BOWLING IS AN equal-opportunity sport. That is, any collection of images is likely to contain numerous photographs of women and youth—not as many as male bowlers, but proportionally more than in many other recreational or competitive sports. Typically, photographs of groups of bowlers show notable uniformity; team shirts and conforming haircuts are de rigueur, and groups are posed to choreograph an impression of stolid determination.

This group of women veers from the norm. Perhaps the dresses were cut from the same pattern and, at most, two different bolts of cloth, but washing and wearing have altered their shades and shapes. Perhaps the two pairs of white socks were woven at the same mill. Maybe two of the balls were produced at the same factory. The similarities in this picture are secondary to the pleasures of witnessing the insistent variety of these bowlers. Hairstyles, postures, expressions (including one woman with eyes closed—amazing that this picture survived, given that most such “failed” photos get tossed), the size and shapes of hands, legs, feet, bodies, the nearly symmetrical arcing lines of balls and heads—all of this detail in a moment, recorded on film with the aid of flash.

Like the best pictures from any historical archive, this midcentury image asks more questions than it answers. First, who were these women? Their dresses bear no clues, no team emblems, embroidered names, or sponsor logos. Where did they bowl? How did they know each other? Where did they get their shoes? And why is there a space on the left side of the frame, as though someone couldn’t make it and the racked ball is her surrogate?

Would knowing the answers affect our viewing of this image? Perhaps. But knowing will not change the enduring pleasures of what could not have been intended, by the women or by the photographer. Despite conventions of art and sport, individualism overcomes uniformity in this singular document.

—George Slade
(in fond memory of Anna Mae Crenshaw)

George Slade, whose web presence can be located with the phrase “re:photographica,” is a photography historian, curator, and consultant based in Minneapolis.
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