

# How I got started in Photography

by Lee Alexander

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This is a story of how I started dabbling in photography. As a child I had my share of box cameras and old projectors. My father had an old Bell and Howell projector that didn't work quite well. I tore it apart and put it back together so my brothers and sister could watch our black and white Mickey Mouse movies. But my father asked me if the parts he found on the table should be in the projector. My response was that it seem to be extras pieces that did not help or impede the projectors ability to show the movie, so I left them out. He just laughed and went his way. We enjoyed the rest of the movie on our back porch with a white sheet fasten to the ceiling. When I had money I would buy film for the Brownie box camera I had and got it developed. To say the least, at my age of 9, I did not understand anything about the then normal terms of composition, visualization, and many more terms that I know today. I just pointed and shot what was in front of me.

As I got older I moved away from picking up a camera until late in my military career. While stationed in Germany I started buying camera equipment. I had acquired a Canon AE1, yes film, and got hooked on shooting slide film and the various standard B&W films. I enjoyed getting into the darkroom. The smells of all the different chemicals sort of fascinated me. Learning how to load film on reels for development and subsequently bulk loading and processing all of my B&W films. During this period in Germany I also fell on some luck in getting to do medium format work. The local 'Sight and Sound' outlet for the military had cameras for sale. I walked in one day, just to browse, and a Mamiya, complete with lens, 120-film insert and non-metering view finder, caught my eye. I could not believe the price on the tag. Back then we didn't have personal pagers or cell phones. I left to talk to my wife, and hoped that it would still be there and no one else saw what I saw. The price was beyond belief and as

I explained it to my wife I was able to convince her that we should take the money out of the bank and get it.

I was shaking as I withdrew the money from my account and made my way back to the store. Hoping that the camera was still in the case and no one had corrected the price. As I stood over the display case staring down at the camera a salesperson approached and asked me if I needed assistance. I then responded with a nervous yes and asked if I could hold the camera and check it out. As the camera was placed in my hand I then asked if the displayed price was correct. The salesperson checked the tag and said yes. But I told her I believe someone made a mistake. She called for the manager and the manager confirmed that the price, as shown, was correct. I reached into my pocket, pulled out, believe it or not, \$360.00 and paid for the complete system. Even at 1978 prices the lens cost was over two hundred dollars, and I got it all for just under four. This blew my mind, but I had no intentions to push the issue of the camera's low price. I just paid for it and smiled as I walked out the store. The pricing was eventually corrected later that week, and each remaining display was corrected with each part of the camera tagged with the correct price. If anyone wanted to purchase this system it would cost them well over \$900 dollars.

My next acquisition was a Canon F1N with a motor drive (12 batteries), and it was a beast. Weighing in around 3 to 4 pounds loaded. The weight didn't bother me then as I shot sports, landscapes or portraits with any of the cameras that I had. I made a make-shift darkroom using my bathroom when I processed my film. The military installation also had a complete studio and darkroom facilities for all patrons. The instructors were well adapted to help me get my skills up to par. They assisted me in my darkroom workflow, and making it more proficient.

The two instructors had a deep background in photography, and between them I would say well over 45 or 50 years apiece. Both of them photographed professionally and ran their own studios and in-house processing labs. I remember one telling me of spending in excess of 3

hours developing the 8 x10 glass plate from a furniture store session. He had to set the camera, lights and ready the product for shooting. The only thing the photographer that he worked for did , was remove the lens cap, press the cable release for the shutter, and wait for the exposure to complete. He then packed all of the equipment up and went back to the studio to process the film. Yes, one plate of glass.

One of my instructor's most memorable narratives came from his tour in the German army. He became the assistant to Leni Riefenstahl while in 1934-1935. She filmed and edited "Triumph of Will", in Nuremberg , Germany. The final editing took place in Berlin in a small bunker. All of the basic amenities for a prolonged stay was made available to them until the editing was completed. It took the both of them 72 hours around the clock to make the final cuts that were presented to the authorities. So I would conclude that his, somewhat forced induction into lab work, makes his experience and training, good enough to guide and direct my photographic development. During my training I had the privilege to impress both of them, not by just taking pictures, but creating images that have substance.

Upon my return to the states in 1980 and finally settling down in Oklahoma I built my own darkroom before even visiting the local military setup. I found myself engulfed in the formidable smells of D-76, Dektol, Beers formula and fixer. Setting up enlargers that would accommodate 35mm to 4x5 inch negatives. Utilizing various timers, dodging tools, densitometer, print washer, and local retouching kits for prints that was available to me, it was a blast.

The technology changes and for the most part, it is for the best. Just as my instructors went through their progressive photographic training I had to evolve and take the next jump. My wife will attest that the digital revolution for her was great. No more rotten egg smell coming from the darkroom. This room changed from a dark environment to a light-room. I was maintaining a database of my film images before I purchased my first digital camera in 1991. I had two point and shoot, Panasonic and Sony —

very limited in functionality, but they worked until I could afford better equipment. Now film scanners, printers and digital cameras with megapixels have taken over this room. The lights are on and the smells in most cases are very pleasant. Old medium is scanned in from my film days and digitized and I can download from disks or cards to a system that has 8TBs of storage. The computer with the various image software packages have since replaced the development tanks and chemicals. The monitors have assumed the position of the enlarger to display the image for dodging, burning and all the other elements of image creativity and enhancement. But as a photographer, the beginner, amateur or professional, we must all not forget, it is not about the equipment or tools we own, expensive or otherwise, but how it is used, and about our creative imagination.

We can all argue whether photography is an art. That is a good topic of debate for days of reflection. But I personally know that photography is an expression, and it can be good, bad or indifferent. I have come to the conclusion that photography helps to establish a purposed intent that is only defined by the person behind the camera. What they are attempting to convey, why and to whom. We must use the skills we have learned over the years to express our visualization of moment, space and spirit of the images we create.