

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NR 1/21/09

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
other names/site number Site #CE0135

## 2. Location

street & number In the Heber Springs Cemetery at the northeast corner of Oak Street and South 4<sup>th</sup> Street  not for publication  
city or town Heber Springs  vicinity  
state Arkansas code AR county Cleburne code 023 zip code 72543

## State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination   
request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic  
Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets   
does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  
 nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Catherine Matthews*  
Signature of certifying official/Title

11/18/08  
Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register  
 See continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
Name of Property

Cleburne County, Arkansas  
County and State

**Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
		buildings
1		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

FUNERARY/graves/burial  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

FUNERARY/graves/burial  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A  
walls N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
roof N/A  
other STONE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
Name of Property

Cleburne County, Arkansas  
County and State

**Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**  
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**  
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- Property is:
- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
  - B** removed from its original location.
  - C** birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance.
  - D** a cemetery.
  - E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
  - F** a commemorative property
  - G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Levels of Significance** (local, state, national)

State  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions)

ART  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1959  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1959  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person** (Complete if Criterion B is marked)

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation** (Complete if Criterion D is marked)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Statement of Significance**  
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
Name of Property

Cleburne County, Arkansas  
County and State

**Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property Less than one.

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>15</u>	<u>587833</u>	<u>3927141</u>	3	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	4	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u>

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Ralph S. Wilcox, National Register & Survey Coordinator  
organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date September 8, 2008  
street & number 1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street telephone (501) 324-9787  
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
- A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Mayor, City of Heber Springs  
street & number 1001 W. Main telephone             
city or town Heber Springs state AR zip code 72543

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

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### SUMMARY

The Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite consists of a small rectangular gray granite marker in the north central part of the Heber Springs Cemetery. The marker is close to the ground and simply reads "MIKE MEYER DISFARMER/1884-1959." Decoration on the stone is limited to an egg and dart design in the bottom center of the stone and stylized flora located above the birth and death dates.

### ELABORATION

The Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite consists of a small rectangular gray granite marker in the north central part of the Heber Springs Cemetery. The marker is close to the ground and simply reads "MIKE MEYER DISFARMER/1884-1959."

The sides of the stone are rusticated while the top of the stone consists of a highly polished border around the edge and a matte-finish center. The top half of the stone has "MIKE MEYER DISFARMER" carved in it while the bottom half has his birth and death dates, 1884 and 1959. The dates are located in rectangles on the stone in the bottom right and left corners. The rectangles are connected to each other with a segment of egg and dart design in the bottom center. The rectangles with the dates are surmounted by stylized flora.

### Integrity

The Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite has good integrity. The stone has not been altered, although lichens are growing on it. The area surrounding the stone also remains a cemetery just as it was in 1959 at the time of Disfarmer's death.

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
Name of Property

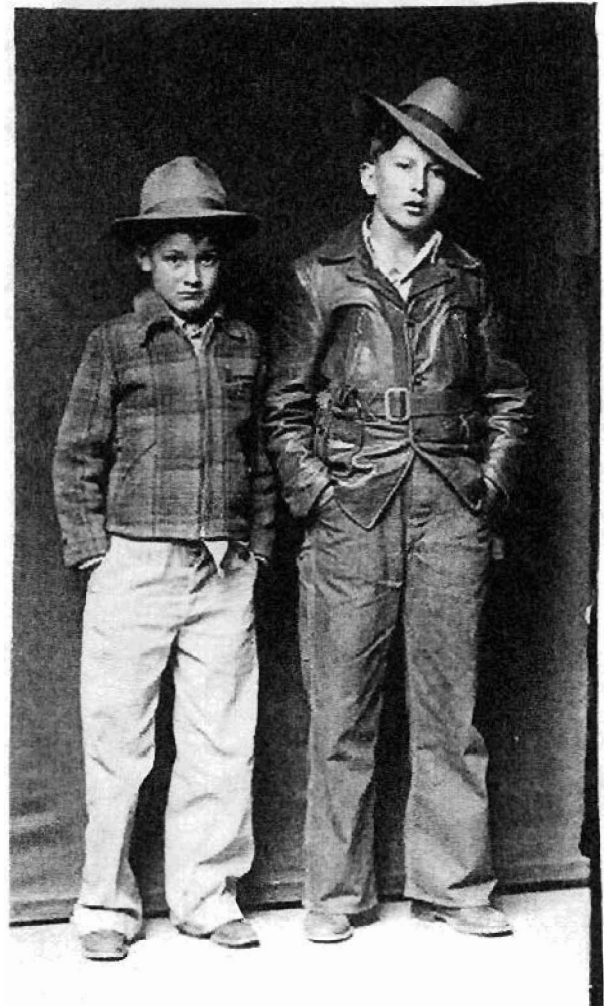
Cleburne County, Arkansas  
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

Examples of Mike Meyer Disfarmer Photographs

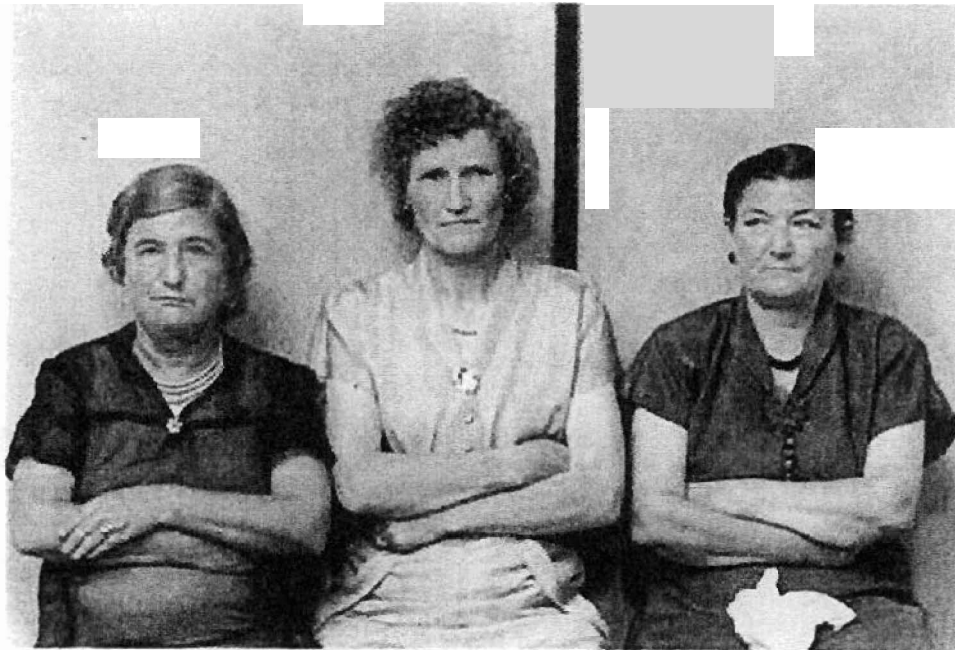


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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

Examples of Mike Meyer Disfarmer Photographs



Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite  
Name of Property

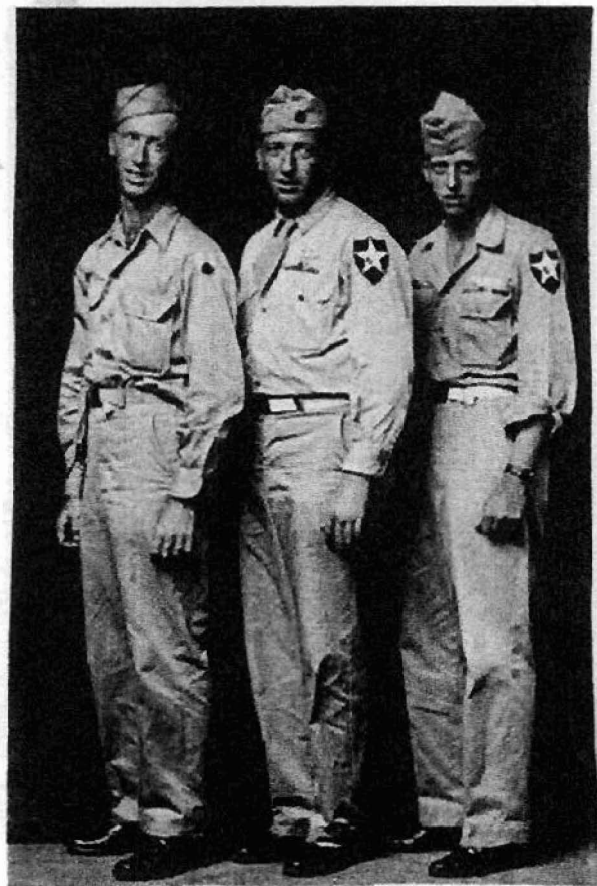
Cleburne County, Arkansas  
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Examples of Mike Meyer Disfarmer Photographs





Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite

Name of Property

Cleburne County, Arkansas

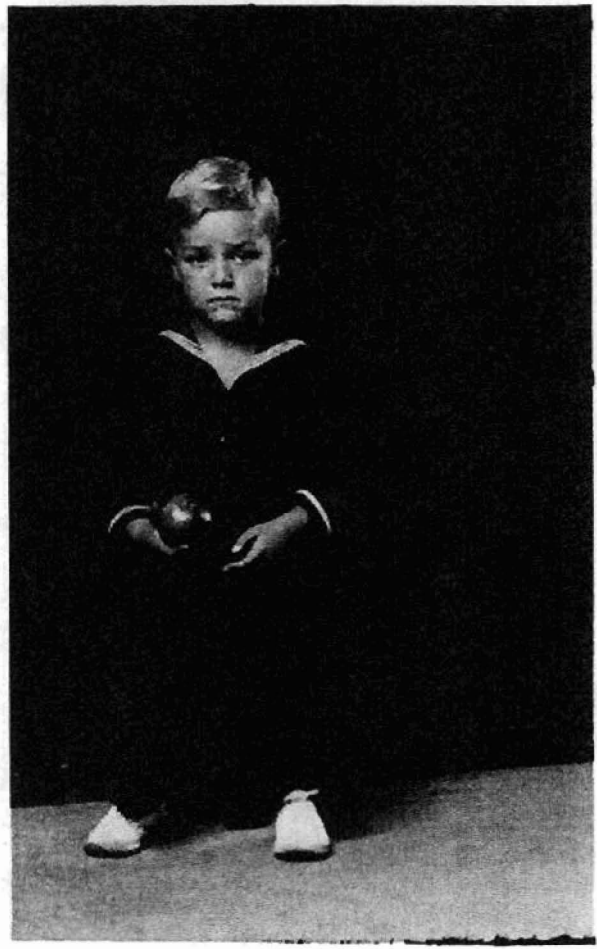
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Examples of Mike Meyer Disfarmer Photographs



Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite

Name of Property

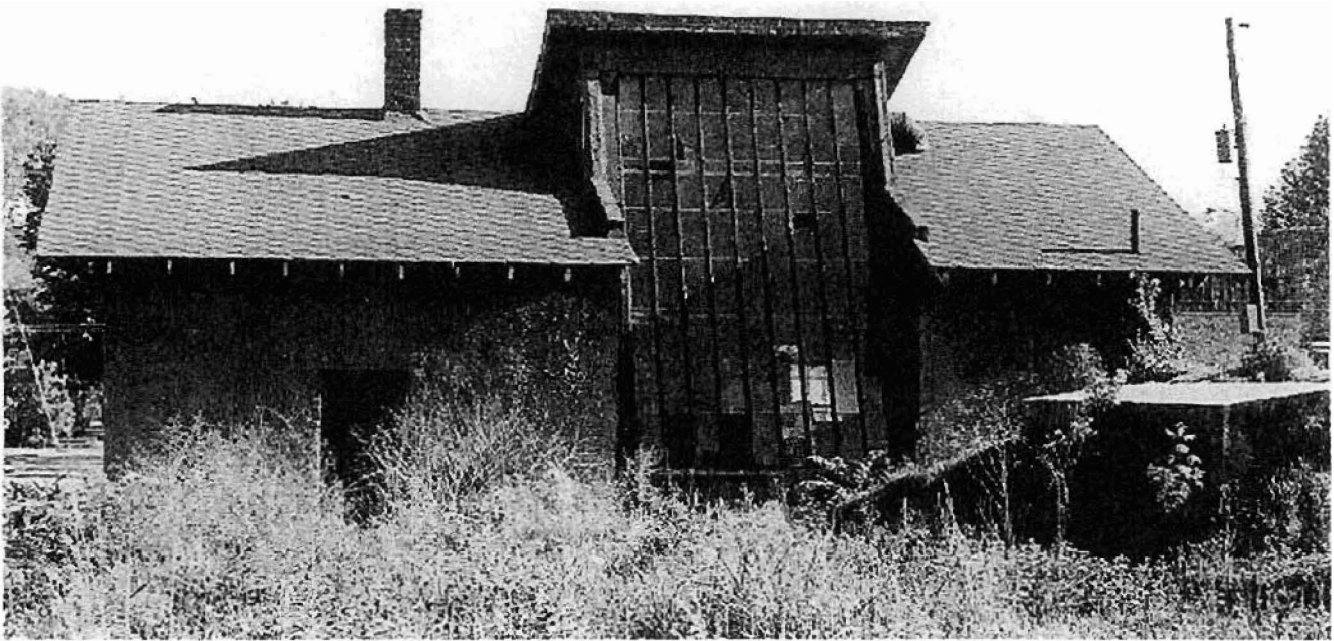
Cleburne County, Arkansas

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Mike Meyer Disfarmer Studio – 1961

Disfarmer, Mike Meyer. Gravesite

Name of Property

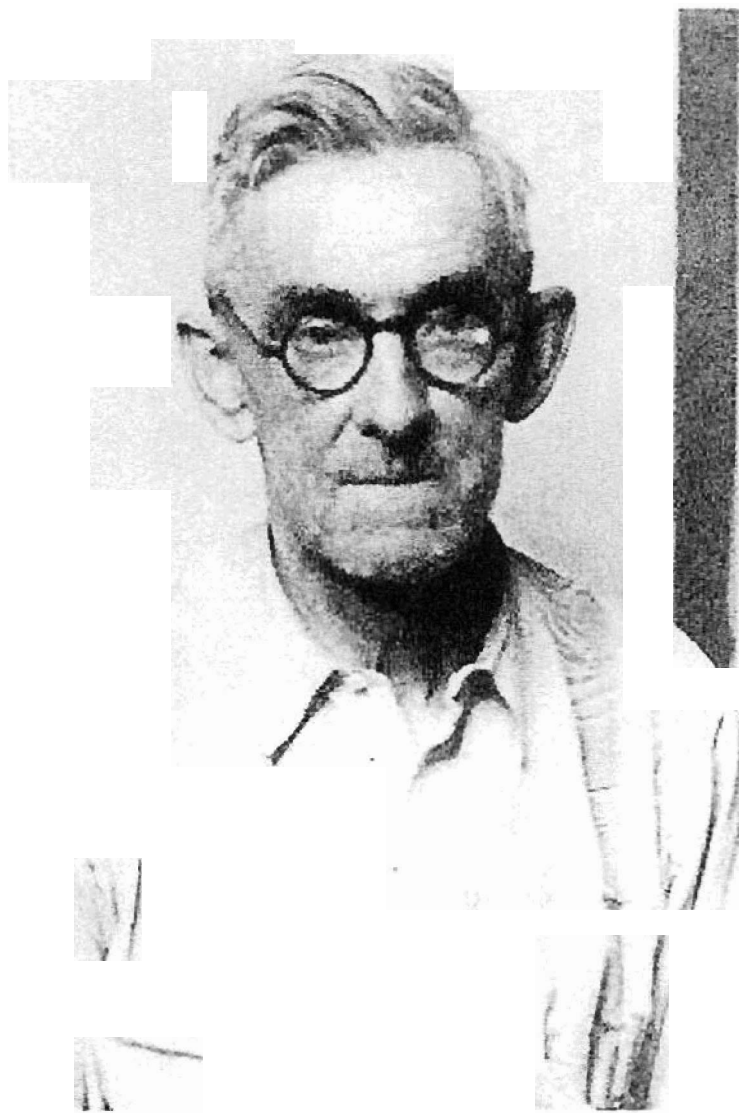
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Mike Meyer Disfarmer – 1940s

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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### SUMMARY

The gravesite of Mike Meyer Disfarmer in the Heber Springs Cemetery is the only remaining property associated with the life of the noted portrait photographer. Operating a studio in Heber Springs from 1925 or 1926 until his death in 1959, Mike Meyer Disfarmer quickly became known for his portrait photography of the common people of Heber Springs and the surrounding areas. Since his death, Disfarmer's work has gained a much wider reputation, culminating in an exhibition of his work at the International Center of Photography in New York in 1976. As a result of his importance in the world of photography, the Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion B** with **statewide significance**. The property is eligible for inclusion under **Criteria Consideration C** as a grave of an historical figure of outstanding importance.

### ELABORATION

The origins of modern day photography actually date back to ancient times when people used camera obscuras, which were box-shaped devices that used a pinhole to form images on the walls of darkened rooms. Improvements to camera obscuras in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, notably making them portable and improving their brightness and clarity by enlarging the pinhole, made them more useful and they were frequently employed by artists of the time.<sup>1</sup>

The development of photography received another boost in 1727 when Professor J. Schulze accidentally created the first photo-sensitive compound. After mixing chalk, nitric acid, and silver in a flask, he noticed that the side of the flask exposed to sunlight darkened. Almost a century later, in 1816, Nicéphore Niépce combined the camera obscura and photosensitive paper, and in 1826 he was able to create a permanent image.<sup>2</sup>

After Niépce's combination of the camera obscura with photosensitive paper, other people explored other methods to create photographic images. In 1834, for example, Henry Fox Talbot created permanent images, although negatives, on paper soaked in silver chloride that was fixed with a salt solution. He then created positive images by contact printing on another sheet of paper. Talbot patented his process in 1841 under the name "calotype." Along the same lines, Frenchman Louis Daguerre began creating images in 1837 using silver-plated copper that was coated with silver chloride and developed with warm mercury. Although the Daguerreotype method was never patented, Daguerre was awarded a state pension in exchange for the publication of his methods and the rights for others to use the process. London sculptor Frederick Scott Archer was able to improve the resolution of photographs by spreading a collodion mixture and chemicals on

<sup>1</sup> Greenspun, Philip. *History of Photography Timeline*. From: <http://photo.net/history.timeline>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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glass sheets. His process was much cheaper than Daguerre's and allowed unlimited reproductions. However, like Daguerre's process, although it was published, it was never patented.<sup>3</sup>

Once the basics of photography were in place, it was not long afterwards that portrait photography developed. On March 23, 1841, Richard Beard opened a portrait studio in London, and the *Times* described the studio as follows:

The apartment [sic] appropriated for the magical process - for so it may be termed - is...on the highest story of the institution. From the roof, which is constructed of blue glass of about a quarter of an inch thick, a very powerful light is obtained, and it is so ingeniously contrived as to revolve with the sun. In a portion of the room, nearly in the centre, an elevated seat is placed, on which the party whose likeness is to be taken sits with his head reclining backwards. In this position the sitter is told to look into a glass box, in an opposite direction, about five feet from him, in which is placed the metallic plate to be impressed with the portrait. Having done so for a few seconds, he descends, and in a few minutes afterwards a faithful likeness is presented to him.

The likenesses which we saw were admirable, and closely true to nature, beauties and deformities being alike exhibited...<sup>4</sup>

Although Beard was highly successful, reportedly earning as much as £125 a day, he was bankrupt by June 1850, the result of several lawsuits concerning the use of the Daguerreotype process without paying any licensing fees.<sup>5</sup>

Although portrait photography had its beginnings at least as early as the 1840s, it was not until the 1850s when it really took off, specifically with the patenting of the *carte-de-visite* by André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri in Paris in 1854. A *carte-de-visite* consisted of a small albumen print mounted on a thicker paper card, usually measuring 2.5 x 4 inches. The *carte-de-visite* took off in popularity in Europe in the 1850s and in the United States after 1860, mainly because, unlike previous methods of portraiture, it was inexpensive and accessible to all people.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Information on Richard Beard from: <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/beard.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Greenspun, Philip. *History of Photography Timeline*. From: <http://photo.net/history.timeline> and Leggat, Robert. *Portraiture*. From: <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/portrait.htm>.

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In addition to the development of photography in Europe, other developments in the United States during the late nineteenth century specifically aided in the spread in popularity of photography and portraiture. At the same time that *carte-de-visites* were developing in Europe the creation of positive images on glass, known as ambrotypes, and on metal, known as tintypes or ferrotypes, were popular in the U.S. The introduction of inexpensive cameras, such as the Kodak Brownie camera, which was introduced in 1900, also made photography more accessible to the common person.<sup>7</sup>

As in other parts of the United States, Arkansas had its share of photographers by the late 1800s. As early as 1871, Little Rock had at least four photographers, including B. P. Alford, Thomas W. Bankes, H. P. Diehl, and S. T. Eagan. Photographers also appeared outside of Little Rock by the close of the decade with T. W. Ailey in Ozark, R. C. Bulgin and B. Z. Gannaway in Fort Smith, Carpenter & Whealdon in Texarkana, Clary in Hot Springs, C. C. Cook in Dardanelle, Pye, Bradford & Shinn in Pine Bluff, and Jesse M. Summers in Hope all in business by 1878. (Interestingly, Jesse Summers, in addition to being a photographer, was also a sewing machine agent and proprietor of the Summers' Hotel.)<sup>8</sup> The number of photographers continued to grow in Arkansas during the early 1900s so that most towns of any size had at least one photographer. However, of all of Arkansas's photographers in business during the first part of the twentieth century, none of them were more significant than Mike Disfarmer of Heber Springs.

Mike Meyer Disfarmer (he adopted the last name Disfarmer later in life) was born in Indiana in 1884, but his family moved to Arkansas in late 1892. The Meyers were part of a group of families of German descent that were drawn to Stuttgart, Arkansas, which had been settled by a Lutheran minister. Little is known about his early life, but he did work in the rice fields around Stuttgart and then as a night watchman at a rice mill in the community.<sup>9</sup>

In 1914, Disfarmer's father died and he and his mother moved to Heber Springs. They settled into community life in Heber Springs, and his mother was remembered by local residents as a "fine, if a trifle 'thrifty,' churchgoing citizen." Disfarmer, on the other hand, was remembered slightly differently.<sup>10</sup>

One of the characteristics of Disfarmer that many people remember vividly was his social skills, or more correctly, his lack of social skills. Although he saw and interacted with many people during his work time at

<sup>7</sup> Greenspun, Philip. *History of Photography Timeline*. From: <http://photo.net/history/timeline>

<sup>8</sup> Information on Arkansas photographers compiled by D. L. Ewbank in the files of the Arkansas History Commission. From: <http://www.ark-ives.com/pdfs/PH.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> *Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946: From the Collections of Peter Miller and Julia Scully*. Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1996, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> *Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946: From the Collections of Peter Miller and Julia Scully*. Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1996, p. 181.

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his studio from all different kinds of backgrounds and age groups, he did little socializing elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> One of the few social relationships he seems to have had was with Albert Hendrix, a local guitar-playing barber. Hendrix and Disfarmer would spend some evenings playing music in his studio, but Hendrix remembers that he didn't give out too much personal information.<sup>12</sup> Even though he did not socialize with strangers, he did apparently keep in touch with members of his family in the area – a brother, two sisters, and children of other deceased Meyer siblings were listed as heirs in the probate court petition after his death.<sup>13</sup>

However, it must be remembered that Disfarmer was indeed very different from the other residents of the area. He was a bachelor, loner, and atheist, and was also the only person in Heber Springs that practiced studio photography. In addition, since his roots went back to Indiana, he was technically not a Southerner.

As a result, he was not likely understood by many of the local residents and probably seen as somewhat of an oddity. (In fact, when notice of the change of his name from Meyer to Disfarmer appeared in the local paper, accompanied with information about his origins, it appeared under the headline "Truth is Stranger than Fiction.")<sup>14</sup> As the book *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints* states, "The people in the small town of Heber Springs, Arkansas, where he made photographic portraits for more than forty years, remember neither the places he worked nor the man himself as attractive. For a good part of his life he seems to have been more feared than liked."<sup>15</sup>

Disfarmer's sometimes strange behavior was also reflected in the changing of his name, which was apparently brought on by his mother's death in 1935. Although he had been thinking of changing his name since at least the mid-1930s, he did not formally petition to change his name until 1939. The reporter who wrote the story on his name change indicated that he was changing his name "because 'meyer' means 'farmer' in German, and since the petitioner was not a farmer, he chanced upon the name 'disfarmer.' 'Dis' is said to mean 'not' in German."<sup>16</sup>

At the same time that he changed his name, he also cut off all ties to his family. The book, *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, explains:

For starters, he claimed that an "old man" told Mike he was not kin to the people who had known him all his life. Instead, his real name was "either Charles Cave or Charles August Cudahy" and he had been carried across the

*Original Disfarmer Photographs*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers and New York: Steven Kasher Gallery, 2005, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946: From the Collections of Peter Miller and Julia Scully*. Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1996, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> *Original Disfarmer Photographs*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Gester, Philip. "From a Studio in Arkansas, A Portrait of America." *The New York Times*. 22 August 2005, p. E4.

<sup>15</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*. New York: Edwynn Houk Gallery and powerhouse Books, c.2005, p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 207.

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Indiana farmlands by a tornado and deposited in the Meyer's yard. There was a "Real Uncle Mike Meyer," he confided. ... That fellow, however, "blew away in the same storm that I came in," then died, only to be found nine years later.

The story gets stranger. The remains of this other Mike Meyer were found – "a little piece of his dress, little pieces of bones" – and given to his real mother "who called it her little Mike and hugged [sic] it and wept." She then put this bundle into a big doll, "played with it and hugged [sic] and loved it and called it her little Mike." The bundle was supposed to be buried with Meyer's grandmother (a woman named Margretha Weidenhammer). The photographer Mike Meyer was never told about this secret, however, and so burned the bundle and the doll and "threw the ashes into the ditch in front of my studio." Thus was one Mike Meyer buried and another reborn.<sup>17</sup>

It was not long after Disfarmer moved to Heber Springs in 1914 that he became involved locally with photography. It is not known where Disfarmer received his basic training in photography, but it is possible that he received training while he was living in Stuttgart, which had several photography studios between the 1890s and the 1940s. It is also possible that he was self-taught. However, it was not long after he moved to Heber Springs that he began working in photography professionally.<sup>18</sup>

By 1915, he was a partner in the Penrose & Meyer studio in the lobby of the Jackson Theatre on the south side of Main Street. Although little is known about the partnership, the few surviving portraits from the 1915-1920 period are of well-dressed middle-class people. Since Heber Springs was a tourist destination in the early twentieth century with summer hotels, cinemas and a bowling alley, Penrose & Meyer likely targeted visitors to the Jackson Theatre who might want to get a portrait done to remember the visit. However, shortly after the Jackson Theatre burned in 1921, the partnership dissolved and Penrose left town a short time later. In 1923 and 1924, Disfarmer started purchasing land on First Street, just to the north of Main Street, and he built his studio in 1925 or 1926.<sup>19</sup>

The construction of his studio was not brought about just by the break up of his partnership with Penrose. In 1926, a tornado destroyed the house where Meyer had been living. As a result, he also needed a place to live and the studio would serve not only his business but as his residence as well.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 206-207.

<sup>18</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 208.



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Although Disfarmer's studio was a strictly utilitarian building, it was unlike anything else that existed in Heber Springs at the time. Measuring 20 feet by 30 feet, the one-story stucco building with a shingle-covered gable roof was built on a double lot on Main Street across from the post office c.1926. Although in those characteristics the studio was similar to other buildings in the area, what set it apart was the oversized diagonal dormer window on the north wall that provided the natural light for Disfarmer's photographs.<sup>21</sup>

Starting near the ground and rising to a point several feet above the roof, the dormer window consisted of 72 rectangular panes of glass and likely measured about eight feet wide and 15 feet tall. It is not known where Disfarmer got the design for the studio, but it is an adaptation of the "single slant" studio lighting design which would have been readily accessible to Disfarmer in photographic books or encyclopedias of the time. The design of the studio would have been a somewhat familiar sight in an urban area, but it would have been quite a sight in a rural town like Heber Springs. Unfortunately, the studio was demolished in 1961 to make room for a parking lot for the Piggly Wiggly and the site is now the parking lot for the Heber Springs State Bank.<sup>22</sup>

When customers came to Disfarmer's studio, they entered through a garage-like door on the side of the studio. They then sat in front of the curtain, which apparently extended south from the north wall and was oriented at a 90-degree angle to the dormer window. (His photographs show that light was falling on the right side of the subjects, casting their left sides in shadow.) Disfarmer apparently only relied on the natural lighting, and did not employ reflectors, diffusers, or hot lamps. In addition, the equipment that he used was crude, consisting of handmade cameras and glass plates, which he used for most of his career, even after celluloid film was available.<sup>23</sup>

Even though the majority of Disfarmer's work was done at his Main Street studio, he did do a limited amount of photography in other places. People who have lived in Heber Springs a long time remember him riding around town on his horse, wearing a black cape, and carrying his camera and tripod. He would offer to photograph families relaxing on their porches or he would set up his camera on the weekends in Spring Park, a favorite local gathering place.<sup>24</sup>

Although Disfarmer focused on portrait photography, which would seem to encompass a narrow range, noted New York photograph collector Michael Mattis points out that there is a definite evolution to his work. Disfarmer's earliest photographs were taken in a prop-filled studio, which was gradually stripped down until, by the 1940s, he was down to two backgrounds, a solid black background and a white background with black

<sup>21</sup> *Original Disfarmer Photographs*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Original Disfarmer Photographs*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 232.

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stripes. Mattis points out that stripping down the backgrounds and the studio allowed Disfarmer to “focus ever more intensely on his subjects.”<sup>25</sup>

Disfarmer made most of his money through portrait photography, but as many small studios, he also would process dropped-off film to supplement the income. A 1928 price list from his studio indicates that prints cost four cents each. Developing pack film cost 25 cents while developing roll film cost 10 cents. Surprisingly, in 1955 he was still charging only four cents for a print. Even though portraiture was the foundation of Disfarmer’s business, he only charged 50 cents for a session – another price that stayed the same for decades – and that included three prints.<sup>26</sup>

When Disfarmer took portraits, it was not something that was usually rushed. Sometimes, he took more than an hour to do one portrait, and Richard B. Woodward wrote in an essay on Disfarmer that he “paid far more attention to people as artistic problems to solve...than as individuals with lives outside the studio.” Local residents who had portraits done by Disfarmer also show that he approached photography differently. Charlotte Lacey, who was photographed in her school band uniform in the early 1940s, remembers that he would vanish under the camera cloth for minutes at a time. Tom Olmstead also remembers his unusual technique, saying “There wasn’t much of a greeting when you walked in, I’ll tell you that. Instead of telling you to smile, he just took the picture. No cheese or anything.”<sup>27</sup> Even Disfarmer’s assistant from the 1940s (the only one he ever appeared to have), Betty Utley, remembers him as being “real mean sometimes.”<sup>28</sup>

The output of Disfarmer’s studio not only reflects the people of Heber Springs, but also reflects to a certain degree nationwide trends during the period. His trade was likely hurt by the Great Depression during the 1930s, and it is also reflected in the attire of his clients. By the end of the 1930s, his portraits include many more laborer rather than middle-class clients. Disfarmer also did very well during the 1940s as a result of World War II. Many mothers and wives wanted pictures of soldiers before they left for war and many soldiers wanted pictures of their families to take with them, all of which is reflected in his output during the period.<sup>29</sup>

Although Disfarmer’s business was very good during the 1940s, it dropped off dramatically in the 1950s, and there were several factors that likely contributed to it. He had begun to drink more heavily, and his diet had become poor. In fact, one witness claims that he ate nothing but chocolate ice cream. He had also become a

<sup>25</sup> Treischmann, Werner. “Portraits of a Master.” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. 9 October 2005, p. 2E.

<sup>26</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 212.

<sup>27</sup> Gafter, p. E4.

<sup>28</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 204.

<sup>29</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 213.

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target for children to mock because of his eccentricities. Upon his death in 1959, it was a couple of days before anybody missed him, and when they broke into his studio they found him lying on some newspapers.<sup>30</sup>

During his life Disfarmer was well known in the Heber Springs area, and likely further around the state, for his portrait photography. However, it was in the years after his death that his talent gained a much wider international reputation and audience. The beginning of his climb to fame began in 1961 when local resident Joe Allbright bought the contents of Disfarmer's studio for five dollars from the local bank. In 1973 Allbright sold ten to fifteen boxes of glass plates to then newspaper editor (now attorney) Peter Miller. Miller thought the pictures might be important and spent a year using a formula provided by Eastman Kodak cleaning the emulsion of dirt and mold.<sup>31</sup>

Miller's work paid off and he was able to salvage around 3,000 of the 4,000 negatives. He made some modern prints from the negatives and sent a few to Julia Scully, who was editor of *Modern Photography* magazine. Scully's sponsorship of the work resulting in a book in 1976 along with an exhibition at New York's International Center of Photography was what led to Disfarmer's widespread fame and discovery.<sup>32</sup>

After Disfarmer's reputation spread, a search began, led by Michael Mattis, to uncover as many Disfarmer prints as possible. Mattis teamed up with a group of local people in Cleburne County to find prints, evaluate their quality, and make fair offers to buy them. In addition, Hava Gurevich, former director of New York's Gitterman Gallery interviewed people with prints and who had knowledge about Disfarmer. As Mattis has said, "In many respects, this endeavor has resembled an ambitious archaeological dig more than a standard project on vintage photography." Mattis also believed strongly that the search was to be an educational endeavor – he wanted people to know that they had Disfarmer prints and pay fair prices for them. In conjunction with the search, a Disfarmer display was on exhibit at the Cleburne County Historical Society.<sup>33</sup>

Although, for the most part, Disfarmer's subjects were not posed (several have said that he just snapped photos without warning) and they were captured unhindered, it is that very quality that helps to set his photographs above the work of other photographers' works. As Verlyn Klinkenborg, author and member of the editorial board of *The New York Times* once wrote:

The faces are burned and worn. The arms hang long and heavy. Some of Disfarmer's subjects have been caught off guard, as if they had never seen themselves in a mirror before, much less in a photograph. Others know the

<sup>30</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>31</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Disfarmer: *The Vintage Prints*, p. 205.

<sup>33</sup> Hart, Russell. "State of the Art: Vintage Disfarmer." *American Photo*. Volume XVI, Number 6, November/December 2005. p. 92.

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poses and the gestures that a camera is supposed to elicit. But given the setting, a shallow footing against a blank backdrop bathed in northern light, it is astonishing how fully these people reveal themselves.

...Each of these photographs strikes me as the midpoint in a story we do not know – stories, perhaps, that we do not even know how to tell any more. You can see in these prints the surprising grace of a clumsy man, the unexpected beauty of a plain woman. You can feel the labor almost everyone here has known.<sup>34</sup>

It has also been suggested that the isolation that Disfarmer experienced from the local community contributed to the quality of his photographs. In the book *Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946*, it has been theorized that “Perhaps it was Disfarmer’s perception of his own alienation from his environment that permitted him the artistic distance needed to record these plain country people so clearly. With directness and simplicity, he achieved a revelation of character that more sophisticated photographers have attempted with greater technique but perhaps no greater success.”<sup>35</sup>

What exactly made Disfarmer’s photographs so great will likely to be the subject of debate for many years to come. However, the fact is that Disfarmer had a special gift and has been compared to some of the greats in the field. As stated in *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*:

In his ruthless clarity and in his zest for viewing the material world through a glass lens, Disfarmer belongs in the company of August Sander, Brassai, Walker Evans, Irving Penn, [Eugène] Atget, Weegee, and [Diane] Arbus, although comparisons of this sort are perhaps ultimately a disservice to all.

Disfarmer’s achievement was at once smaller and greater than theirs. Lacking the education of well-traveled urban aesthetes like Evans and Arbus, he was anything but a sophisticate. His mind was probably damaged. His range of subject matter was narrow – studio portraits of citizens in an American small town – and his vintage prints, on many kinds of papers, were often done in a hurry and lack the consistently high finish of a classic Penn, Sander, or Brassai. Disfarmer’s audience could not have afforded the work of an “artist,” and he often had to make do with materials dictated by wartime or backcountry shortages. But even though it was the taking of the picture and not the final

<sup>34</sup> Klinkenborg, Verlyn. “Vernacular Faces.” *The New York Times*. 4 October 2005, p. A26.

<sup>35</sup> *Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits, 1939-1946: From the Collections of Peter Müller and Julia Scully*. Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1996, pp. 200-201.

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product that seems to have kept the photographer behind the camera for four decades, a high proportion of the prints...clearly exceed the norms of a typical commercial enterprise from that era.<sup>36</sup>

Today, the grave of Mike Meyer Disfarmer is the last surviving property associated with the life of this noted photographer. The first home that he lived in when he came to Heber Springs was destroyed in a tornado in 1926 and the Jackson Theatre, where the Penrose & Meyer Studio was located, burned in 1921. In addition, Disfarmer's Studio, which also served as his residence from 1926 until his death in 1959, has been demolished and the site is currently occupied by the parking lot of the Heber Springs State Bank.

Mike Meyer Disfarmer's contribution to photography and the documentation of the people of the Heber Springs area has been significant. *American Photo* magazine said in its November/December 2005 issue that Disfarmer "created what is now considered one of the great bodies of American photography."<sup>37</sup> In addition, the book *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints* states of his portraits "that in their simplicity, restraint, elegance, and penetrating social gaze [they] rank with the finest produced in the twentieth century."<sup>38</sup> With his distinctive studio, spartan backdrops, and full-length portraits, Disfarmer's photographs focused on the people rather than the props associated with them. In addition, his photographs provide a wealth of information on the everyday people of small-town Arkansas during the 1920s through the 1950s. His remaining photographs are testament to his work, and his grave remains as a monument to his artistic genius.

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The gravesite of Mike Meyer Disfarmer in the Heber Springs Cemetery is the only remaining property associated with the life of the noted portrait photographer. Operating a studio in Heber Springs from 1925 or 1926 until his death in 1959, Mike Meyer Disfarmer quickly became known for his portrait photography of the common people of Heber Springs and the surrounding areas. Since his death, Disfarmer's work has gained a much wider reputation, culminating in an exhibition of his work at the International Center of Photography in New York in 1976. As a result of his importance in the world of photography, the Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion B** with **statewide significance**. The property is eligible for inclusion under **Criteria Consideration C** as a grave of an historical figure of outstanding importance.

<sup>36</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 218.

<sup>37</sup> Hart, Russell. "State of the Art: Vintage Disfarmer." *American Photo*. Volume XVI, Number 6, November/December 2005. p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints*, p. 204.

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Disfarmer, Mike Meyer, Gravesite

Name of Property

Cleburne County, Arkansas

County and State

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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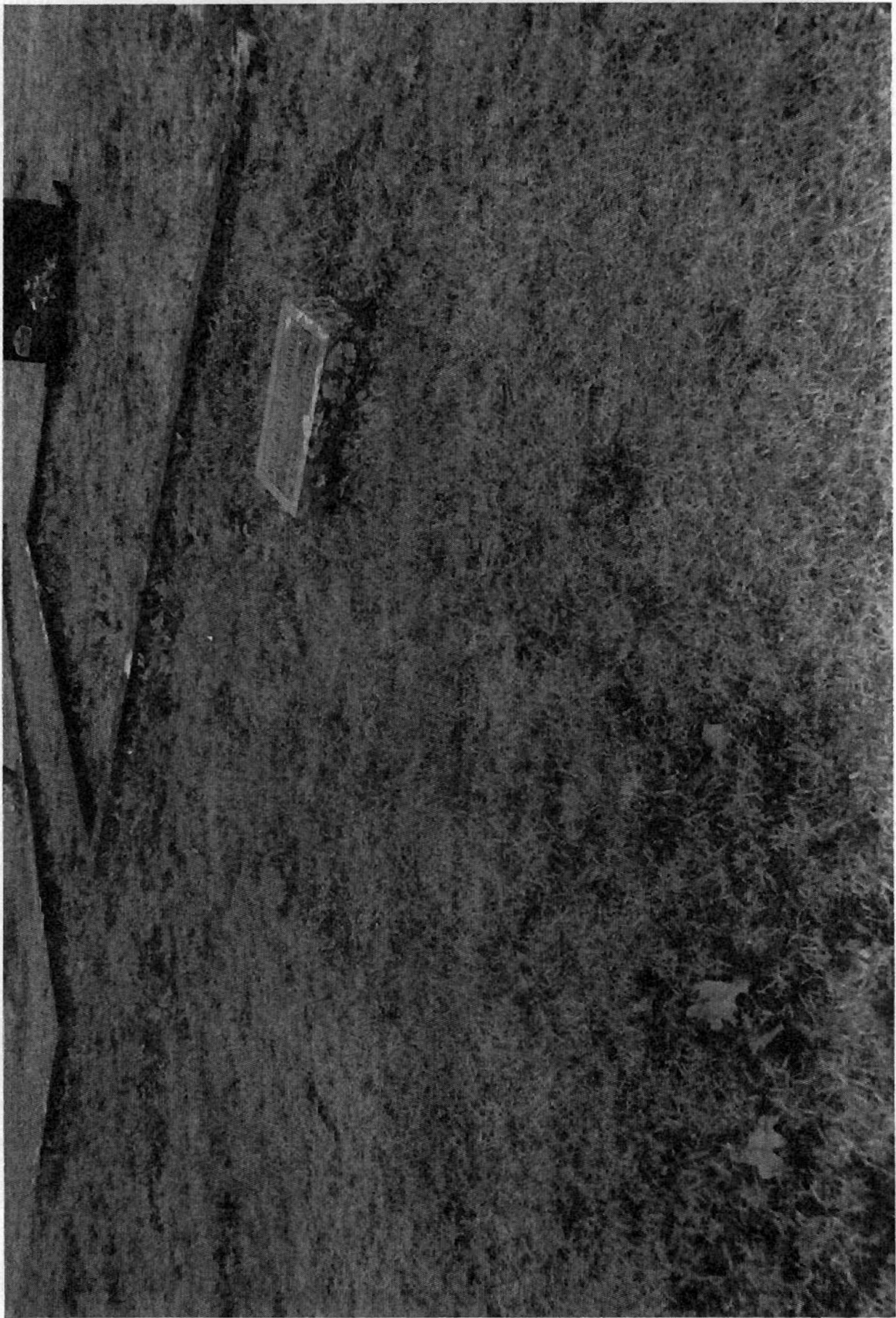
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### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

From a point 2 feet southwest of the southwest corner of the Mike Meyer Disfarmer gravestone, proceed northerly 10 feet, then proceed easterly 20 feet, then proceed southerly 10 feet, then proceed westerly 20 feet to the point of beginning.

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary contains the land that is historically associated with the Mike Meyer Disfarmer Gravesite.





MIKE MEYER DISFARMER

1884

1959



GREENS FERRY DAM  
SW

HEBER SPRINGS QUADRANGLE  
ARKANSAS—CLEBURNE CO.  
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

1586  
1587  
1588  
1589

SE (VILLE)  
BATESVILLE 4.0 MI.  
DRASCO 15 MI.

2/30/587 1 990 000 FEET

R. 10 W. R. 9 W. 92° 00' 35" 30'

WILBURN 8 MI.

DISPATCHEL MINE  
MAYERS GRANITE QUARRY  
HEBER SPRINGS  
420 000  
FEET UTM;  
15/53733/3427141

3927

3926

3925

