One could say quite truthfully that I was cradled in photography, for our home was not just a house with our family living in it; it was also a photographic studio. The house itself was a large, old-fashioned home on the village green in Massilon, Ohio. The green was the center of everything that happened in town, yet a world apart from the residential section.

My father was a special kind of photographer and person. He was a graduate of the Art Institute of Cincinnati and he was also a graduate chemist. My mother and father worked side by side in the studio, each doing their particular part of the work. It was in this happy world that I grew up. By the time I was ten years old, I, too, had my jobs. The first that I remember was the endless "washing of the prints." The water was icy cold and my fingers would turn blue and get numb, but I was proud to be one of the "team." My father's praise was my reward.

The best part of the day for me was in the evening after supper when Papa and I would go into the darkroom. We would close the door and enter into a magical world. The only light was a small red one, but one's eyes soon adjusted. Here, too, I had my jobs. I learned to weigh the chemicals according to my father's directions. My father mixed his own chemicals for the solutions and was most exacting in his work. I was a proud apprentice.

One happy coincidence was that the library was adjoining the darkroom. This meant that when we were working we could hear my brother, Charlie, at the piano and know that my mother was nearby.

My father made my first camera for me on my 7th birthday. It was a pinhole camera, which is a simple black box with a pinhole at the front and a place at the back for a paper negative. I developed an immediate rapport with

this little box. It became for me a kind of secret diary where I made my own observations on life. My father taught me to develop my own prints and to take pride in them. These small paper negatives were pasted up on the darkroom wall where I can still see them in my mind's eye.

It was during these years that I met Lillian Gish. She came to Messilon in the summers to visit her Aunt Emily, and thus began our life-long friendship. It was her Aunt Emily who first made me aware of the beauty of a mother and her child. As I watched her bending over the cradle of her newborn baby, I knew that what I wanted to be more than anything in the world was a mother. Lillian's loveliness had a great impact on me, too. I came to realize how important beauty was to me and how necessary it was to capture and share it with my camera.

My first and only "beau" was a friend of my older brother. His name was Tom Koons. He had always been like a brother to me, but at age sixteen he had suddenly become my suitor. Everything was like a storybook. Our two families were old friends and I was like a daughter in their home. I became engaged at 17. I wore an engagement ring; I began my hope chest; there was nothing to indicate that our marriage wouldn't last forever and ever. The following year we were married in my home; Lillian was my only attendant.

Tom's father set him up in the electrical supply business in the little town of Warren, Ohio. It was here that our first daughter was born and the dream of becoming a mother came true. Life was simple in those days and having children was not the complicated business that it is today. One did not need to finance their college education before they were born. The doctor's bill was $10 and the nurse cost $10 a week. Life would never be this simple for me again.

In about four years we moved to Miami, Florida, where Tom was employed by the architect for the James Deering estate. Then World War I was declared

and Tom was taken into the Army, but stationed in Miami. Following the war the world was swept by a great influenza epidemic. Miami was badly hit and Tom worked with the news media helping to keep track of the dead. I worked with the Red Cross. I was pregnant at the time, but there was no time for ourselves. One was simply caught up in the current of what was happening.

By the time my third daughter was born, Tom was well established in the real estate business. Then the "boom" came to Miami Beach. Fortunes were made and lost overnight through speculation. Tom became embroiled in the frenzy of the time, but to me it was very frightening. I just wanted to run away; to escape. I bought a small sailboat and each day I would take my camera and perhaps some bread and cheese and go down and explore among the Keys. These islands were deserted and seemed like a different world to me. I would sometimes take a child or two with me and photograph them as they played in the water and the mangroves. These pictures later became my first book, In a Blue Moon.

It was during this time, with my father's help, that I built my first studio. Together we made prints of the pictures that I was taking in the peace of the Keys and we hung them on the walls. I was able to escape the turmoil of the "boom" by totally immersing myself in the world of picturemaking.

Then suddenly the bubble burst. The stock market crashed. The banks closed, many never to reopen. We lost everything except our house and the studio. Tom thought that it was the end of the world, but I reacted in the opposite way. My father and I made a sign and hung it outside the studio. The simple shingle read, "Nell Koons - Photographer."

My children were wonderful. They fished from the docks and gathered fruit from the neighboring groves. It was quite a different world from the days of the "boom." People began to help each other; it was exhilarating and exciting. For about a year we lived this way, on fruit and fish and grits, as

I worked to build my photography business. From that time forward I was the sole support for my family. I did photos for the Gondolier, a society magazine, and studio portraits. Tom was unable to adjust to this and it was the beginning of the end of our marriage and eventually led to a divorce, although our friendship continued.

I wasn't really happy in Florida. The work was seasonal (January through April) so I decided to try a summer in New York. The girls stayed in Florida with my parents while I packed a few things and my portfolio and went north. It was a big step for I had little money and no guarantee of work. First I went to my friend Lillian Gish and together we made a studio in the barn at her place in Wilson Point, Connecticut. I traveled back and forth to New York looking for work. I tried the advertising agencies with no success and great frustration. The summer was hot and I greatly missed my family, but I began making pictures of Lillian's friends in the studio and slowly built a following.

It took a while, but eventually the family was together again, and I had my own studio in the city at 100 East 59th Street. I was asked to do a show for the Delphic Gallery of my newly-made collection of "famous men." Among these was a picture of John V. N. Dorr who later became my husband. We were married in 1934 and the following years were very hectic but wonderful. John's business took him all over the world and usually I went with him. The girls were in boarding school, and although I had many new and heavy responsibilities as the wife of an important man, I took my camera everywhere and continued to take pictures.

My three daughters grew up and married and World War II was declared. John went into the army and did scientific liason work between the United States and her allies, and my three newly-acquired sons-in-law were drafted as well. I bought an old house in New Hampshire overlooking the valley of the

Contoocook and the White Mountains. The house had no running water and no electricity, but we loved it. My three daughters and six grandchildren moved in with me. The only contact with the outside was the every day coming of the mail man and the letters that he brought from the wartorn world to our peaceful one. We made for ourselves a magic world and out of this came the pictures that were to become Mother and Child.

All of my work in photography is the direct result of my personal history, my childhood influences of home and family and my craving for beauty and harmony of life.

Mother and Child was the result of the untimely death of my daughter in her young motherhood. My comfort was to search through all the many pictures of the happy hours before her death, pictures made with no thought of ever being published, just taken for the sheer joy of catching a beautiful moment. These were now treasures and I gathered them together into a little book for my own comfort. As my little book took shape it proved to bring a message to those who saw it and eventually I took it out into the world.

Two of those who saw it were Alfred Steiglitz and Edward Steichen. I had seen copies of Camera Work and the pictures reminded me of my father's, so I gathered some of my photographs and took them to Mr. Steiglitz. He had a little, unpretentious office off of his studio with just an old chair and a cot in it. He was wearing a loden cape and his hair and bushy eyebrows were all mussed up from putting it on and taking it off. I sat in the chair, which had no bottom, and he slowly looked at the pictures. When he was finished he said, "Do you have to make a living with these," and I said "No." And he said, "then stay and photograph in your own world and don't get into the ratrace."

Steiglitz was so different from Steichen although, as he once said,

they were from one root. When I first showed the pictures to Steichen there were tears in his eyes. Then he just sort of snapped out of it and said, "But I still miss my dirty-faced little brats." At that time photographs of "dirty-faced little brats" were just coming into favor and of course, my work took the opposite view. I went home that night and I couldn't sleep. "Can a mother no longer make pictures of her own children," I thought. I wrote Mr. Steichen a letter in the morning and I said, "In Russia they have Mr. Stalin who tells the people what they may photograph; in Germany they have Mr. Hitler and now in the United States we have Mr. Steichen." His assistant, Wayne Miller, said "Nell, that letter was the best medicine that you could have given him. He shows it to everybody. Later Steichen told me "Nell, nothing could have done me more good; I needed that!" This was the start of a long and wonderful friendship.

According to my horoscope I am an earthchild and this has proven to be true. I have always longed to live closer and closer to the earth and farther from so-called civilization. The barefoot peoples of the world are closer to reality, to timeless beauty and to the ultimate truths. I always longed to do pictures of the barefoot people, to be one with them and several winters in Mexico gave me these precious memories which were published as The Bare Feet. My most recent book, Night and Day, came about because once again, my feelings boiled over. This time it was the war in Viet Nam. My eldest grandson was there in the Army. I had no actual pictures of the war, only my intense feeling about war which could not silently accept what was happening. Searching through my journals I found words to speak for me and searching my own heart I found (in pictures) a way to speak; to release the pent-up emotion within.

My "picture-taking" and "picture-making" are as different as night and day. I take my pictures quite unconsciously. I see them in my mind and I trust my mind's eyes as the exposure meter. It is done without thinking. I feel the

exposure. My only concern is to be ready for that "moment of truth, always ready to grasp it quickly before it's gone, or to wait patiently until that split-second when it appears.

In the darkroom I can relax and take time and consider. First I study the negative and decide on the paper to use. There are as many photographs possible from a single negative as the artist can imagine. This is the exciting part. I can never bear to finish with a negative; to say "this is it." Tomorrow I can come again and make new pictures from that same negative. This is the thing that I love most of all; the making of that final picture. No one else can do that for me, nor do I ever completely satisfy myself.

I am not nearly as conscious of my age as others seem to be. George Bernard Shaw is supposed to have said, "Is that all they can remember about me, how old I am?" We don't have any alternative to growing older and it happens so slowly that we are not really aware of it. A day passes unnoticed until it becomes yesterday and suddenly we are older. If you were to ask a child how it feels to be young, he wouldn't know how to answer. I know how it feels to be sick or how it feels to have pain or how it feels to experience joy, but I don't know how it feels to be old. Perhaps I have more understanding of other people than I did when I was younger. I know that I have more time to love and more conviction that love is the answer. The world of today is full of fears. We have it pumped into us by the radio, newspapers and tv. We are supposed to be afraid of cancer, afraid of the water we drink, afraid to breathe the air around us and afraid not to breathe. Fear is very destructive. I always get back to love. Our lives should not depend on conditions of today or tomorrow, or conditions of world politics or world fears, but on the eternal awareness of the earth and the sky and the stars and knowing the small part we play in the millions of years of evolving. We tend to get so confused and overwhelmed by

the events of the day, and the weather, and storms and politics and the stock market and taxes that we forget the leaves and the grass that cover the earth and will cover our graves and cover us all.