

San Francisco  
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To Mary Margaret McBride

This is how I remember it -- not as a matter of dates or history but of learning at my father's knee. The first maxims I remember were "only the pictures worth keeping are those worth taking". "Always make a picture for keeps -- the picture is the thing."

My father was John Jacob Becker, one of the great pioneers of photography, a graduate of Cincinnati Art Institute and also a graduate chemist. In combination with a partner in business they made the firm of "Urlin & Becker" -- later changed to "Pieffer and Becker" of Cleveland, Ohio -- one of the largest and most respected photographic galleries of the late eighteen hundreds. Their specialty was the cabinet sized photograph.

My father did not marry until he was past fifty years of age and then took his young wife to the beautiful old town of Massillon, Ohio, on the banks of the Tuscarawas River and the Erie Canal, where he established himself in a smaller and more individualized type of photographic business. His life and work merits a story all its own -- suffice it to say here that by the time his one and only daughter came along, she was the apple of his eye and he the idol of her heart.

My happiest and earliest recollections are the evenings spent with him in the secret magic of the dark-room. This joy was something I could never explain -- nor ever wished to. But coming out of it into the circle of a lamp-lighted living room was like coming down to earth after a great circling of the heavens. My mother was a Scotch woman and she always hurried me off to bed saying I was far too young to be up so late. But I carried my dreams with me to bed.

It was in these childhood years that I learned my A. B. C. 's of photography. They began quite literally by learning to weigh, on the beautiful old scales the sodium carbonate and the sodium sulphite for the old "A. B. C. Pyro" developer which is the true granddaddy of all our blue-blooded developers today. This was before the days of the "miracle drugs" of present photography -- before the days of panchromatic emulsions or of high precision cameras. My father used 8x10 glass negatives and woe betide you, if one of these precious plates slipped from your hands in the dark.

Each negative was individually treated. Being an artist as well as an expert chemist, he used his solutions as an artist does his brush. Perfectionist that he was, he knew to the nth degree the control of chemical action and the ultimate result he was seeking to achieve. Sitting on my high stool in worshipful

silence, in the warm red glow of the dark-room, I watched the birthing process. Under his direction, I stirred the magic brews until I came to know them by heart. These moments live with me today in perfect clarity -- they have guided me through the labyrinth of this new photographic era. I have known no other teacher than this dear, long-silent pioneer of silver shadows. He was a man with no great ambitions but in their place were great standards.

Marriage came early to me and with it the children for which I longed. In this busy chapter of my life, photography played no part. It was years later in Florida, after the death of my brother, after the Florida boom and crash, after a nervous break-down, after the first great hurricane of 1927, after the first World War -- after such events had washed away the security I had always known, only then was I forced to use my knowledge of photography.

I had already had a one-man show of my work in the pictorial work. I already had my intimate small studio with its walled garden enclosed, so that it was not a big step from this to becoming professional; in fact, it seemed a natural unfolding. To this studio came many great and beautiful people. Carl Sandburg came with his guitar and his songs to have his picture made, and stayed for the whole day -- and the pictures and songs were mixed together. Much rich experience came to me and also financial security once more. Here I ventured my first small book called "Mangroves" -- and here I did the work for a later book "In a Blue Moon" to be published by Putmans.

This epoch of my life ended when I came to live in New York in 1933. I had the first showing of photographic murals at the Marie Sterner Galleries that winter. The next year I had a showing of famous men at the Delphic Galleries. This included the beloved Don Marquis, with a three-day growth of beard, in his Archie and Mehitable habitation. It included such a wide variety as Capt. Bob Bartlet, of Arctic fame, Theodore Dreisser, Roland Young, Peter Arno, George G. Nathan, Marc Connelly, James P. Warburg, Edward L. Bernays -- doctors, lawyers, scientists, et al.

The mystery picture of this show was one that I called "Man of Sorrows." It was of a poor derelict that I had found sleeping on a park bench in Union Square. His shoes were worn through and the soles of his bare feet were showing, but his sleeping face was one of the most beautiful that I had ever seen. I woke him gently and gave him my card and asked him to come to this address -- that I wished to make pictures of him. Never have I seen such a look of incredulity. He afterwards told me that he thought I was the Virgin Mary appearing to him in a dream. No one had ever told him he was beautiful before! I made him promise to come to me just as he was -- I had an awful fear that he might get a shave in honor of the occasion. But no such idea occurred to him or if it did, he had no money to indulge it. He had difficulty getting past the door man to my apartment and I had to come down myself and vouch for him. The first thing I



did was to sit him down to a steaming bowl of home-made soup, and home-made bread and a pot of coffee. I talked to him while he ate. After that I photographed him, I photographed him all day long. There was simply no end to his uniqueness, and I felt at the end of the day that I had not even begun to see the beauty of this man. One critic wrote of his picture in the exhibit "this might be a picture of the Christ" and this was exactly the feeling that I had in his presence. As a result of this, I was able to get work for him as a model at the Brooklyn Art Institute and later he was used in several large projects as the model for Abraham Lincoln. I was able to get care also for his advanced tuberculosis.

In this exhibit of famous men hung also the picture of my future husband, Dr. John Van Nostrand Dorr.

It was the following year that I made the dance film now in the library of the Museum of Modern Art, called "The Singing Earth". Taking my theme from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" I experimented in movement and color and sound in pictures. I have always been a great lover of the dance. Why should it not be as familiar as music itself? What if the music of Bach had died with him? Why should the art of Pavlova, Nijinsky, or our now-living Martha Graham die with them? It is only by repetition that we make such experiences live in our hearts. This experiment was in a costly field and the dance has very few backers, so I was limited but feel the result has proven beyond a doubt worth doing. The Choreography for "The Singing Earth" was done by Kurt Graff and he and Grace Graff, his wife, and their dance group gave their enthusiasm and talent to me. It was one of the happiest and most exciting things I have ever done.

Years later I directed a documentary film called "The Dorr Way" showing the wonders of the modern world of science and engineering. This film had ample resources back of it and has I think justified their faith in me. The photography for this film was done by Erica Anderson, who did the film on "Grandma Moses" and for the past few years has been at work on a film of Albert Schweitzer.

"Mother and Child" my latest book published by Harper's, has been a long time in coming. This is the world I have lived in since my children were growing up and bringing a new generation of children into the world. It was only when one precious part of this world was taken from me that I realized how necessary it was to bring some of these pictures together into a book. To translate one's own experience into a universal language brings a peace which passeth all understanding for none of us walks alone even on the most lonely path -- there are others who have gone before and there are others who will follow. This small volume is left as a sign for them to read; it gives no directions but only states that God is always there.

Nell Dorr