

## One Woman's Journey

*By Jacklyn Patterson*

I owned my first camera the year I turned thirty-eight. I would like to say that this purchase was a defining moment in my life, but it would not be true. Actually, it had never occurred to me to own a camera or to take photographs. My father recorded the history of our family and did a very good job. You have to understand that in the time and place where I grew up it never once occurred to my parents that I would ever have to “earn a living”. I was brought up to be an asset for the professional or executive husband I would no doubt marry. In the world I grew up in, learning to “set the table properly”, and the all-important “play a decent hand of bridge” took center stage.

Education and college were important, but only for my own enjoyment, and to make sure I had the skills to live in the world my parents planned for me. However, the best-laid plans have a way of going astray. At the advanced age of 37, I found myself a single woman with three children and no possible way to earn a living. All I was qualified to do was work for a rich family and run their household. I really was very skilled at giving dinner parties, running the Girl Scouts, planning civic banquets and, of course, playing that important “decent hand of bridge”. Unfortunately, there were not any rich families in my small community who needed these services, so I had to look elsewhere for employment. It would be nice to be able to say that at this point I knew my secret dream was to be a photographer, but it would not be true.

Many women of my time belonged to the transitional generation. Brought up to be wives and mothers, we were suddenly informed that we should work and be able to take care of ourselves. And, even more, “fulfill our dreams”, so we could “have it all”.

My favorite hobby was always art. Toile painting, decoupage, macramé, papier-mâché, fabric art – I did them all. I needed to find a profession, so I followed my natural inclination and enrolled at the closest college, having decided to earn a degree in art and become a high school art teacher. I loved art school! Unfortunately, I learned that I did not draw really well and my talents appeared to lie with color and design. Keeping enough drawings ahead for my watercolor classes proved to be a major chore. At this point, a friend suggested that I buy a camera.

In the “real” art world it is permissible to work from a photograph if you have conceived the idea and have taken the photograph yourself. With one of those strokes of luck that affect the direction of your life, I fell into the hands of a great salesman. Instead of selling me the cheap

number I asked for he sold me a great little camera called a Cannon G317. This remarkable little piece of equipment had a unique feature built in. If the exposure was not correct the camera would not fire! Genius! I soon learned that you could take the camera off “auto” and change all sorts of little levers and the camera would work. Amazing! This proved to be so much fun that I enrolled in a basic photography course – strictly for entertainment. I would like to say that when I developed that first black and white film, and saw the first print come up in the developer, I experienced an “awakening”. However, it would not be true. What a great tool, is what I thought. It beats a paintbrush all to pieces and makes a pencil seem archaic. You could record as many images as you liked, changing things each time, and reproduce it easily, quickly and as many times as you wanted.

My camera was the best new tool in my arsenal. However, my mind was focused on ART, with capital letters, but I was spending more and more time in the darkroom, just because it was so much fun. Did I mention how lucky I was to have a great teacher? His name is Woodie Gaddis and he has taught photography in the Journalism Department at the University of Central Oklahoma for 30 years. This man not only has a passion for photography, but a passion for teaching his students. After two semesters I was having such a good time that I enrolled in a one-hour summer course just to be have access to the dark room. (After all, you never knew when you might need a contact sheet to paint from).

The assignment was to produce 15 photographs on the same subject. The title of my subject was “Miss Wolcott’s House”. Miss Constance Wolcott was the first woman graduate of the Oklahoma University School of Pharmacy. At this time, she was also the oldest graduate. She lived in a large and once beautiful old house, which was falling down. She described in detail the antique furniture in the rooms upstairs – unaware that relatives had stripped and sold all of it. She lived in two downstairs rooms, was in a wheelchair, disabled, partially blind, and mostly deaf. She had tried the nursing home and did not like it. The only part of her still working was her mind.

When I took the finished assignment to my teacher, he told me to find a writer and take the photographs to *The Daily Oklahoman*, which at that time published freelance work. The paper took the feature and paid me \$150 (a fortune), and the writer \$45 (she is still mad at me about that). I waited impatiently for several weeks and finally one Sunday opened the paper and there they were! My photographs! A three-page feature. That was it. That was the moment. Suddenly I realized – belatedly – that a photograph is not complete until someone else looks at it, that it is all about communication. Did all those Sunday readers understand? Did they see the spirit, the courage, and the bittersweet

life? Did they see that the house mirrored the life of the woman? This was the moment I acquired the passion. I never produced another painting from a photograph and never got a teaching certificate. I did get a degree in painting and took every photography course the school offered. *The Daily Oklahoman* published four more of my photo features and at graduation; I knew I wanted to be a photographer. I have chosen to include in my portfolio four photographs from my days in journalism. These photographs inspired my passion for photography and started me on this journey.

Are you ready for a serious confession? Here it is. I care nothing for nature, sunsets, or the grandeur of the great outdoors. The most beautiful scene in the world causes me to start planning where I would pose the group. Instead of admiring the view, I look for the direction of light that would most flatter the family and start thinking about how they will fit into the landscape. One day while feeling guilty for my lack of enthusiasm for getting up at dawn, I realized that I care only about photographing people, the objects they gather around them, and the structures they choose as dwelling places.

A profound influence on me – long before I owned a camera – was a book of photographs titled, “The Family of Man.” Edward Steichen created this exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art. It consists of 503 pictures from 68 countries, 273 photographers, both amateurs and professionals. I still have this book. While a little worn and tattered, it still moves me as it did when I was in college. Another influence on me was a photograph I saw in the late fifties that has always stayed with me. It was in *The Saint Louis Post Dispatch*, and I saw it once, and have carried in my mind ever since. A nameless news photographer recorded the scene on a city street. It was a rainy night, halos of mist around the streetlights, puddles of water on the street. I see the photograph even now. Illuminated by the headlights of cars a mother kneels in the street holding the body of her injured child.

Another photograph that had a profound effect on me was the one that was not taken. A veteran news photographer told me this story. He said it would have been the photograph of his life, possibly a Pulitzer Prize. However, he did not take the picture. A grandfather had run over his baby grandson while backing his car out of the garage. When the photographer entered the house of mourning the grandfather was sitting at a table, his head in his hands, with the coffin of the dead baby visible through the angle of his body and arms. He said he did not take the photograph because the sorrow of the man was so intense that he could not compound his grief by recording it for all time – for all to witness. I have often wondered if I would have taken the photograph. Would you have?

My family has had tremendous influence on me. I was one of those fortunate children who grew up safe and happy, and blessed with colorful and striking parents. Growing older, I now realize how well my mother prepared me for life. She gave me the skills necessary for survival and instilled in me a true pleasure in living. My father was in the railroad business. While growing up I was always aware of the esteem and respect people had for him. I can honestly say that I never heard my father say a cruel or unkind word about anybody. My little brother, whom we lost eight years ago, was the same way: he had no malice in him. I never photograph trains because the trains I hold in my mind no longer exist. I remember the shade of silver and the reflection of the lights on the white tablecloths. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, lifting the shade, seeing the steam and the porters loading luggage. I remember the voices calling to each other and the particular quality of light cast on the platform. I remember falling asleep to the sound of the “chung chung” of the wheels. The excitement of boarding a train at night, dressed to the teeth in a suit, hat and gloves, was a never to be forgotten experience.

After graduating from college with my art degree, I really wanted to work for *National Geographic* and tour the world. However, a son attending college and two daughters in high school prevented that. My time to make such a decision had passed. Second choice was a newspaper, but they had unreasonable demands, such as moving to the city (where they were located) and working from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. This was not an option with two teenagers at home. I took a job as a wedding photographer, and felt lucky to have a job in the photography business. Wedding photography changed my life, as I was always a shy and quiet person. During my journalism period, I lurked around the edges, recording, observing and letting the writer do the hard work. I still remember my first wedding, when the awful realization dawned that the people were not going to just fall into position. Someone had to take charge. Visions of unemployment danced in my head and I developed a new personality. Suddenly I understood that wedding and portrait photography is like a performance. The setting, the lighting, and the clothes can all be perfect, but without emotion - we only record an event.

Wedding photography taught me to work with people and draw out their emotions. I learned that every wedding is a celebration and my job was to see that everyone remembered it as the most beautiful event that ever took place. Through my work I learned that every parent's child is the most beautiful, intelligent, and wonderful child in the world and that every single family is special. I understood it was my role to see that the photographs I made reflected all of this. I was fortunate enough to have an employer who let me be a good employee. During my two years with him he taught me how to run a studio and he let me do anything I thought I could do. Bob Potter still lives and works in Oklahoma City,

and he never knew that working for him was my first job. I will always be grateful he took a chance on a novice photographer.

During this time, I discovered the Professional Photographers of Oklahoma. What a moment! After attending a PPO convention for one day, I was a convert. What great photographs! I had never seen professional portraits of that caliber and now had some new heroes: Glen and Marvel Nelson, Ed Lobit, Jim White, Roy Kendrick, a completely new world opened for me. I knew I wanted to be associated with photographers that could produce that quality. I joined PPO that year, in 1979. The next year I entered prints – four of them – and learned more sitting at the print judging than any school I ever attended. I was hooked!

That summer when my last child graduated from school, I married again. Did I mention what a lucky person I am? Not only was he smart, handsome, but also successful in his profession. Bob is a geologist and petroleum engineer and loves his work as much as I love mine. He taught me the difference between people who “work to live”, and people who “live to work”. After a year and a half getting used to a new town and new family, the urge to work again overcame me and I opened a small studio on a shoestring. If I had the equipment and could figure out how to do it – and if they would pay me - I would photograph anything that walked in the door. In 1983 I joined the Professional Photographers of America. I became active in PPO in 1985 and served as President in 1991. Since that time, I have served two additional terms on the Board and chaired the Scholarship and the Oklahoma School Committees for three years. I also served as the Certification liaison for three years. In 1996 I was elected to the Board of Directors of the Southwest Photographers Association and had the honor of serving as President in 2004.

Can you handle another confession? I never had a goal of becoming a Master Photographer. This seemed to be such an accomplishment that it never occurred to me I could earn it. One day while visiting with some friends who were talking about merits one of them asked me if I was not close to the Masters. I realized I had 11 print merits and had attended schools, given some small programs, and gone through the offices of my state association. After entering print competitions every year, just for the fun of it, suddenly there was a goal. However, once I stopped looking at print competitions as the most fun game around and started trying to get merits, I was in trouble. It took me two years to get two merits, worrying about what the judges “would like”. However, I did get the Masters, stopped worrying about merits, and went back to enjoying print competition, having a good time, and benefiting from a great learning experience.

I heard a famous football coach quoted recently. He said, "Success is not forever, and failure isn't fatal." This is also a great attitude for the print competition. I did set a goal of earning the Craftsman Degree, which I received two years later. As my studio grew decisions had to be made. Mine was to keep my studio small and do only custom portrait work. I never expected to be a children's photographer, but now find that half of my work is children. My goal is still to see the beauty in each and the love in every family and the special bond between parents and children.

Allow me to tell you a story of two men. Both shared common traits. They loved their work and looked upon each day as a great adventure. People who only spent a short time with them always remembered them and considered them friends. They shared the joy of loving every minute of their lives. We said goodbye to one of these men in Mandeville, Louisiana on October 14, 2002. He was 46. On January 4, 2003 I attended the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday for the other man in Boca Raton, Florida. I watched him, surrounded by friends, family, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren; he danced with his eighty-year-old girl friend. Those of us fortunate enough to have a strong and abiding faith in a higher power can only believe that someday all mysteries will be revealed to us, and we will somehow understand.

This story is important to tell because I have come to realize that time is the most valuable gift we will receive. There will never be enough hours in a lifetime to do all the things I want to do. The time spent with my husband, children, grandchildren and friends is a gift beyond price. Doing the work I love is a great blessing, and to live during this particular time in history is a wonderful thing for a photographer. It is almost impossible to realize how far our profession has come in such a short time. And how many amazing things are still ahead of us.

I pray I will have many more years for my journey. I want to see all the children grow and develop. I want to travel and see more of the world with my husband. Helen Yancy inspired me to combine my painting skills with photography and I have had a great satisfaction from "stepping out of the box" and trying the combinations of two mediums and long for more time to pursue this new interest. The digital world is calling me and I wish for the time to give it my full attention. There is a whole world of children waiting to be photographed – each one different and special. I have loved every day of my journey. Should it end sooner than I would like I will always be grateful for the gifts I have received, the people I have loved, and for discovering at the halfway point in my life, this great gift of photography.