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First published in 1973, this remarkable book about life in a small turn-of-the-century Wisconsin town has become a cult classic. Lesy has collected and arranged photographs taken between 1890 and 1910 by a Black River Falls photographer, Charles Van Schaik.

Wisconsin Death Trip Details

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From Reader Review Wisconsin Death Trip for online ebook

Nicola Mansfield says

Reason for Reading: In the book *A Reliable Wife* by Roderick Goodwin, the author mentions in a note that this book gave him the idea for the atmosphere to set his own book in. His characters read from the newspaper regularly and his description of this book made want to read it. So I put an ILL request in for it right away.

Comments: This is a very unusual book. It is a collection of both photographs and newspaper clippings from the period of 1895 to 1900 from a newspaper called the *Badger State Banner* which covered local Jackson County news as well as having access to state wide news. During this period, the author contends that a certain presence of death, and tragedy loomed over the agricultural towns of the American Midwest. What became a mundane part of their everyday lives as reported in the newspapers, now, to us looking back, seems to be a macabre era of history.

The newspaper articles which run from one-liners to several paragraphs report on suicides, diphtheria deaths, baby deaths, insane declarations, window smashers, arsonists, found dead bodies, deaths, funerals, charges of obscene letters sent through the mail and much more plus repeated instances of the same over and over with each one different and many the same. Suicides are rampant, men shooting themselves in the head, hanging themselves in the barn and one guy blew his head off with dynamite. Women poisoned themselves with the plenty of rodent killers found on the farm, drowned themselves in barrels and rivers or set themselves on fire, one lady in a bath of kerosene. The asylum must have been filled to the rafters with all the reports of committed people. How many times I read of women with 8 to 13 children being committed as insane with symptoms of despondency and men who lost their jobs and wouldn't do anything were declared insane. Of course then there were also the usual religious insanity, the tobacco insanity, the "thinks the neighbours are after him" insanity, too. All this and the other topics make for absolutely fascinating reading of a time when life must have been a hard road to travel.

Then along with the text between each year, are sections of photographs which were taken by a local studio photographer, Charley Van Schaick. It was the finding of the glass negative slides that prompted the compilation of this book. None of the photos are snapshots, they are all photos taken because someone wanted them taken. They are very striking and range from the morbid dead babies in coffins and old women who are scary to look at to studio shots of people but whose eyes are strangely lifeless and there are even some photos of picnics and local businesses. The way they have been arranged though is not just a sequence of photos but is an artistic presentation. I almost felt as if I were watching a silent movie at times.

The combination of the text and the photos together presents an unusual artistic viewing of social history in a manner not likely to be seen again. I think this is only something to come about from the mindset of the seventies. Both the preface and the authors ending thesis (this was originally presented as his thesis at Rutgers) suffer from a lot of seventies psycho-babble but the history presented is unblemished and fascinating ... and macabre. This is the type of book that would be a pleasure to own and dip into or just to come back to over and over for the pictures alone. While not for everyone I highly recommended it for those who, like me, enjoy this sort of thing.

Melki says

After reading *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, a story inspired by photographs, I realized I had

never added this strange and wonderful book to my list. Essentially nothing more than a series of photos and newspaper accounts from the late 19th century, the book depicts a troubled slice of history as it recounts daily life in Black River Falls, Wisconsin and its surrounding areas. The newspaper excerpts tell woeful tales of suicide, murder/suicides, madness and sadness. If anything good ever happened to these people, it never made the pages of *The Badger State Banner*.

The photographs in this book are what really draw you in, and they leave a lasting impression. Taken over a period of 20 years by photographer Charles Van Schaick, they are a unique chronicle of an American town. Ladies in their Sunday-best sit astride horses, miserable looking families pose in front of their tiny homes, while another man mows the lawn of a gorgeous mansion.

A group of men in black face is shown next to a photo of barbers and their customers. My absolute favorite is a happy looking, hatted lady, holding a snake in each hand, with a third draped around her neck.

Most disturbing are the many photos of dead children in their coffins.

Perhaps the most poignant is the photograph of a living baby posed with the photos of two dead siblings - a grieving mother's only way to get a family portrait.

It's difficult to look at the pictures here, and not wonder about the lives of the subjects depicted. In fact, this book has inspired at least two novels - *A Reliable Wife* by Robert Goolrick, and the brilliant, though deeply disturbing, *A Prayer for the Dying* by Stewart O'Nan.

Originally published in 1973, this book is still in print and readily available. Many of the images can be viewed here - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whsimag...>

And, a docudrama film has been made, and is available through Netflix.

Harris says

This was a very interesting account of the effects of an economic depression on the rural inhabitants of western Wisconsin, specifically the town of Black River Falls, with photographs that really bring to life the people who lived and died during the 1890s. However, I feel that the book's format, arguments, and designs say almost as much about the study of the humanities during the 1970s as about the late nineteenth century. Lesy's impetuous behind the approach to history seen in the book seem to be very representative of the new philosophies such as postmodernism that began to effect the academic world by the '70s. In any case, I thought that Lesy did a very good job at evoking the everyday life, if rather sordid and bizarre, of the rural populace of America. I especially felt the mixture of actual documents and photographs brought a unique view of history, brought even closer to home as I read the book in the town of Winona, Minnesota just across the river from the area of Wisconsin the book details.

Stephen says

Ran across this book when I was about 15 and it seared my teenage brain like hell. Definitely had a visceral impact on my whole neural pathway development and all. Looking back on it now, I think I'd have to relegate it to the dustbin, at least as far as it tries to be a "history". As an "artwork", it sticks.

Michael Lesy wrote his morbid *Death Trip* as a 20-something grad student at the University of Wisconsin, after he discovered Charles Van Schaick's glass-plate negatives in a reading room. Lesy actually said that *Death Trip* was written as a subjective surrealist photo montage of text and image, not genuine history. (Van Schaick's work simply provided the gloomy visuals to unrelated news clippings). Unfortunately, most people who pick up the book will read it as history. It's actually an experimental art piece, an artifact of the LSD generation that produced it and of surrealist theory. *Death Trip* strikes me as being more about Lesy's private dark fascination with death, crime, and disappearing things than it is about "Wisconsin". Given that caveat, it's incredibly interesting as a *personal* existential statement, a "soup bowl" to be "combined and sucked on and enjoyed," as Lesy wrote. But it's not good history. Lesy is a killer literary journalist and experimental artist, but *Death Trip* shouldn't be taken at face-value as local history.

Van Schaick (a small-town photographer who flourished around the turn of the century but who died as recently as 1942) wasn't out to document angst or mass hysteria. Lesy uses Van Schaick's photos to make a personal statement. I've looked at most of Van Schaick's thousands of photos (all of them are now digitized on the Wisconsin Historical Society's website). Lesy pilfered the weirdest of Van Schaick's photos to use as a kind of theatrical backdrop in this book about people going crazy in small North Woods towns during an economic crisis. Shit burns down, people kill their families, teenagers get lonely and lovelorn. Honestly, that sounds like a pretty good description of America in 2014, or human beings at any stage: why Black River Falls, Wisconsin, in the 1890s?

Actually, the majority of Van Schaick's overall body of photos is a really interesting documentation of the destruction of the North Woods and of the Winnebago Indians. (Probably close to half his photos are remarkably honest studio portraits of Native Americans, whom he had an immense respect for and whom he portrayed as *real people*, not as fantasized Noble Savages like Edward Curtis did. And unlike Van Schaick's predictable studio portraits of his white neighbors, his photos of Native Americans just jump out of the frame.) Van Schaick was definitely *not* out to document a "creepy" little town and the human weirdness there, and I think the use of his photographs in a book alleging mass insanity is a pretty flawed idea. Van Schaick was a realist in the vein of Carl Sandburg, who saw the reality of small-town life like the great Midwestern poet did, the people as "hero and hoodlum, phantom and gorilla", but to call his work "macabre" as some do or to say that he depicted characters in an insane asylum is really stretching it. His career was as interesting and remarkable as the much-lauded Mike Disfarmer of Heber Springs, Arkansas. Unfortunately, because he's been hitched to Michael Lesy since *Death Trip* came out in 1973, it's been hard to see Van Schaick through a less surreal lens.

Lesy later wrote about his first encounter with the images that he used in *Wisconsin Death Trip* that "What I'd done was to discover a massive amount of pain, suffering, and death in the middle of America. In fact, what I'd described was a holocaust without Jews..." A better book might have used Van Schaick's work to look at the dark memory of environmental destruction going on all around the Midwest, and really all of North America, at a time when everything old about the place except the rocks was being changed or outright obliterated. (The time period covered in this book was truly a Holocaust of nature.) Moreover, a frightening book about the human experience doesn't have to be historical, or as subjective and experimental as *Wisconsin Death Trip*. It could be as contemporary as last week's CNN coverage. But imagine piecing together a history of New York in the '50s from Diane Arbus' freak show, or the history of America in 2014 from the most dismal news reportage, and tie it together with some strange photographs, and you have Lesy's book here: a scream of a statement pieced together from detached journalese, but not very accurate "history."

Gotta say, Lesy does leave a deep impression. I won't deny that he writes strange and wonderful books. (Get his later non-photo book, *The Forbidden Zone*, a journalistic foray into the "death industry", from the Omaha stockyards to an Asheville pathology unit and a Florida crime beat.) But that's really all this is, impressionism. Where *Wisconsin Death Trip* really triumphs is in giving the definitive jackhammer treatment to dreamy-eyed fantasies about a Ken Burns America where everything is in golden technicolor and evening light. The Wisconsin of the 1890s was dark in the same way the times we live in are barren and depressing. Strip away fashion and hair-dos and it's not hard to look around and see the sadness in the faces of Charles Van Schaick's sitters gradually becoming ours.

In some ways, I'm glad Lesy did what he did -- it was bold and beats dry American Studies Department political correctness any day. (As a cult classic, the book has been influential enough to spawn a hard-rock band, an opera, and a "fiction documentary" by filmmaker James Marsh with soundtrack by Yo-Yo Ma and Mark O'Connor.) Look at it context and *Death Trip* is still a powerful ride on a loose powerline, but the book is a creature of its own and has to be read that way.

Connie Bloch says

Being interested in both history and genealogy, and being from Wisconsin, I had to look at this one. The portraits are interesting, too bad they are not all printed as taken, I could do without the artistic changes (if there were 3000 portraits to choose from why use the same portrait several times in the same book?). The articles are a good collection portraying the dark side of turn of the century life and lack of medical knowledge. Glad I found this one for 99 cents.

Susan says

This out-of-print book is so good that it was my only Christmas/Anniversary request a couple of years back. I read it when it first came out in the 1970's and have never forgotten the structure and premise: glass negatives were found all dating from the late 1800's in Wisconsin. Some were death pictures (especially the children, as pictures were rarely taken then). Others were just portraits of everyday citizens. Side-by-side to these pictures were excerpts from Wisconsin papers; that society's definition of obituaries. What was most moving and thought-provoking was the fact that the custom was to be brutally blunt: "Eva Sounder threw herself down a well, distraught at the loss of the Sounder farm". (I made that up, but I do remember there was a description of suicide-by-well-jumping in the book.) The essay at the beginning describes how the Wisconsin farmers could not understand the worldwide depression. Why, if their crops had produced a certain dollar amount the year before, did something going on in Europe suddenly made their crop worth so little this year? The pictures, the author's essay, and the news clippings came together to make a book worth reading, thinking about, and remembering for forty years.

Emily says

Got this one through inter-library loan and was very, very sorry to have to let it go today.

I (morbidly) loved everything about it except for Lesy's opening and closing essays, which are sometimes poetic, but more often cringe-inducing. Fortunately, they are also short, and the end result of this compilation

of photographs and newspaper clippings from late 1800s Wisconsin newspapers is fantastically weird and totally absorbing.

Like many reviewers, I read this because it was mentioned in the notes in Goolrick's *A Reliable Wife*, a book I did not actually enjoy, but nonetheless could not stop reading. "Such things happened?" Apparently so... diphtheria, arson, murder, and madness abound in WDT. The suicides are what really got me, though.

"Mrs. Phillip Fredericks, aged 82 years, who was partly insane, threw herself in her neighbor's cistern at Beloit and was drowned. She had long planned death in this manner."

"Henry Johnson, an old bachelor of Grand Dyke, cut off the heads of all of his hens recently, made a bonfire of his best clothes, and killed himself with arsenic."

"The 80 year old mother of an imprisoned man threw herself in front of a train and was cut into 3 pieces. She was crazed by the disgrace."

"James Price, aged about 60 years, committed suicide at Omro by taking paris green and morphine. All attempts to save him he resisted. Despondency was the cause of the act. He fell last spring and broke the patella of his right knee and has been unable to work since. He leaves a wife and one daughter."

"Working men at Kenosha found the body of a man hanging from a rafter. The body was badly decomposed. Nothing was found to identify it."

"Gottfried Wagner, an old farmer living near Montello, set fire to all his farm buildings and then threw himself into the flames. All his grain and farm implements were destroyed... The cause of the act was supposed to have been a divorce procured by his wife. He destroyed the property to prevent it falling into her hands. Wagner kissed the children goodbye, gave each some money, and sent them to school. His wife left him a week before.

"Ludwig Senglaub, a German resident of Manitowoc, aged 74, committed suicide Friday morning at the home of William Radins. The old man had become enamored of Mrs. Radins and had been a frequent visitor at the house. She told him not to come any more. He went to the house, however, walked into the front room, and deliberately shot himself while looking into a mirror."

"Mary Karban, wife of Wenzel Karban, a farmer of the town of Neva, committed suicide by eating the heads of 4 boxes of matches. She was only 16 years of age and had been married last fall."

Mrs. Reuben C. Bartlett, an elderly woman living near the western limits of Eau Claire, partly filled a washtub with kerosene, partially disrobed, and poured kerosene over her head and set fire to it. She died in a horrible agony before help reached her. She was undoubtedly insane... She leaves several adult sons and daughters and a husband."

"Abraham Zweekbaum of the town of Holland committed suicide by battering himself on the head with a hammer... He attempted to take his life a few days ago by cutting his head from his body with a sharp instrument, but was prevented from doing so."

And this:

"Elsie Whitsan, 4 years old, child of Henry Whitsan, died at Neenah of grief... Her mother died a few days before and from then until her death the child cried without stopping. Physicians say that death was caused by a broken heart."

Wow.

Also watched the film adaptation last night, and it is a beautiful, delicate treatment of the subject -- highly recommended.

Emma says

great book for overly moody man-children who think a passing interest in "death" makes them deep.

J.W.D. Nicoletto says

This is the American history, reality I knew I'd never find in doctoral propaganda. Brutal, disgusting, insane human. It is what it isn't.

Sarah says

I recently read and loved "A Reliable Wife." The author, Robert Goolrick, claimed this book was his inspiration. Wierd, wierd, wierd

Disease. Mental illness. Corruption. Deceit. Murder. Crime. Psychosis. Love affairs. Suicide. Death. Lots of death. This is a bizarre book, a collection of newspaper articles and historical photographs from Black River Falls, Wisconsin from the 1890's to 1910's. This book paints a bleak picture of harsh working conditions, unsavory social connections, and a genuine hardship amongst the community. A reviewer from Library Journal summed it up succinctly, "[the:] whole package seems to confirm that the good old days were actually awful."

Jean says

Not like any other book.... don't read it so much as dip into it and marvel at how tough life was back in the Wisconsin of the 1890's. Snippets of newspaper articles touching on deadly epidemics, bank failures, suicides, arson and doctors' notes from the Mendota State "Insane Asylum". Here is one such snippet: (Mary Sweeney appears often - in different towns - throughout the state, breaking windows.) Governor Schofield will take steps to provide, if necessary, for the care of Mary Sweeney who has cause so much trouble.... by smashing plate glass windows. This woman... once taught school in Marquette, Michigan and Stevens Point in this state... Mary says she doesn't know why she breaks windows and only does it when the craze seizes her. She uses cocaine liberally on such occasions, saying it quiets her nerves."

Rebecca says

Wisconsin Death Trip doesn't entirely deserve its cult reputation. The tedious Freudian opening and closing essays and the super groovy 1970s art collages get in the way of the reader's enjoyment of its morbid and

interesting little nuggets of American history.

lola says

There is no better evidence than this book that the concept of a "simpler, happier time" is a straight-up teleological mendacity concocted by some archetypal mom to make us all feel guilty for ipods and Lady Gaga. It's the late 19th century in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, and everyone is offing themselves in the most esoteric ways possible, shit is constantly on fire, and roving bands of tramps are basically running everything.

Karin says

I picked up this book after reading that it served as the inspiration for "A Reliable Wife," but it was just a bit too strange for me. As a history buff, I appreciated the photographic portraits and newspaper stories demonstrating the dark side of rural, turn-of-the-century Wisconsin. But it felt as if the author was trying too hard to present the book as an experimental, sociological art project, which sometimes worked well, but sometimes bordered on the ridiculous.

Paul Bryant says

The time traveller stepped cautiously out of his machine and looked around the wide field. The day was bright, the country fecund. He permitted himself a smile. An elderly man was walking purposefully ahead of him. "Good day to you!" called the time traveller. "Not now, not now," came the reply, "I have just this moment taken the life of my wife, her sister and three of her cousins, who were visiting. I am in a hurry now to take my own. I intend to swing shortly from yonder elm." The time traveller reeled back in alarm. What was this? He cast his eyes about and noticed for the first time various dark forms dangling from the larger branches of the nearby trees. But then his eyes were taken up by an altogether gayer sight – it was a cheerful bonfire in the mid-distance. As he approached he noticed various persons frantically throwing water from buckets onto the flames and he realised it was a domestic house ablaze.

"Come help us please!" said one, approaching. "Ralph Chase and his intire family are still within – a local boy known as an incendiary has done this for sure –" and he handed the time traveller a bucket but suddenly sagged to the ground and began convulsing. A woman ran up and dragged the time traveller away from the moribund : "Keep clear, keep clear – he has the typhoid for sure!" The time traveller turned to her and in terrified tones demanded of her

“What God Forsaken place is this?”

“Why sir,” she said, “this is Black Ferry, Wisconsin, 1896.”

This book is :

an affront to good taste

a stone thrown into a pond
a diatribe
an indictment of human beings in general
a patchwork quilt of blood and death
an exercise in a particularly unpleasant form of voyeurism
an original and extraordinary history essay
a ripe example of the hipster's fascination for the outre for its own sake
a vision of Hell

What you get is :

a) snippets from a couple of local newspapers from this small area of Wisconsin between 1885 and 1900. All the snippets are about suicide, murder, insanity and disease. Check the name of this book – that's right. It's not called "A Pleasant day Out in Wisconsin".

b) interpolated quotations from a couple of novels

c) snippets from case studies of inmates at the Mendoza Asylum for the Insane.

d) some bizarre photos by a local Wisconsin photographer, all posed, many featuring mannish women and men with frankly absurd tastes in facial hair – e.g. you shave all your face EXCEPT under your chin and your throat, so where your chin ends there's a big hair explosion – hmm, attractive! Note to self – must try this.

Oh yes, several photos of babies in coffins.

e) pompous essays by the author/compiler and his professor pal Warren Susman (if my old professor had written a piece this patronising for my first book I'd have photoshopped his face onto some S&M porn and posted it on the university bulletin board).

The final essay by Michael Lesy might actually be pretty good but you know what? By the time I got to it I'd had enough.

Random example 1:

"A wild man is terrorising the people north of Grantsburg. He appears to be 35 years of age, has long black whiskers, is barefooted, has scarcely any clothes on him, and he carries a hatchet. He appeared at several farm houses and asked for something to eat. He eats ravenously, and when asked where he came from, points to the east. he secretes himself in the woods during the day and has the most bloodcurdling yells that have ever been heard in the neighbourhood."

Random example 2:

"Henry Ehlers, a Milwaukee butcher, died from nosebleed. His nose had been bleeding for 9 days... He was 37 years of age and had been a great meat eater."

Random example 3:

"The family of Henry Miller of Cedarburg is sorely afflicted. A 6 month old child died of diphtheria a week ago and now a 7 year old boy is dead. A few weeks previous, 2 children had died, all of the same disease. One child survives out of a family of 5 children and that too is down with the disease."

There's a great American traditional song called Railroad Boy which in retrospect encapsulates the casual brutality of many of these jarring anecdotes of damage - I would have given the link for the great performance by Dylan and Joan Baez taken from Renaldo & Clara, but Youtube deleted that, so here's just the words :

She went upstairs to make her bed
And not one word to her mother said.
Her mother she went upstairs too
Saying, "Daughter, oh daughter, what's troublin' you?":

"Oh mother, oh mother, I cannot tell
That railroad boy that I love so well.
He courted me my life away
And now at home will no longer stay."

"There is a place in yonder town
Where my love goes and he sits him down.
And he takes that strange girl on his knee
And he tells to her what he won't tell me."

Her father he came home from work
Sayin', "Where is my daughter, she seems so hurt"
He went upstairs to give her hope
An' he found her hangin' by a rope.

He took his knife and he cut her down
And on her bosom these words he found:

"Go dig my grave both wide and deep,
Put a marble stone at my head and feet,
And on my breast, put a snow white dove
To warn the world that I died of love

Although in Wisconsin in the 1890s they were dying of a whole lot more things than mere love.