



# WE SORT OF PEOPLE

Photographs by

Henry Horenstein

Text by Leslie Tucker

Essay by Shannon Perich

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“From stock car racing to country music stars, this US photographer is one of the great documenters of Americana...”

- *The Guardian* (UK)

Henry and Leslie began working together in the summer of 1997, when she invited him to Maryland to shoot the mysterious, little-known Wesort clan.

*We sorts are different from you sorts.*

During the mid-twentieth century the Wesorts were a kind of urban myth among black people in Washington, DC. They were known by a single name—Proctors. They looked white but didn't claim any race. They kept to themselves. Many belonged to the Catholic Church.

The Wesorts had done something odd in America. They had stepped out of race. They sustained this status with constant intermarriages. Three races—black, white and native american—combined into one family with cousins making dozens for centuries.

They mixed, mated and migrated in between whites and blacks from the earliest documented records of the nation. While the project started as a genealogical search for a family whose roots stretched back to the founding of the first Catholic colony, it grew into a mystery about the origins of race in America, then became a race against time as the Wesorts and their descendants disappeared and died.

If race itself is the sorting of humans into shared physical qualities, where did the colorfully eyed, blond, pale-skinned Wesorts fit in America's rigid categories?

While Henry photographed the last generation of Proctors and their disappearing world, Leslie recorded the conversations she had with the wise women of her family. A living archive emerges, with voices that portray the complex realities of their lives in

CHARLES COUNTY, MARYLAND  
1987

Lonie lives alone in a three-story house on the edge of the village. He says, "The tractor driver drove past my house and I saw the tractor. I was like, 'That's strange. I never saw a tractor before.' I was like, 'That's strange. I never saw a tractor before.' I was like, 'That's strange. I never saw a tractor before.'"

That frame kindly knocks the thing in the head

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their own words, as seen through their eyes. This family history is elastic, moldable, and often lost. It isn't necessarily permanent or durable or even correct.

Much like the graves of Leslie's ancestors—which have no markers at all—are simply there waiting for someone to find them again. This timeless photography in *We Sort of People* combines Henry's lifelong vision and determination to document the social histories of those who live in liminal spaces, bridging multiple realities, in marginal communities.

A century straddler, Leslie as a girl had known her great grandmother, born in 1895, and then became a mother herself in 2005. Through Henry's lens, this sense of time as accordion is played out in a family in which so many held hands with those born in centuries before and after them.

This collaboration captures the little-known citizenry at the end of their existence. Henry has photographed the modern Wesort: family members spread throughout the District and Maryland, showing the roots of their commonality in densely layered portraits in their natural habitats at home, in juke joints, barbershops, cemeteries or on the muddy shores of the Potomac River.

The dynamics within the family, between the generations and among the wise women, are like two contrasting poles with tremendous magnetic force. They represent so many opposite things—country and city, experience and education, solitude and community.

In every case these women in their unique ways show how common sense is not so common, that standing for what's right and good is not easy or even a choice, that telling it like it is, isn't for the weak.

Henry's ability to immerse himself in the thick of any group combined with Leslie's willingness to go home to her elders unfurls in such a unique and compelling family story that probes and documents, listens and records, visits and photographs race on its surface and its underneath. This story carries its metaphor on its back like a turtle carries its shell.



## Henry Horenstein

has been a photographer, filmmaker, teacher, and author since the 1970s. He studied history at the University of Chicago and earned his BFA and MFA at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where he studied with legends Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Henry's work is collected and exhibited internationally and he has published over 35 books. His *Shoot What You Love* serves both as a memoir and as a personal history of photography over the past fifty years.

In recent years, Henry has been making films: *Preacher*, *Murray*, *Spoke*, *Partners*, and *Blitto Underground*. He is in production on *Everyone Is Someone*, a film about Cajun Louisiana. He teaches at RISD and lives in Boston.

## Leslie Tucker

worked in book and magazine publishing, children's television, and broadcast journalism. She was a freelance field producer for CNN Manila. After the Soviet Union collapsed, she managed thirty regions in Russia, teaching radio and TV journalists how to produce Western-style economic news. Leslie majored in English literature at Princeton University, where she studied with award-winning playwrights Romulus Linney, María Irene Fornés, and Adrienne Kennedy, who encouraged her to leave America in order to see it more clearly. She lived in Moscow for nearly two decades and now lives in northern Virginia.

## Leslie Tucker speaks about her family



<https://www.vimeo.com/571761832>

## Shannon Thomas Perich

has worked in the Photographic History Collection (PHC) at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC for more than 25 years. She teaches history of photography as an adjunct professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. Perich's interests are broad and often focus on the intersection of personal stories, national narratives, and photography's role in making history visible. She is interested in digital humanities and was project director for two online oral history projects related to the Pandemic of 2020 and the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001.

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