

THE LIFE THAT'S LEFT

When a place is abandoned—when the door's closed, when the key turns in the lock for the last time—it's tempting to assume that's the end of the story. But for Michael Schwarz and the guys behind the website Abandoned Arkansas, opening those doors shows the spark of life is still going strong—and that the story's just beginning.

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DOWN A DUSTY, LONELY ROAD

west of Petit Jean, there are two stone buildings squatting bleak and swathed in pinstripe vines. Placed at the intersection of three open fields, they're almost like black holes in the way they blot out the sun.

All the windows of the one on the left have been boarded up—every entrance a ganglia of growth that's long since gone unchecked. Inside, the ground underfoot is spongy. It gives to weight in some places, showing black and speckled with crystalline sparkles through the loose netting of leaves and branches. Even with the blue sky showing overhead, it takes a moment to realize you're walking over the collapsed roof. Standing there, no matter how you crane your neck, squinting as though it were an image from a Magic Eye, it's difficult to see what was once the gymnasium for the school in Carden Bottoms. But Michael Schwarz seems to see it.

"Over here, this used to be the bleachers," Michael says. Cheeks pinked from the brisk February weather, he waves toward an overgrown pyre of wooden slabs slumped against a bleached stone wall. "Obviously, you can tell from the wooden fragments right there."

Walking through the building's innards, abandoned since the '70s, he talks about what it might have been like when there weren't trees growing roughly in the vicinity of the out-of-bounds line, and when every indication that children had ever galloped through the doors or that basketballs once swished against the weave of the net hadn't



vanished beneath the growth and fallen roof. But for as well as he seems to know the place—and this almost certainly goes without saying—Michael was never a student here. The structure had already lain fallow and unused for nearly two decades when he was born.

But thanks to the considerable research he's done on this place—and others like it—you'd never know. As the founder of the website Abandoned Arkansas, Michael leads a loosely knit group of urban explorers who—legally and with the permission of owners and responsible parties—venture into places that, while varied in their states of decay, no longer serve the purposes for which they were constructed. Using video and still photography, he and the group's three other primary photographers document places around the state and post their findings to the website, occasionally supplementing the visuals with information acquired from historical societies and interviews with locals.

Their mission, as stated on the site, is to help keep memories of those places alive:

Many photographers that have traveled to structures like these simply take three or four interesting photos

and leave. Our work is aimed at a higher purpose. Through historic documentation, we hope to immortalize the stories of the places we visit beyond the building's finite lifespan—to preserve an echo from the past.

And if this seems a bit overdone—if it seems just an excuse to explore these structures whose tethers to the habitable world have been all but severed—you need only listen when they start talking about the dozens and dozens of places they've visited. Like when Michael talks about the destruction of Hot Springs' Majestic Hotel as if it were a bereaved member of his family. Or when any of the guys talk about the comments left on the website. But never is it so poignant as when Michael talks about Dunjee Academy in Oklahoma, the place that first got him started.

He can still remember how it looked before the fire. When he visited in 2011, there were whiteboards and chalkboards that still had assignments from before the school was shuttered in 2004—readings on Oklahoma history and arithmetic. Jackets and caps still hung on their hooks. Certificates of appreciation and plaques and citations for service still adorned the white plaster walls.

"It was as if all the students had just gotten up and just left," Michael says of the school, which had been closed in 1972 and reopened as a charter school in fall 1997. "Assignments were still on the board, books were everywhere, on the shelves. Teachers' desks, you know, still had pens in their little cup, and all these ungraded assignments on there."

In speaking with Michael, there are few conversations that fail to elicit some favorable comparison to the place that he came to know so well. In fact, he says, the experience he had at Dunjee is largely why he's so fastidious with the photos, why the other photographers have bestowed on him the nickname "last shot Schwarz,"



because when they're leaving a place, every new angle draws an "oh" or an "ah" and sends him off in a flurry of *ka-chicks*. Because, as he says, when he left Dunjee for the last time—when he hadn't known that it would be his last time—there were still images that he wanted to capture, still wanted to share with the world, and which might complete that act of visual reconstruction.

"After it burned down, I looked back through my photos. I started to feel—I really wish I would have got a shot of that, I really wish I would have got a shot of that," Michael says. "I wanted to go back in there and build everything back to the way it was, every little book, every little thing."

When the place burned in January 2012, he met the owner while walking through the sodden ruins. She was crying, Michael remembers, because all the memories she had of her husband—an alumni of the original school who'd purchased the building in 1996 and run the academy until shortly before his death in 2004—were in that school and had been consumed by the fire. Michael says that giving her the photos he'd taken opened his eyes to how images could play a role in keeping those places alive.

Since he formed the group in August 2012, eight months after the Dunjee fire, its members have visited a list of places that, if you were to bring them all together, could form a full town several times over. Of the 56 locations posted to the website (and many, many more that have yet to be posted), there are hospitals and theaters and schools. Country clubs and golf courses. Jails and paper mills and bowling alleys. Most of them are fairly obscure, though a few notable names—Dogpatch, the Majestic—appear on the group's website in the lists sorted by location and condition (abandoned, burned, demolished, etc.). But even if there's some overlap in terms of those characteristics and what the structures were originally built for, every place has details that make it unique.

Case in point: the Carden Bottoms school. Walking through its halls, there's no shortage of signs suggesting the



JARED HOLT



MICHAEL SCHWARZ



EDDY SISSON

process by which it's gradually broken down: the dollops of mud pasted like spitballs to the ceiling where wasps swarm during the summer; the gradients of green and white paint, each coat ceding space to the one that preceded it; the fallen ceiling tiles that line the floor. But entrenched there as well are details that provide some insight into what the school used to be.

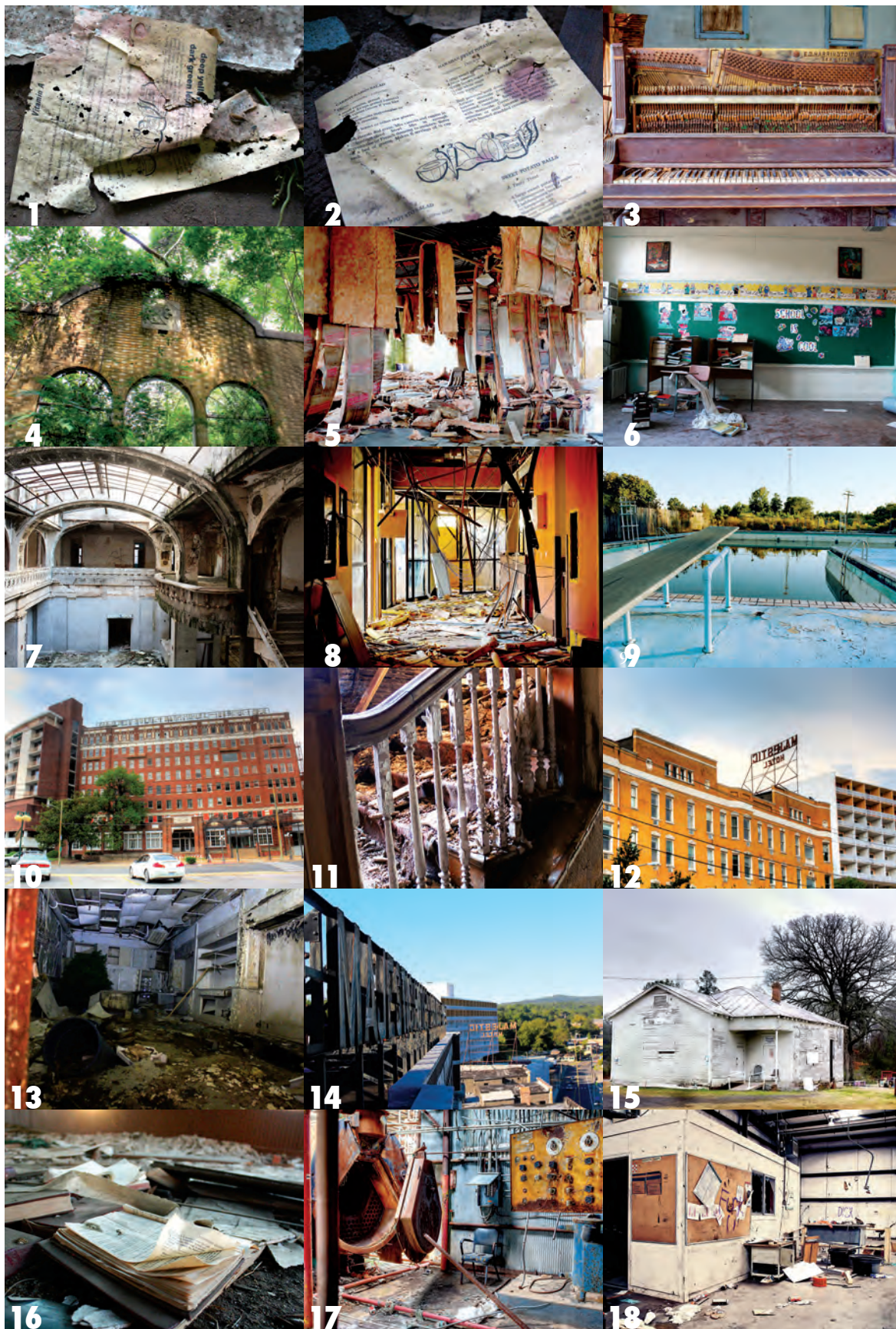
In one of the six rooms, beside a pair of eviscerated couches, there are sheaves of brittle yellowed paper and worksheets explaining nutrition and others listing recipes for sweet-potato balls. In another room, not far from a piano, which is missing a few keys but can still emit a middle A (albeit a bit stridently), there's a raised stage facing a long, well-lit room. Scattered a few feet away are some indications of the life the building has lived since its abandonment—there's some sheet music, for instance, from the hit modern-day musical "Wicked." Outside, behind the buildings, there's a semicircle of beehives whose soft humming you can hear even at a distance.

After even a few minutes of walking across the grounds, realizing that behind every detail lies any number of stories, you start to gain some appreciation of just how many people have passed through the school, both before and after it was abandoned. It's a sentiment that the guys are well acquainted with.

"It makes you feel small sometimes—at least me," says Eddy Sisson, another member of the group, as he talks about a hospital they visited in the past. "Because when I walked in there, I'm just looking at it as a room with four walls. Until you see something like [a] patient register, you don't really realize that, wow, for 30, 40 years, it had laughter, crying—all these emotions; all these people maybe dying, being born. And it's just ... I'm just another person to come through this hallway."

Ultimately, for as much as those buildings mean to Michael and his group, they also meant so much to others who knew them first—which is largely the reason the group does what it does; because every one of the

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LOST AND FOUND

Since he started the group, Michael Schwarz and the guys from Abandoned Arkansas have posted photos from nearly 60 locations around the state (and visited dozens more). Although there are hundreds (and likely thousands) of photos on the site, we asked them to share a few favorites.

1-3: Carden Bottoms school, Carden Bottoms

4: The Chewaukla Bottling Factory, Hot Springs

5: Gloryland Baptist Church, Little Rock

6: Greenwood Elementary, Hot Springs

7: Hotel Pines, Pine Bluff

8: Memorial Hospital, North Little Rock

9: Rosswood Country Club, Pine Bluff

10-14: The Majestic Hotel, Hot Springs

15: Bigelow Rosenwald School, Conway

16: St. Paul A.M.E. Church, Brinkley

17: Striker Paper Co., Stephens

18: Tiffany Furniture Industries, Conway

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hundreds and thousands of images they take has the ability to transport people back to that time. As Michael says when discussing his reasons for focusing on the seemingly trivial details: "It doesn't mean that to me, but it's obviously history to somebody else."

The comments posted to the photo galleries associated with each of the locations, such as these that accompanied the Carden Bottoms post, say as much.

-Thank you for the memories! The coal bin was located at the back of the school next to the playground. I think every room had a coal burning stove, I know Mrs. Jackson's 5th-6th grade classroom did. When the indoor bathroom was built on the old Gym, we were happy kids, I can tell you!

-How interesting for me to see. My mother was born in Carden Bottoms and i believe may have gone to school there for few yrs before moving to Perry, where she went to school as well. Mom was born Jan 1916, a McGhee. I tried once to find remnants of town but could not.

-My grandmother taught there until she retired. Her name was Goly D Crow and she taught 3rd & 4th grades for several years. I think the last school year was about 66 or 67. The building was used by the C.B. extension homemakers club for a few years before the active ladies either died or moved away. I was the last class of 8th-graders to go to school there. The top 4 grades moved to Dardanelle in 1959; then the top 6 grades in 1964; then the lower 6 grades a couple of years later.

Now, it's in reading through these accounts—and even walking with Michael and the group through the school's broken halls—that one overwhelming question seems to demand some recognition:

What reason would a group of young people have for spending their weekends peering into forgotten places, where there are only the shells of memories and refrigerators of rotting stuff? Because no matter how closely the Abandoned Arkansas guys know a place—no matter how many hours they spend walking the broken halls, poring over documents that describe the minutiae that collectively suggest what the place might have been—there's always going to be a point where they can't go any further. There's always going to be that irreconcilable furrow between the place as it is and the place as it was.

But whenever those doubts do bubble up—and they most assuredly do from time to time—you only need to revisit the website. For many of those locations the group has visited, there are write-ups about the history. They bring some life to these places. And it's clear that whoever wrote them, though they never saw those buildings in their prime, clearly cares quite a bit and can see them for what they once were.

How many children came and went through these

doors and hallways? Who were the generations of teachers that spent all of their working years lovingly educating the youth of the community within the school's walls? What games were played in the collapsed gymnasium building? What songs were played over the now defunct pianos? [...] All that you have to do is close your eyes in the central hallway, and you can feel the ghostly memories of students past as they walk to and fro around you. Listen carefully, and you can almost hear the long lost echo of the sounds of generations past playing and having fun during decades of long forgotten recesses in the small schoolyard, now completely choked by encroaching vegetation. But the children are gone ... as are the buildings ... and as is the community. All that remains is the school.

Because in truth, these places are history for them, too.

Just up the road, there's a church. Once the local branch for the Assembly of God, the church has been abandoned as well, and to see it from the outside, wrapped in a tight bondage of vines and branches, it seems to have received similar treatment from the elements as the Carden Bottoms school. There's nothing about the exterior that suggests any degree of preservation. But of course, that changes immediately when you walk through the open door. It looks like people might have just gone for the day and forgotten to lock up. Or perhaps, given the lack of benches or chairs, they'd scheduled the carpet for a cleaning.

Although there's undeniably something of a musty odor, it's not so overpowering that you'd guess the place has been abandoned since 2001. Its abandonment is in the details—those elements that set the status quo askew. There are bird nests lining the wooden boxes once used to distribute literature and handouts. In a room off the entryway, there's an upper shelf with coloring books and other books, and a dead bird facing the wall.

That sense is more pronounced in the kitchen where, although there are still cans of tomato paste and embroidered tissue-box covers arrayed on the counters and cabinets, there's not a door or drawer that's been left shut. There are animal droppings on the stove and nests lining the floral-papered walls of the cabinets.

It is in that sense a very surreal glimpse of a place on the very cusp of fading, though lacking the last push that will send it reeling from the brink. Odds are that will be the case when the roof caves in, and the elements are allowed free rein and no longer have to rely on a front door left ajar. It seems to suggest how very close these scenarios can be. It feels odd to stand in a place like this and forecast how it may change.

Earlier that afternoon, Jared Holt, another member of the group, had said, "You always feel like there's something that you missed. ... It's always kind of weird because that thing that you know you missed, like when you come back it might not be here. It's like you have to treat every time you come here like it's your only shot. ... [There's] kind of a sentimental feeling, because once we're here and we spend a couple hours in the place, you feel some sort of connection to it."

It's difficult not to be reminded of that as we make our way out of the building. As we leave, Michael closes the door. **AL**