

Photo Books

VINCE ALETTI

The simultaneous appearance of two new Disfarmer books has brought fresh attention to the Heber Springs, Arkansas, portrait photographer who's been a cult favorite ever since the 1976 publication and exhibition of pictures made from his rediscovered glass-plate negatives. The republication of that material by Twin Palms in 1996 confirmed Disfarmer's place as an avatar of vernacular authenticity—a self-taught eccentric whose pared-down work doesn't suffer from comparisons to Sander, Evans, and Avedon. But until now we've only seen posthumous prints of photos Disfarmer took between 1939 and '46, a narrow view of a career that started in the mid 1920s and lasted more than 30 years. After years of dogged research among the citizens of Heber Springs, that view has been both broadened and deepened. Together, *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints* (powerHouse) and *Original Disfarmer Photographs* (Steidl/Steven Kasher Gallery) reproduce more than 200 previously unseen vintage photos, all actual size and none larger than a postcard. Rick Woodward's terrific essay in the powerHouse book pins down the photographer's often peculiar, surely delusional personal history, but nothing is as fascinating as the photos themselves. Though Disfarmer may not have been especially ingratiating to his clientele, his unpretentious approach suited them perfectly. Standing before his camera, these handsome small-town men, women, and children look not just disarmingly elegant but vital, self-contained, and ready for anything the world would throw their way.