

~~VIII~~ IX

I suppose I began photography, as so many photographers ^{to mention it} did, until it is almost a cliché, ~~to admit it~~, with a Brownie box camera. It was given to me at about the time we started going to Maine ~~in the summer~~, not because I wanted a camera but because some adult ~~thought~~ could think of nothing else for a birthday or Christmas present. However, my father may have given it to me because of his own interest in photography which began, when he was a young man, with the invention of the Eastman roll film Kodaks. He took one of these with him on several camping trips to the Canadian Rockies and ~~after each trip~~ filled an album with the photographs he made. We children would look through these albums with great absorption and were especially interested in the pictures of our parents and their friends in their camping clothes. There was one album, not of the Canadian Rockies, that fascinated me in particular. It contained a whole series of pictures of the Winnetka house during its construction from the first breaking of ground to the final planting of trees. It was in this house that I was born a year after its completion so in a sense it marked the beginning of my life.

My first recollections ~~were of the house in Maine~~ ^{with pleasure} of using the Brownie, ^{with pleasure} were, however, in Maine. Before that I may have taken some pictures of birds' nests in the shrubbery beside our driveway in Winnetka, but the nests never showed up very well. ^{My} ~~The~~ first pictures around the Island were imitations of pictures father took, always unsatisfactory landscapes or of coasting schooners we past on the first cruises in the Hippocampus. It wasn't long, however, until I began to photograph the nests and young birds we saw on the bird islands

we visited. Young gulls and gull's eggs were big enough to show up at 6 feet in a Brownie picture. Captain Green would take the exposed rolls to the drug store in the town of Deer Isle when he took the laundry over and would bring back the processed pictures the next week. So each week ~~there~~ I experienced a good deal of excitement in anticipation of the results, and I remember my disappointment when the pictures were light struck or blurred or did not show what I expected.

The first photographing success came when
~~then~~ the summer we were tutored, we visited a colony of Great Blue Herons on Bradbury Island. The young birds were well grown and as we struggled through the litter of fallen trees *overgrown with* and raspberry bushes *in the middle of the colony* ~~where they nested~~ a young bird ~~near the~~ *about the* time of fledging took alarm and flew from its nest above our heads to crash in a raspberry thicket. It stood there half buried in the bushes with its long neck stretched out and crest feathers raised, glaring at us in fright. I took a picture of it with the help of the tutor *and it* ~~which~~ turned out to be one of those accidents of photography in which every variable worked in favor of the photographer. The picture was quite sharp showing the fierce eye and raised feathers of the angry bird. Father was very pleased with this result and had an enlargement made.

After that I tried photographing the fish hawks on North Point and the Double Beaches from a small tent-like blind I had devised and mother had sewed ^{up} for me out of green cloth. The blind worked all right but the results were very disappointing. Only those pictures in which the hawk was standing quietly on its nest were sharp; all the others of the birds in flight or alighting were completely blurred. The tenth ^{mill} second shutter of the Brownie was entirely inadequate for this

kind of work.

~~For~~ ^{On} the next Christmas I was given a Kodak 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 Kodak with the newest high speed shutter having a top speed rating of 1/300 th second. Equipped with this instrument I following returned to the ospreys the following summer, but I was not alone this time. My best friend Fairbank Carpenter went to the Island with me. Together we squeezed into the tiny blind, patiently waiting for hours to photograph the hawks. We took many pictures, and many were excitingly good. With one I won a \$25 Eastman Kodak Company nature photography prize which was reproduced in posters and distributed to the drug stores and photo supply shops all along the coast. But to my disgust the Eastman advertizing department called it a picture of an eagle (in spite of my protests).

The next step up in equipment was the acquisition after several more years of a Graflex that I bought myself with savings from my allowance. Fairbank also had one and together we visited gull islands where we spent the days in our cramped quarters, taking with us only a meager lunch and a thermos of water. The gull pictures have not survived but I can remember them for their dullness. There were few flying pictures. Few of birds in flight, they mostly showed gulls standing on rocks at a considerable distance like milk bottles left on the kitchen steps porch. When it came to however seemed terns/we did better for they seemed to be tamer and when they alighted momentarily on their nests they paused momentarily with their wings extended in graceful photogenic poses.

so
By this time I was deeply involved in photography that I was not

all the
~~satisfied with commercial processing and~~ wanted to do ~~everything~~
 processing myself. During the winter at home in Winnetka or away at school
 neither time nor facilities for this kind of activity were
 available, but on the Island ~~the/possibility/of/it/that~~ I had
 the time if I could find a place for a dark room. The small
 basement room, where the hot water heater was located under the
 east end of the house, was the ^{feasable} only place I could find. Water was
 available ~~there~~ and with a minimum of labor it could be made
 light proof. Father gave me permission to install a small sink
 and so ~~there~~ I set up a laboratory ^{there}. I had had no previous
 experience with film processing and ~~so/I~~ ambitiously ^{over-} purchased a
~~myself/with/a~~ variety of developers thinking that I could
 work out ^{my own} ~~the/myself/the/best~~ formula, but not surprisingly
 it didn't turn out to be as easy as I had expected and many rolls
 of film were underdeveloped. Finally I settled on a standard
 prepared ~~the/that/a~~ developer. I never did much printing in this
 dark room because the profligate use of water that photography
 requires was not permitted, but for two years I did develop roll
 film in a tray by inspection. As my interest in bird photography
 waned during my college and medical school days the dark room
 was allowed to fall into disrepair. It was not until years later
 when I had a house of my own that I built another small dark room
 which I still use for loading film.

in 1929

After I graduated from medical school, while I was
 still ambitious to become a bacteriologist under ~~the~~ inspiration
 by ^{one of my class-} of Dr. Hans Zinsser I became a close friend of ~~young/doctor/and/~~
^{mates} ~~of/my/class~~ working in the same field who did photography as
 an avocation. Influenced by him I bought a Leica and began
 again to do photography in my spare time. What interested me then
 were not birds but a more abstract approach to subjects

as illustrated in the photographic annuals of those years.

I photographed leaf patterns, details of bridges, splashing water, and close-ups of many everyday objects. As time went on I accumulated a modest collection of prints, and one day was invited to show them at a friends house near Boston where a visiting photographer from the west ~~was to show his pictures~~ also by the invitation would show his pictures. At first flattered^{me} the occasion became for/a very embarrassing one, but, more important than that, it was a revelation that had a profound influence on my/~~work~~ subsequent work. The western photographer was Ansel Adams and the photographs he exhibited one by one on an easle took my breath away by their perfection and strength. Never had I seen any photographs like them. I wanted nothing so much at that moment as to forget my poor collection and keep them out of sight for I knew they would be the anti-climax they were when all insisted I unwrap them. Ansel Adams was very kind, sensing I am sure my several embarrassment, looked at them all and made/helpful suggestions and advised using ~~such a~~ a larger camera.

I did not immediately take his advice but tried to revise my technique of print making to obtain the Adams quality. ~~The next summer I photographed a great deal. In the fall my~~ following

I continued to photograph a great deal during the summers, and one fall several years later my brother Fairfield, who was studying painting in New York,

introduced me to Alfred Stieglitz, whom I visited later at his gallery An American Place. He looked at my latest photographs and told me they were all woolly but that their fault was not a matter of sharpness. I didn't understand what he meant unless it was a matter of sharpness and decided then to get a larger

camera. Periodically after that I ~~showed my latest photographs~~ ^{went to see him with the best} ~~work I had done since last seeing him the last time.~~ ^{to Stieglitz.} until at last on a memorable occasion He was always encouraging but non-committal, cautioning me that photography was

very difficult and required much hard work. At last on a while memorable occasion, ~~After~~ looking through the box of photographs I had brought, he stopped suddenly and said, "You have arrived. I want to Show these." It was completely unexpected and I was dumbfounded but thrilled. All at once I knew I was indeed ^{this} a photographer. Later, he wrote ~~me~~ ^{had} a letter about the pictures. ~~he was going to exhibit after the exhibit.~~

An American Place
Jan. 21/39

My dear Eliot Porter:

I have your letter. I have been wanting to write to you but have been swamped with people & "things". And I am far from being physically equal to the demands I make upon myself - I think I know how you feel about me. Men really don't have to thank each other. - Still I must thank you for having given me the opportunity to live with your spirit in the form of those photographs that for 3 weeks were on our walls. - And "our" includes yours. - Some of your photographs are the first I have ever seen which made me feel "there is my own spirit" - quite an unbelievable experience for one like myself - Once more my deepest thanks to you & Mrs. Porter. Also the same from O'Keeffe

Your old

Alfred Stieglitz

And a week later he wrote:

Jan 27/39

My dear Porter: Thanks for your grand letter.- It is most welcome - Your photographs told me all you are. Your letter is but a corroboration of those photographs. Crowninshield was in & I showed them to him. He had asked me what it was in the young generation that was so cold - so unfeeling. I showed him your prints as my reply. "He has your kind of feeling" he said as he saw the first. - He looked at all & said: very, very beautiful I understand fully how you feel about your work & how you must follow your inner voice - I may have said something or other to your mother which she did, or could, not fully understand - . . .

My warmest greetings to you and your lady -

Your old

Stieglitz

Perhaps these letters should not be included

Having made this decision, there were no compelling reasons for living in Cambridge or Boston, and so my wife and I decided to strike out into a new territory and chose ~~the~~ ~~Santa Fe~~ Santa Fe in the Southwest for the next winter. In the meantime I had again become interested in birds. With a portfolio of black and white photographs I went to Houghton, Mifflin to ~~inquire about the possibility of~~ see if they would be interested in publishing a book of bird photographs. In spite of my naivete ^{courteously} ~~it was~~ I was ~~not~~ ^{for} received by the editor in chief who advised me that ~~the possibility of~~ ^{for} ~~the~~ ^{photographic} ~~book~~ ^{should} be in color. ~~That~~ ~~was~~ ~~not~~ ~~yet~~ ~~ended~~ I accepted the challenge though it seemed like a terrific undertaking with uncountable years of work ahead. However, ^{since} Kodachrome had recently been introduced on the market it was not an impossible task. From Eastman Kodak Company I got some helpful suggestion about flash photography with color film, and after the winter in Santa Fe I applied for Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph birds in color which was granted in the spring of 1941. This was the beginning of many years, ~~that have~~ not yet ~~come to an~~ ended, that each spring I ~~have~~ devoted to bird photography. I have worked in many parts of the country from Arizona to Maine and from Minnesota to Florida.