Paul Moakley
Ocean Breeze

Late last year, I knocked on the door of the only house left at the corner of Naughton and Oceanside Avenues in Staten Island. A man in a blue bathrobe answered and after brief introductions—masked and from a safe distance—I asked him about a photograph made there in in 1983. He immediately recognized his sister Christine Ann Gibson, who had moved away years ago. He kindly gave me Gibson's number, and the next day we spoke on the phone.

"In that beach community, everybody knew everyone else," Gibson said when I asked if she recalled the day the photographer Christine Osinski made this picture. "It was just a normal thing back then. The guys in the neighborhood would drive by and beep, make noise, to try to get your attention. I would be like, Oh, really." Osinski set up her 4-by-5-inch camera. "I just didn't think anything of her. I was trying to get my task done, and it was just like one of the boys bugging you."

On that day, Gibson remembers the heat but also struggling as a young, single mother. "I was living next door to my widowed mom. She helped me with my two-year-old son while I was working three jobs. I was trying to scrape by to pay the bills."

When most photographers looked to the crowds in Manhattan for inspiration, Osinski captured the quieter lives of Staten Island's working class.

Osinski's photograph captures that feeling—a tough attitude, an athletic frame, Gibson taking out her aggression on an overgrown patch of grass. A row of beach bungalows, lush trees, and old cars fill out the background. Today the only house left standing in this scene is 726 Naughton Avenue, the one in the middle of the frame. This small neighborhood, Ocean Breeze, is on Staten Island's South Shore, sunk between the larger Midland and South Beaches. It's known as "the bowl" to some residents, one of the lowest areas and prone to flooding.

Ocean Breeze has felt desolate since Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, the remaining homes seeming misplaced and alien, surrounded by grassland. Red, spray-painted numbers mark the plots where houses once stood, and new signage outlines plans for the Mid-Island Bluebelt, an ecologically rich drainage area designed to absorb floodwater from future storms. Two blocks north, wild turkeys roam around nearby medical facilities, where military tents cover a COVID-19 testing site run by the National Guard. Directly across the boulevard, a beach stretch borders everything with an uninter-rupted view out to the Atlantic. Since the 1880s, this area was a summer destination; more than a century later, it still provides a place to escape.

Raised by a father who was Lithuanian and a mother with Irish and German roots, and the youngest of six children, Gibson recalls when her parents bought the house in Ocean Breeze. In its heyday, South Beach Boardwalk had been home to an amusement park and a resort until their closings in the 1950s. "There used to be a casino in Midland Beach, and it was a place to be," Gibson says. "My parents bought that property, and others, under that premise. They liked the area so much that they winterized the homes and stayed there. They saw a great profit; my father flipped homes back in those days. He was a visionary." Gibson's father used to mow the lawn, but he died when she was nineteen.

Osinski moved to Staten Island after being priced out of Manhattan in the early 1980s, around the same time she made the photograph of Gibson. Osinski was drawn closer to the working-class people she grew up around in Chicago. A massive expansion followed the opening of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, in 1964, with thousands migrating from Brooklyn and other parts of the city. The island drew one of the largest Italian American communities in the country. Osinski's photobook *Summer Days Staten Island* (2016), with images made in 1983 and 1984, records the rise of new housing developments and shopping centers that took hold on the edges of former farms and beachfronts. Yet much of the island's natural space has been preserved to this day, making it the borough with the largest area of green space. When most photographers looked to the crowds in Manhattan for inspiration, Osinski captured the quieter lives of the working class and the city's expansion on a new frontier.

For Gibson, Osinski's photograph opens a box of memories that touches on many issues from that time—the struggle to fit in, the racial tensions, and her own path as a student and later a mother. "I thought, I can do it all. I was superwoman. I wasn't going to let anything get me down." She noted her Stevie Nicks look (she was into rock 'n' roll then) and a telephone pole in the background painted for the bicentennial.

"I loved growing up on Staten Island," Gibson says. "It was quiet and peaceful." At thirty-eight, she moved away, and now lives in Florida, where she works in clinical research. Back at home on Staten Island, they call her "the glue." She misses her family, but remains close to them. "You remember a lot of love with that many kids growing up in the family. I remember the ocean breeze rolling in around two each day. My dad always said, 'All good things come from the sea.'"

Paul Moakley is a documentary photographer and editor at large for special projects at *TIME*. He lives on Staten Island as the caretaker and curator of the Alice Austen House.

Christine Osinski,
*Woman Cutting Grass,
Staten Island,* 1983
Courtesy the artist and
Joseph Bellows Gallery,
La Jolla, California