman's native Poseyville from the northeast, you almost feel your car sinking down into the shared floodplain of the two rivers—the Wabash, to the west, and the Ohio, to the south—that hold Posey County in their grip. This is the point at which Indiana tilts, like an off-kilter frying pan, down to its lowest elevation, at the junction of the two rivers. Despite Posey County's claim, in the words of the local chamber of commerce, to being "rich in history, industry, natural beauty, and its people," the area draws few outsiders today. The county's population peaked in 1900 and gently declined through most of the twentieth century. A few more people have arrived in recent decades (testament in part to the exurbanization of Evansville, a few miles east of the county line), but their numbers have never risen above thirty thousand countywide.[2]

Posey County's largest town, Mt. Vernon, straddles a gentle rise on the north bank of the Ohio. The center of town looks little different today from its appearance in 1876, when optimistic citizens topped off the tower of their new county courthouse. The waterfront, which was officially styled the "Southwind Maritime Center" in 1980 and which exports more than three million tons of crops and manufactured goods annually, is nevertheless still the kind of place where you might expect to find a kid with rolled-up cuffs, kicking an old bottle along the levee or throwing a line into the river.[3]

The village of New Harmony, the county's chief destination for visitors, is itself a monument to desertion. Here the German Rappites of 1814 and their successors, the followers of the Scottish socialist Robert Owen, tried to build a New World utopia—and failed. Today, little remains in the town outside of a handful of early nineteenth-century structures, a small fleet of horse-drawn buggies, and a smattering of shops and businesses primed, fittingly, to a theme of quietude and contemplation.

Residents of places like Posey County are only too aware of the differences that separate their communities from the mainstream of twenty-

2. Barnyard, Posey County, Indiana, 1941. Long after he left home, Cushman's native Posey County remained a touchstone of the photographer's ever-expanding portrait of twentieth-century America.

first-century growth and development. Some take a measure of pride in resisting the hazards of change. Their ancestors, however, had no intention of settling places that would pose picturesquely as history passed by. There was a time when the prospect of two major rivers colliding on a map excited the ambition of all those Americans convinced that greater opportunity awaited at some strategically chosen spot beyond the current frontier. This prospect of capitalizing on underdeveloped resources, a promise unleashed even before the nation itself was born, represented the first phase on this continent of the modern era—a period of widespread faith in the ultimate benefits of environmental exploitation, economic individualism, and material accumulation. "The earth is a machine," Ralph Waldo Emerson would write in his essay on farming, "which yields almost gratuitous service to every application of the intellect."[4] Charles Cushman's Posey County, seemingly the remnant of a "simpler time," as some would have it, was an integral part of the complex social machinery that Emerson and others of his generation extolled, one linking sites

of extraction, storage, processing, and trade in resources into a single system that extended from remote places like southern Indiana to port cities such as New Orleans, and thence across the world. Cushman would grow up to see—and to picture—that modern landscape as it matured and then collapsed beneath the weight of a new layer of economic, technological, and cultural imperatives that shaped the United States that we know today.

The most important connective threads within the modern national landscape were its rivers, and it was for this reason that places like Posey County seemed, to many Americans in the years before the 1830s, destined for greatness. Like the canals, railroads, and highways that followed, rivers represented at the time the cheapest and fastest routes along which to move resources, and it was somewhere along the chain of handling such resources (whether extracting, processing, transporting, storing, selling, or servicing them) that most Americans made their living until the 1970s. Some of those river-junction sites (Pittsburgh, St. Louis) succeeded spectacularly, if only to settle into a slower-moving urban niche amid subsequent changes in transportation and technology. Others (Cairo, Illinois, for instance) never realized the dreams of urban glory that attended their conception. As for the place where the Wabash flows into the Ohio, Mt. Vernon's courthouse spire notwithstanding, the low-lying landscape of southwest Indiana was destined to yield farms and small market towns, nothing more.

Still, there was no shortage of Americans and European immigrants willing to set their sights on this fertile territory, even before it was legally wrested from a variety of Indian claimants in the period from 1803 to 1809, shortly after establishment of the Indiana territory. Southwest Indiana saw a steady influx of newcomers, including speculators, economic opportunists, landless farmers, and underemployed laborers, willing to gamble on such new horizons—men like the Tennessee-born George Thomas, who established a small fortune as a wharf-boat operator in Mount Vernon—the town where his granddaughter, Mabel Thomas (later Mabel Cushman) was born in 1868. There eventually came to the region,

as well, a smattering of the professionals, clubwomen, ministers, and bankers who considered it their lot in life to elevate frontier American towns and cities from the status of crass commercial outposts into orderly and civil communities. Such a person was Cushman's maternal great-grandfather, Charles Weever, a Maine native who in the 1830s established his medical practice in Posey County; such too were Charles Cushman's paternal grandparents, Elizabeth Cushman and her husband Reuel, a Methodist circuit-rider. Himself a first-generation Hoosier, Reuel and his descendants still prided themselves on their direct ties to Robert Cushman, one of the original settlers of Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, and the namesake of a monument dedicated in that historic town in 1858. Reuel and Elizabeth's son Wilbur, born the year following the erection of the family monument, grew up to operate the local lumber mill and grain warehouse that stood along Railroad (later Water) Street in Poseyville, and he earned enough money from his operations to build a big frame house for Mabel, whom he had married in 1895, and their son, Charles, born the following summer. The house still stands on a quiet block of Second Street, a block from the stores of Main Street, around the corner from the local Carnegie library, up the street from the Methodist Church.[5]

This was the world in which Charles Cushman grew up. Sunday drives to his grandparents took him either south to Mt. Vernon (where his mother's father, the county sheriff, lived with his wife and their younger children in the residence adjoining the county jail), or north, to the Gibson County land where Reuel farmed after he retired from the ministry. Back in town, the census taker who passed through Poseyville in 1900 needed only seven pages of his ledger to record the name of every one of Wilbur and Mabel's neighbors; surely the Cushmans knew them all. Family photos tempt a viewer to imagine young Charles the coddled only child of small-town gentry (a sister, Dorothy, died at the age of two), the cherished offspring of ambitious parents who must have considered their little community a pleasant enough place but not the mercantile or cultural center that earlier generations of Cushmans, Thomases, and Weevers

3. Charles Cushman, c. 1898

4. Indiana University, c. 1908

might have foreseen in their early flights of entrepreneurial fantasy (fig. 3). Their son played his own games of make-believe as he sat in the child-sized, wire-back chair that they bought for him and gazed out at the quiet street from the front porch. It is hard to imagine that Charles's ambitious relatives would not have encouraged him to imagine a life for himself beyond the Posey County line.

That he in fact did so is first evident in a telegram that Cushman sent to the Indiana University (IU) registrar in December, 1913. "As I contemplate entering your institution next term," wrote the teenager, "I would like you to send me a credit blank so I may get it filled out as soon as possible."[6] A month later he was in Bloomington. Like his near-contemporaries, Hoagy Carmichael and Ernie Pyle (both of them just enough younger than Cushman to have missed him in school), Cushman arrived at IU a small-town Hoosier with big-time ambitions; like them, too, he found at the college the opportunity to develop those ambitions in a setting that, while sheltered as all colleges are, brought him into contact with ideas not easily accessible to the resident of the farmlands and small towns of early twentieth-century Indiana (fig. 4). The university,