

Jan 29
1979

Dear Laura -

Here it is! There may still be places you want to cut or change but the restructuring has given it chronology and a certain continuity which I hope is satisfactory. Please remind me when I call you about whether the photographs are being sent. (and please include one of you - perhaps the one standing out in the landscape with the big camera!)

You have ice, we have rain. It's a dreary day but I am so glad that this "worked" when I did it, that for me it is cheerful weather!

I completely lost track of sending you prints myself - within a few days I'll have them done and sent also. Don't hesitate to call collect.

Best from
Greta

By Laura Gilpin

The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle, Hastings House, 1941

Temples in Yucatan, Hastings House, 1947

The Rio Grande: River of Destiny, Duell, Sloan
and Pearce 1947

The Enduring Navaho, University of Texas Press,
Austin and London, 1968.

About Laura Gilpin

David Vestal, "Laura Gilpin, Photographer of the
Southwest", Popular Photography, February, 1977.
Numerous short articles in newspapers following
showing of Retrospective Exhibition.

Laura Gilpin

I don't recall exactly how I began in photography because it was so long ago but I know I was given a Brownie as early as 1902; Recently I found something my father wrote in 1903 when I was twelve years old. He was down in old Mexico managing a mine over the Christmas holiday. In a letter home he wrote a parody on "T'was the Night Before Christmas". In it he described things that he imagined he saw under the Christmas tree -- a train for my brother and a developing tank for me. The tank was one of those funny machines in which you rolled the film under a red apron from one side into the other and then poured in developer. I can just picture it now. I don't know what ever happened to it.

I can also date a lot of life-long influences back to the year 1902 when at age thirteen I was sent by my mother to visit her closest friend, my namesake Laura Perry, who was blind. She lived in St. Louis. We went to the World's Fair every other day and it was my job to describe exhibits to her. I think that the experience taught me a kind of observation that I would never have learned otherwise. I can also remember being very much fascinated by some Igorote natives from the Philippines who were there.

When I was fourteen my mother took my brother and me to New York where we had portraits made by Mrs. Gertrude Käsebier; they were very beautiful, especially the portrait of my 6 year old brother. Meeting Mrs. Kasebier had a great effect on me, certainly, because later when I was a photograp~~h~~hy

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I went into the poultry business, raising turkeys, to earn what was necessary. My mother was the one who always wanted me to be independent. She was a remarkable woman and she was all for my doing what I wanted to do. In 1916 for a girl to go off on her own was not the usual thing, but whatever I wanted to do she was for; she was right behind me. She was wonderful -- the more that I think of her the stronger I feel that.

While I was at the Clarence White school I saw a great deal of Mrs. Käsebier who gave me good criticism. At the school Mr. White was a marvelous teacher. Paul Anderson was the technical instructor, and that year Max Weber gave a course in the history of art and design which was a wonderful experience and then Mr. White himself brought it all together with weekly criticisms. He would give us problems to solve. I remember some very interesting students and I can tell from my old group photograph that there were more women than men at the school. I have always wondered what happened to them.

Mr. White

/ certainly knew how to inspire everybody. I know it was because of him that I made those two night photographs in Central Park in the snow storm. The first view camera I had was a 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 and I remember logging

it over into Central Park with one plate holder with two glass plates in it. One of the pictures has been seen by very few people. I have never shown it anywhere but I'm not parting with that one until I have made a duplicate of it.

The schooling in New York was wonderful, it was just what I most wanted to do and I soaked it up! Learning technique was different in those days. When I began photography at the Clarence White School we did not have light meters. It was a question of acquiring sensitivity of the eye on the ground glass while working under the focusing cloth. Really, photographic technique is nothing but plain common sense. Problem solving. I always go back to the first very simple principle -- that you expose for your shadows and develop for your highlights. That's what Ansel Adams has done with his zone system and everything is really just a refinement on the basic principle.

As I look back, I think that music helped me in learning photography. Music was a big part of my life growing up. I studied the violin, but I never got very far with it. So I let photography win! There's a great link, you know, between photography and music. One is continual sound and the other is continual tone. There you are -- there's the comparison! and it is true of so many other photographers. Ansel Adams was a concert pianist. Did you know Mr. White was a violinist?

I never liked to perform but I enjoyed being with musicians.

Before I went to New York, I spent a summer managing a chamber music group in Colorado Springs. In New York I landed right into the world of music again, because one of my roommates Brenda Putnam was a pianist. My first exhibition print was of a trio in which she played. Brenda's father was the Librarian of Congress. He bought a few of my prints for the Library collection. Later I was instrumental in his purchase of both the work of Gertrude Käsebier and Clarence White. I'm just pleased that I had sense enough to do that.

While I was in New York I did quite a little work for sculptors. I photographed all of Brenda's sculpture and I got jobs from other artists and I also did quite a little portrait work. New York was exciting but it wasn't the big open spaces for me, so I went back west.

I had the flu very badly during the 1918 epidemic. When I was well enough to get to work again I would send proofs to Gertrude Käsebier or send them to my friend Brenda Putnam and she'd take them over to Mrs. Käsebier. Then I'd get a letter from her criticizing them. As a result I'm the very proud owner of one copy of the magazine Camera Work (Number One) autographed by Mrs. Käsebier.

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I have always loved the platinum printing process. It's the most beautiful image you can get. It has the longest scale and you can get the greatest degree of contrast.

It's not a difficult process; it just takes time. You have to have a contact negative; that's why other people don't use it much today.

The most unusual photographic work I've done was as the official photographer for Boeing Airplane Co. during World War II. It was work with lots of pressure and very strenuous. Among the photographs I took while there is one which illustrates the real problem-solving kind of photograph I had to make. I had to find a woman in the factory who was working in the wing section, who had a son in the Air Corp. So I hunted around and I found a woman who had not only one son but two sons who were aviators. So the idea was to have a photograph of her thinking about one of her sons. She brought me in some pictures of one of these boys so I made a lantern slide of it. And then I had to light her so that it threw her shadow onto the wing and then I could project the lantern slide image of the boy onto that so the rivets of the wing showed through that projected image. That was the most difficult technical problem I've ever had to solve.

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I have always been an independent photographer perhaps because I was alone so much in Colorado. I had to work things out for myself from the beginning. I come from a long line of Quaker ancestry and my whole belief is very simple. It is in how you behave and how you take what happens to you: those are the two main things in life.

What I have done has been very natural to me. Creative work is something you have to see and feel. I record the things I see. If you're busy and interested, life seems not to be complicated.

Being a woman photographer has never been a problem. The only thing that I can ever remember about was a very funny comment one day. I was doing architectural photographs for two architects in Denver on 16th or 17th Street downtown, photographing a bank across the street, and I had my 8 by 10 camera and I was under the focusing cloth. I heard a woman's

voice saying "that's it, girlie; show them how!" Personally, I can't see any difference for men or women; either you're a good photographer or you're not.

I really consider myself a landscape photographer more than anything else. For some years we lived on a ranch in Colorado and as my favorite subject in school was physical geography, I think I come by my love for landscape naturally.

My father was a friend of the great landscape photographer, William Henry Jackson. The first series that Jackson made on a western cattle ranch was on my father's ranch. He came out to the ranch many times over the years but I didn't meet him until 1932. We had quite a talk and I remember him saying that when he was in the southwest he was interested in archeology and the landscape but not in the Indians.

It was in 1920 that I first came down to the Santa Fe area with my father. My first pictures of Shiprock I made on that trip. Later my friend Miss Foster and I used to come down on our vacation every year for a month and we gradually explored a lot of the southwest. Our first trip was in 1930. At that time I was particularly interested in photographing archeology. Anyway I wanted to photograph the ruins Betatakin and Keet Seel as well as Mesa Verde. On that trip we had an adventure -- on a half a tank of gas we tried to travel seventy-two miles from Keyenta to Chinle. It didn't seem far and we didn't have much food with us. We got lost and to make a long story short, I had to leave

Miss Forster with the car and I set out on foot for help. I walked ten and a half miles to a trading post. Upon return to the car with the trader's wife, there was Miss Forster playing gin rummy with a group of Navaho. Apparently they had come to try to help. One who spoke English told Miss Forster all about the country. At one point he said to her "here comes your friend. She's in Frasier's car" there wasn't a car in sight. It was still over the hill.

The next year when Miss Forster was offered a nursing job on the reservation, she took it. During the following years we camped pretty much all over the whole reservation. For a long time I didn't take pictures of the people. You can't do it in a hurry. You have to be trusted.

The Navaho project The Enduring Navaho was fifteen years in the making. I had no backing, I had no grant, or anything like that. It was just something that I had to do. Most of the work is from the 1950s when I had really decided to do the book. It was not an easy job. It took patience and more patience. But it was worth it. As things built up I had a loose-leaf dummy with prints in it to show people. All the Navaho wanted to look at all the pictures; somebody would find someone they knew in a print and that always opened a door. They don't forget, they just never forget you -- it's incredible. My involvement with the Navaho people has affected my own way of life, of course. It feels natural to me.

I have always had an interest in book design. As you probably noticed in the Navaho book four is a very important number in Navaho culture. The four seasons, the four directions on the compass: everything is in fours. So I organized the Navaho book in four sections.

I am going to do this again in the book on Canyon de Chelly: the first section will be on the whole environment, all air shots which I hope will include the entire drainage of the Canyon. I have one to do in October when the cottonwoods have turned so I can get a touch of yellow in it. The second will be the Canyon, the landscape of the Canyon itself. The third will be the ruins and the history of man there, which are older than the Navaho culture. Man has a two thousand year history there. Lately I have been finding four or five generations living on one piece of land.

I'm planning to make one more flight and stay over there for a day, go up the Canyon to check on the locations of the people who live there now. I think I'll end with a story of three generations of a family on the day I recorded all of the them at a family reunion. The two older women of the family went down into the field and brought up arms full of corn which they roasted to make bread. All the preparations and the feast went on all afternoon. I never had such a day and I think that it will show the kind of beauty there is in the Navaho approach to community.

When I make a book I like to do the whole thing: The research, the writing, and the photographs. I never had any training whatsoever for writing and I certainly don't consider myself a writer, but the same principles are there that are in picture-making. Having something to say is the first important thing, then the problem is putting it down in an adequate design. When you are really involved in a subject and respect it, you should be able to find an appropriate way to express it.

I don't teach photography much. I don't think I'm a good teacher because I'm not as precise as someone like Ansel. To me the important thing is to get the picture first. After you've worked a long time you develop a sense of light values on the ground glass when you're under the focusing cloth.

For me to get up and give a talk about photography always makes me laugh. In photographing I don't think in terms of trying to produce fine art but I know that the principles have to be there. Design is evidently a very instinctive and ingrained principle in my way of working. Lots of photographs that I've delivered were just jobs to do, problems to solve, like the advertising and architectural work I've done. But ones of my own caring -- such as my landscape photography and the study of the Navaho -- well, that's the work I want to keep.

Working a long time on a subject has advantages. I have photographed the southwestern landscape since I first stopped

at the Grand Canyon in 1915 and I've photographed the Canyon de Chelly more than any other place. On one of the trips there for my new book on the Canyon I wanted to find the exact spot where the great photograph by Edward Curtis was taken. (the one with the seven horsemen). I grew up under that print. It hung on our wall at the ranch for years. I'm sure that is why I am now doing a book on the Canyon.

Being
/ eighty-seven it does give me a jolt if I stop and think about it, but I don't think about age. It just seems to me when I look back that I must have wasted an awful lot of time.

Laura Gilpin

biographical notes

- 1891 Born in Colorado Springs, April 22
- c1902 Given a Brownie camera.
- 1903 Given developing tank for Christmas
- 1904 Visit to Laura Perry in St. Louis to see the St. Louis Fair.
- 1905 Gilpin family portrait by Gertrude Kasebier in New York.
- 1908 First autochrome color transparencies.
- 1911 Moved to western slope of Colorado and fixed up a darkroom.
- 1915 Visited San Diego and San Francisco. At the San Francisco Fair has first contact with painting and sculpture which she photographed.
- 1916 Managed trio of musicians in Colorado during the summer.
- 1916-17 Studied at the Clarence White School in New York; friendship with Gertrude Kasebier.
- 1918 Struck with influenza. Took the year to recover in Colorado.
- 1920 First saw New Mexico with her father on a spring trip from Colorado Springs to Durango (the long way around the snowed in mountain passes.)
- 1922 Europe with Brenda Putnam - lens fell out of her Graflex into the water. New lens, a Pinkham and Smith soft focus, developed a flair and she began stopping down for compensation. Studied books by William Blake in British Museum print room.
- 1923 Home to Colorado. Architectural and portraiture as well as school catalogues.
- 1930 Trip with Miss Forster to photograph ruins of Betatakin and Keet Seel and Mesa Verde. Stalled in the desert in Navaho country.
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- 1942-46 Plant photographer for Boeing Airplane Company in Wichita, Kansas.
- 1946 Second trip to Yucatan, published book on the Mayan ruins in 1948, worked on the Rio Grande book.
- 1950 Returned to the Navaho Reservation and began fifteen year study of the Navaho people which resulted in her book The Enduring Navaho.
- 1974 Retrospective Exhibition: Museum of New Mexico routed by the Western Association of Art Museums. It is still travelling.
- ✓ 1975 Guggenheim Fellow to make hand-coated platinum prints.
- 1978 Retrospective Exhibition: Amon Carter Museum Fort Worth, Texas announcement of the gift of her entire photographic collection to the museum.
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It was in 1920 that I first came down to the Santa Fe area with my father. My first pictures of Shiprock I made on that trip. Later my friend Miss Foster and I used to come down on our vacation every year for a month and we gradually explored a lot of the southwest. Our first trip was in 1930. At that time I was particularly interested in photographing archeology. Anyway I wanted to photograph the ruins Betatakin and Keet Seel as well as Mesa Verde. On that trip we had an adventure -- on a half a tank of gas we tried to travel seventy-two miles from Keyenta to Chinle. It didn't seem far and we didn't have much food with us. We got lost and to make a long story short, I had to leave

Miss Forster with the car and I set out on foot for help. I walked ten and a half miles to a trading post. Upon return to the car with the trader's wife, there was Miss Forster playing gin rummy with a group of Navaho. Apparently they had come to try to help. One who spoke English told Miss Forster all about the country. At one point he said to her "here comes your friend. She's in Frasier's car" there wasn't a car in sight. It was still over the hill.

The next year when Miss Forster was offered a nursing job on the reservation, she took it. During the following years we camped pretty much all over the whole reservation. For a long time I didn't take pictures of the people. You can't do it in a hurry. You have to be trusted.

The Navaho project The Enduring Navaho was fifteen years in the making. I had no backing, I had no grant, or anything like that. It was just something that I had to do. Most of the work is from the 1950s when I had really decided to do the book. It was not an easy job. It took patience and more patience. But it was worth it. As things built up I had a loose-leaf dummy with prints in it to show people. All the Navaho wanted to look at all the pictures; somebody would find someone they knew in a print and that always opened a door. They don't forget, they just never forget you -- it's incredible. My involvement with the Navaho people has affected my own way of life, of course. It feels natural to me.

I have always had an interest in book design. As you probably noticed in the Navaho book four is a very important number in Navaho culture. The four seasons, the four directions on the compass: everything is in fours. So I organized the Navaho book in four sections.

I am going to do this again in the book on Canyon de Chelly: the first section will be on the whole environment, all air shots which I hope will include the entire drainage of the Canyon. I have one to do in October when the cottonwoods have turned so I can get a touch of yellow in it. The second will be the Canyon, the landscape of the Canyon itself. The third will be the ruins and the history of man there, which are older than the Navaho culture. Man has a two thousand year history there. Lately I have been finding four or five generations living on one piece of land.

I'm planning to make one more flight and stay over there for a day, go up the Canyon to check on the locations of the people who live there now. I think I'll end with a story of three generations of a family on the day I recorded all of the them at a family reunion. The two older women of the family went down into the field and brought up arms full of corn which they roasted to make bread. All the preparations and the feast went on all afternoon. I never had such a day and I think that it will show the kind of beauty there is in the Navaho approach to community.

When I make a book I like to do the whole thing: The research, the writing, and the photographs. I never had any training whatsoever for writing and I certainly don't consider myself a writer, but the same principles are there that are in picture-making. Having something to say is the first important thing, then the problem is putting it down in an adequate design. When you are really involved in a subject and respect it, you should be able to find an appropriate way to express it.

I don't teach photography much. I don't think I'm a good teacher because I'm not as precise as someone like Ansel. To me the important thing is to get the picture first. After you've worked a long time you develop a sense of light values on the ground glass when you're under the focusing cloth.

For me to get up and give a talk about photography always makes me laugh. In photographing I don't think in terms of trying to produce fine art but I know that the principles have to be there. Design is evidently a very instinctive and ingrained principle in my way of working. Lots of photographs that I've delivered were just jobs to do, problems to solve, like the advertising and architectural work I've done. But ones of my own caring -- such as my landscape photography and the study of the Navaho -- well, that's the work I want to keep.

Working a long time on a subject has advantages. I have photographed the southwestern landscape since I first stopped

at the Grand Canyon in 1915 and I've photographed the Canyon de Chelly more than any other place. On one of the trips there for my new book on the Canyon I wanted to find the exact spot where the great photograph by Edward Curtis was taken. (the one with the seven horsemen). I grew up under that print. It hung on our wall at the ranch for years. I'm sure that is why I am now doing a book on the Canyon.

Being
/ eighty-seven it does give me a jolt if I stop and think about it, but I don't think about age. It just seems to me when I look back that I must have wasted an awful lot of time.