

PERSON OF THE YEAR | EXCLUSIVE

The Long-Lost Negatives

In 1980 a handsome college freshman posed for a fellow student. Last winter the photographer went looking for her negatives. What she found is historic

Photographs by Lisa Jack





IF FACEBOOK HAD EXISTED BACK IN 1980, WHEN BARACK OBAMA WAS a freshman at Occidental College in Los Angeles, we'd all be familiar with photos of him arcing a jump shot on the basketball court or giving an early speech at a student rally.

If only. Instead, 28 years later, a series of 36 photographs taken in 1980 by his fellow student Lisa Jack gives a sense of the 20-year-old Barry Obama in search of self. Jack, now a psychologist, never realized her dream of becoming a photographer. But she recently unearthed the cellophane-wrapped negatives in her basement and dusted them off for publication. "I'm not political," Jack says. "[But] these are historical photos, and they should be shared."

Jack met Obama, she recalls, through a friend of a friend who thought he'd make a good subject for her black-and-white portraits. She doesn't remember much about first encountering him at the Cooler, a campus snack shop. "He was really cute," she says. "What else does a 20-year-old girl remember?" But they soon set a date for a shoot at Jack's apartment, a "decrepit old place" a block from campus.

Obama showed up with a cigarette in his hand and a leather jacket on his back, a look common in the crowd he hung with at the time—described in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* as politically minded black students, internationals, Chicanos, "Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets." With his friends, Obama discussed neocolonialism and patriarchy in late-night bull sessions, but at the photo shoot, Obama and Jack stuck to small talk about where they grew up—Hawaii and New York, respectively—and how they liked school. If Obama was already thinking of the move he would soon make to Jack's home state to study at Columbia University, he didn't let on.

But through the photos, Jack recalls, her subject revealed more of himself. "He was a little nervous," she says. "You can see he's just posing, initially, and as the shoot goes on, he starts to come out." Even in Jack's apartment, amid the trappings of scrappy college-student squalor—a nylon plaid love seat hauled from the side of the road, an overturned shopping cart instead of an end table and a lime green shag carpet badly in need of cleaning—the future pol added a touch of glamour. "He was very charismatic even then," says Jack.

Outside of a few chance encounters on campus and one after graduation, the photographer and the future President lost touch. But on a sightseeing tour of the Capitol in 2005, Jack spotted him emerging from a legislative session and yelled hello. "He knew exactly who I was, even after all this time," she says. "I was amazed."

A few more years passed, however, before Jack dug up the negatives. Talking politics with friends in her living room in early 2008, Jack mentioned knowing Obama in college. Finding them skeptical, Jack decided to track down the photos and "prove them wrong." "If I hadn't been dared, I'd have never gone to look for them," says Jack. "They just sat there to be discovered after I died."

After descending the stairs to the "junk room," chockablock with bank statements, old softball mitts, New Year's 2000 paraphernalia and her college record collection—Benatar, Bowie, Dylan—Jack pulled out a blue binder she had saved through nine moves to new homes. It contained all her negatives from college. The images of Obama "blew me away," she says. "I had no idea I'd taken a full roll of film." Jack eventually put the negatives in a safety-deposit box, planning to sit on them until after the election, when there would be no chance they could be used for political purposes.

Today, Jack says, she hopes the photos reveal a "spirit of fun and thoughtfulness" in a man who can seem to some like an enigma. Still, she says she never thought they would have much life outside her darkroom. "Certainly," she says, "I didn't expect *this*." —BY LAURA FITZPATRICK ■



