



OLIVE BRANCH

Photographs and Texts by Cedric N. Chatterley



Mark, his mother Virginia, and his step-father Eddie in front of their home on Commercial Street in Cairo, Illinois. October, 1985.

Front Cover: Mark with dried and strung ginseng that he dug from the hills north of Cairo. April, 1986.

Introduction

I look around and make an inventory of the things Mark has given me: A pocket knife made in Pakistan, a small 3 ft. tape measure on a key chain, and a Frosty Root Beer clock which hangs in my kitchen. These are just a few of the items Mark has found over the years in trash dumpsters and abandoned buildings. Other objects he keeps to fix are broken furniture, bicycles, radios and clocks--lots of clocks. He told me not long ago that he just likes things to be fixed, even if he can't use them.

I met Mark in October, 1985. A friend and I came down from Carbondale to Cairo, Illinois, a distance of about sixty miles. We were standing on a curb and watching a Shriner's parade. Men in tassled hats were doing figure 8's in their miniature cars. After Mark noticed my camera, he approached me and asked if I worked for the newspaper. Before I could say no, he asked if I would follow him into the house directly behind us where he, his mother, and step-father lived. He wanted me to photograph everything that needed repair. I made pictures of leaky plumbing, broken windows and a rotting porch support. He asked when the photographs would appear in the *Cairo Daily Citizen*. It was Mark's hope that a story would bring attention to their landlord and maybe something would be done.

Much later I realized how *everything* seemed broken.

Before leaving, Mark showed me a copy of his birth certificate he kept in his wallet. He pointed out the incorrect birth date. He said he was born July 12, 1966-- not July 13. He asked if I knew how to go about getting it changed. He showed me his name on three different plastic prescription bottles he kept in his pocket and talked about the medication that helped control his seizure disorder and nerves. He also talked a little about his recent application for Social Security Disability Benefits.

Mark was turned down for SSI benefits in March of 1986. On August 10th his mother and stepfather moved from Cairo to Thebes, about twenty miles away. They had been on a *married couples only* waiting list for public housing. Mark was left on his own. He hitchhiked to Florida to look for an uncle he had stayed with for a summer when he was a child, but he ended up staying at a homeless shelter in Clearwater called Everybody's Tabernacle. He returned to Cairo in early fall, a little more hardened and streetwise. For a month he circled about Southern Illinois in search of a home. This was a place, oddly enough, where Mark had lived his entire life but was essentially an alien.

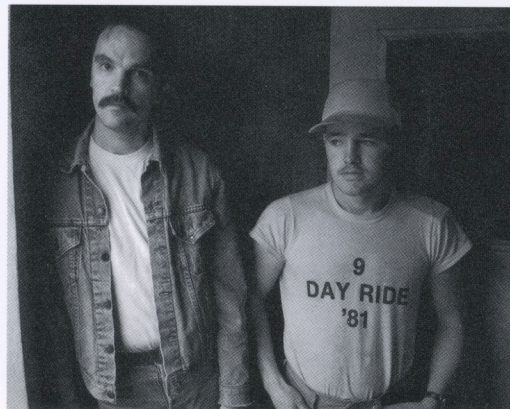
Around late October of 1986, Mark disappeared. In mid-November he reached me through a message and said he was in downtown Springfield, Illinois. He was trying to make an appointment with the Lincoln Land Epilepsy Association because he needed proof of his seizure disorder for his next SSI application. I went up to Springfield to look for the Grand Hotel. What I didn't know was that he had been very ill and had not eaten much for several days. I walked the hallways until I found his room number--the place nearly scared the hell out of me. After I knocked and said who it was, Mark opened the door and began crying. This was the only time I have seen him cry in the eight years I've known him.

Mark found his coat, and as we walked down the stairs and passed another resident, he repeated several times, "I'm going home, I'm going home . . ."

During the trip, it was difficult for Mark to sit up straight. He told me he had been experiencing a sharp pain inside his lower back and that he had tried earlier in the week to check himself into a hospital in Springfield. They told him there was nothing they could do and finally had some orderlies escort him out.

Mark and I arrived in Southern Illinois around midnight. Two things were obvious: Mark needed medical attention, and none of his family members were willing to put him up for the night. We crossed the Mississippi River and went to Southeast Missouri Memorial Hospital in Cape Girardeau. Mark was admitted and spent a week recovering from a serious bout of infectious hepatitis.

After Mark was released from the hospital, I took him down to Cairo for a mandatory visit with a local social worker, somebody who had known Mark for several years. As long as I live, I'll never forget what he said: "Let's face it, Mark, you're just a street person and you've run out of all your alternatives. . ."



Show and Tell

by Debra Risberg

"Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."

James Agee and Walker Evans: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 1939¹

Cedric Chatterley's *Olive Branch* chronicles six years in the life of a young man named Mark, transforming his personal experiences into poignant visual metaphors infused with occasional dark wit. Over one hundred black and white photographs, descriptive texts, personal letters and transcribed conversations trace Mark's transition from an innocent adolescent to a streetwise father who has weathered the ravages of poverty, homelessness and life-threatening physical illness. In a larger sense, *Olive Branch* explores the physical and psychological effects of poverty as it is passed from generation to generation. Chatterley's intimate portrayal of Mark as he attempts to rectify his damaged inheritance also provides a context in which to consider more contemporary dialogues regarding the social hierarchy, ethics and art.

Olive Branch consists of three major parts representing Mark's life with his mother and stepfather, his dark odyssey through homelessness and illness, and finally his struggle to attain a home and a family of his own. The 11 x 14 inch photographs with hand-written titles require the viewer to literally get close to the work for an intimate reading of its contents. The title *Olive Branch*, a small town in Southern Illinois where Mark grew up, relates to the story of Noah's Ark in which a dove bearing an olive branch signified the end of a cataclysmic flood and a new beginning for life on earth. Chatterley appropriates this biblical symbol of promise and re-presents it with existential irony.

Mark's family portrait, one of the earliest images in this series, can be used to illustrate the complex relationship between subject, photographer and audience. Even though they had just met Cedric, Mark and his mother confidently return the photographer's gaze. The step-father looks away as if burdened with exhaustion and defeat. His feeble smile suggests an effort to appear at ease with his condition. One wonders what happiness and comfort can be wrung from

such desolate circumstances and what purpose might be served through its documentation?

James Agee, in his obsessively self-conscious 1939 publication on the plight of several poor, white, tenant farm families, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, describes the Ricketts family preparing to be photographed by Walker Evans. His attention is absorbed by Mrs. Ricketts as she cleans the faces and combs back the hair of her children. To Agee she seems painfully aware of their impoverished appearance as she stoically submits to the photograph. Agee describes how she is bound by her husband's expectations and bears the weight of his and society's power over her existence. He imagines her thoughts as Evans makes the portrait, "If you are our friend, lift this weight and piercing from us, from our children."²

Mark's family portrait confronts the photographer and viewer with a dilemma of responsibility similar to Agee's self-deprecating wrastlings over his right to picture and write about the intimate details of the Ricketts' "unimagined existence." By revealing his story, Mark consciously endowed Chatterley with a new responsibility, radically altering the photographer's vision and his level of participation in the world. According to Chatterley, "For so long, photography was just an external thing. When I met Mark, it became internal."

Previous to his encounter with Mark, Chatterley used photography to explore group rituals, not individuals. He accentuated the absurd and presented it with sardonic wit. The first photograph I saw by him showed people dancing with paper bags over their heads at a beach party. It was from a series he produced on square-dancers entitled *Square Dancing on Purpose*. In another project he photographed Las Vegas wedding chapels. His sense of humor was not directed toward an isolated subject but indirectly implicated the social system that produced that subject. Although he has moved beyond his earlier documentary intentions, the photographer's full-frame, black-bordered images still strain against the edge, and his dark humor and ironic vision remain characteristic of his style.

Chatterley told me that he was uncomfortable when I described some of his photographs of Mark as humorous. Two of these images immediately come to mind. One shows Mark in his mobile home connecting an IV unit filled with water to a frail house plant. In another he is in deep concentration, picking a lock that someone had attached to a women's bowling trophy. Chatterley's photographs render these moments with such tenderness that my response has as

much to do with considering my own obsessions and preoccupations as it has to do with Mark. Humor and irony are indispensable for transporting us beyond the boundaries of our immediate suffering. Chatterley uses these devices to indicate how interpretations of events are relative to social conditioning. He asks us to consider Mark's logic *and* provides a context in which to comprehend that logic.

Mark's world may appear chaotic on the surface but through Chatterley's inside-out depiction an oppressive logic unfolds. The photographs and texts unearth social oppression in its more subtle and ubiquitous forms through the undercurrents of distrust, fear and contempt Mark encounters in the social sphere. These disappointing experiences gradually grind down his self-esteem. Mark's adult education consisted of learning the ropes of poverty -- discovering the hoops he needed to jump through in order to infiltrate the economic system. Ironically, his ultimate success has been dependent upon his disabilities instead of his strengths.

We can construct simulations to promote our political agendas within the safe, controlled environment of a studio, but the world of real events cannot be bound by our assumptions, nor can we capture on film concise visual evidence of all we sense to be true. The photographer, in this case, has not used his subject to validate his beliefs, but has allowed the subject to work on him, to alter his perceptions, on both an internal and an external level.

Chatterley's photographs rarely present a static or staged moment. He makes his pictures immediately after an event peaks — on the downbeat — when the compositional order is beginning to disintegrate. This method is not purely intentional. It is just that predicting the arrangement of gestures and expressions, for the most part, is impossible. A photographer waiting to capture some essential moment of revelation learns rather quickly that the camera's ability to reproduce these revelations is severely limited. Chatterley has learned to use this limitation of the medium to his advantage. Instead of arranging things to impose his opinion on the viewer he relies on the photograph's inherent am-

biguity to compel us to linger and consider a larger realm of possibility.

The photographer's method of pushing information against the edge of the frame presents the subject as too full to contain in a simple two-dimensional box. His strict policy of never cropping his images reinforces this message by keeping the audience consistently aware of the camera's limiting syntax. Another significant element that defines his work is his use of available light. According to Chatterley, "I stopped using a flash after meeting Mark. I believe it was only then that I learned how to use available light. Quite often there wasn't much light at all and I had to make the best of what there was. Sometimes an

image would blur. And in a paradoxical sense, looking back, Mark and I went through some pretty dark times."

Chatterley explores his own subjective position through texts which reveal his active involvement in Mark's life. Taking Mark to the hospital and visiting him when they lived hundreds of miles apart is only part of the story. In Mark's letters he consistently reassures Chatterley (whom he calls Maynard) that he is all right, and asks him not to worry. It is evident that Chatterley *does* worry and that Mark recognizes his concern and responsiveness. Essentially, *Olive Branch* is about the relationship between



Mark and Cedric and it is through their experiences that we can ponder our own relationships.

Chatterley said that Mark was always working to keep what little he had from breaking down, that being poor was a "full-time job." A torn-apart compressor was displayed in the exhibition to represent a day's work for Mark. The bit of copper he was able to scavenge after all this labor was worth about a dollar. Some days Mark just drives around collecting aluminum cans from dumpsters. In a day he can earn about seven dollars which, ironically, is just about enough to pay for the gas he used. As the viewer is led through *Olive Branch* it becomes increasingly evident that the photographer is building a theoretical framework to reveal poverty as a condition extending far beyond the economic and material plane. Also within this framework he explores the



Mark visiting his mother. Unity, Illinois. May, 1986

M: "I just wish to heck by george that I could take LIFE, you see, MY LIFE -- I just wish like hell -- I wish like heck -- go ahead and take a person how like I'm talking to you -- I could just go ahead and SHOW you exactly what I mean and show you the time and show you the stuff that I went through. In other words, I wish I could make a -- make my mind -- they have a computer that they could hook up to my mind that they could tell me exactly what I'm thinking about things -- you still see things that, you see things like your old home and you sit there and start trying to remember, start thinking about your old home and remember what it looks like. You can see -- you can picture in your head what it looks like. That's what I'm saying is being able to picture -- I wish I could take the picture out of my mind, I wish I could show-em."

C: "Show the people you're talking to?"

M: "Yeah, show-em. I always wish I could -- I always -- make a film like and show-em what I'm talking about. If there was some way or another, you know -- there could be like a projector and sit there and show-em on a wall or something."

Part of a conversation with Mark while he was living alone in Cairo. March, 1987.



Mark with x-ray of his blood-poisoned hand. Cairo, Illinois, March, 1987.



Pulling a thorn from Karen's foot on the banks of the Big Muddy River near Carbondale, Illinois. July, 1990.

Exhibit Description

Olive Branch included 115, 11x14 inch, black and white photographs in chronological order dating from 1985 through 1991.

The gallery walls were painted dark red and the installation symbolized an *open book* or a *performance* in three acts.

The exhibit represented three time periods:

- Mark living in Cairo, Illinois with his mother and step-father (October, 1985 - August, 1986).
- Living on his own in Cairo, Paducah, Kentucky and Carbondale, Illinois (August, 1986 - December 1989).
- Living with Karen, the birth of their son, Casey, and their move to Florida (December, 1989 - July 1991).

The exhibit text was printed on 11x17 inch and 8.5x11 inch white paper and thumb-tacked to the walls. The texts included letters from the Social Security office and conversations Chatterley had with Mark, Karen, Virginia (his mother), doctors, and various Social Service representatives.

Other texts included: Unpaid hospital bills, personal correspondence, and copies of pages from a medical book Mark had studied to learn more about his physical problems. He had marked definitions in the book that he found applicable. There was also a copy of a hand-written note Mark kept in his pocket to warn people not to move him during an epileptic seizure.

A torn-apart compressor was displayed in the center of the gallery. Mark had opened the discarded compressor using a cold chisel and hammer in October of 1993 to scavage the copper core. The piece represented a day's work.

