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One Good Shot

Keith Long

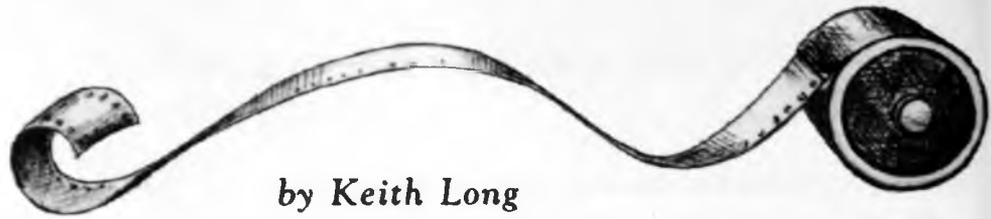
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ONE GOOD SHOT



by Keith Long

As an aspiring journalism student twenty years ago, I took a photography class during which I had to construct a box camera that actually took photos. I used black construction paper, black electrician's tape, black paper clips, and black shoe polish to make sure the inside of my camera was completely black. Black is a big color for box cameras. I pricked a hole in the "lens" side of the camera, went into the darkroom and loaded a sheet of photographic paper, went back outside, pointed my camera at a photography classmate while he stood under an evergreen tree, and moved my shutter, thus catching the moment inside my camera.

An hour or so later, I came out of the dark room with my newly-developed box-camera photo. My instructor looked at it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"That's either Jenkins or an evergreen tree," I answered. Together, he and I decided the lump in the photo most resembled Jenkins. His face was blurry, his knees were knocking, he leaned precariously to one side as though he might fall off the edge of the paper, a mad black streak ran diagonally across the photo, and all four corners of the photo sported a strange-looking orangeish-gray hue.

It's the last good picture I've taken.

When Anna and I got married, some years after the box-camera deal, we made a subconscious effort to catch our lives together on film. I bought a

Pentax 35mm with a 70x210 zoom lens so that our lives could be caught at long distance. We even thought about investing in dark-room equipment, but decided it might be better to try to learn how to run the camera first.

So we did.

Try to run the camera, I mean.

We took rolls and rolls of film. We studied the resulting compositions, judging whether we had stood too far off, or too close up, or too far to the right or left. We wondered about the lighting, and if the shutter speed needed to be faster or slower, and whether the aperture needed to be wider or narrower. We argued, we harangued. We spent more money on rolls of film.

Fortunately, we've borrowed enough photos from relatives to put together a couple of bulky family albums. Several shots in the Long family album even catch me in the background, trying to load another roll of film into my camera. Actually, we have three photo albums nearly completed: one of my side of the family, one of her side of the family, and another one devoted entirely to my finger.

"What's that?" someone is apt to ask when they open up the "My Finger" album.

"That's the Grand Canyon," I say, lurking over their shoulder.

"No," they say, "I mean that huge, orange thing hovering menacingly in the sky?"

"Oh. That's my finger. It keeps sliding over the

lens.”

I have photos of my finger along the parkway of the Kern River in California, with Anna, Parker, and Mossie beside the sign welcoming visitors to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, in panoramic renderings of the Rocky and Smoky Mountains, standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona, and even with the “Big Texan” statue outside a restaurant in Amarillo where I watched a 400-pound man try to eat a 72-ounce steak in six minutes.

Those are the glamorous shots.

I also have pics of my finger washing dishes with Anna in our kitchen, sleeping beside Parker when he was only two weeks old, teaching Boone the Setter Wunderkind to fetch in the backyard, and shoveling snow out of our driveway. I point with pride to the fact that I’ve consistently gotten the best side of my finger in all of those photos.

It should hardly surprise anyone, then, that with my extensive knowledge of all things photographic, along with my naturally helpful nature, I readily volunteered to teach the new photography class on campus.

“Hmmm,” my chairman hummed, slowly shaking his head. “I’m not so sure that would . . .”

“Be glad to,” I told him. “Say, did I ever show you the photo I took with a self-made box camera back in my old 101 photography class?”

“Gosh, but times flies!” my chairman said, tapping his wrist watch and holding it to his ear.

“I’ve got it real handy,” I said, reaching in a drawer, pulling it out, and sticking it under his nose.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“That’s my friend Jenkins,” I said.

The chairman looked more closely at the photo. “Jenkins kind of looked like a finger, didn’t he?” he said.

I promptly re-assigned the photo to my finger album. ❧

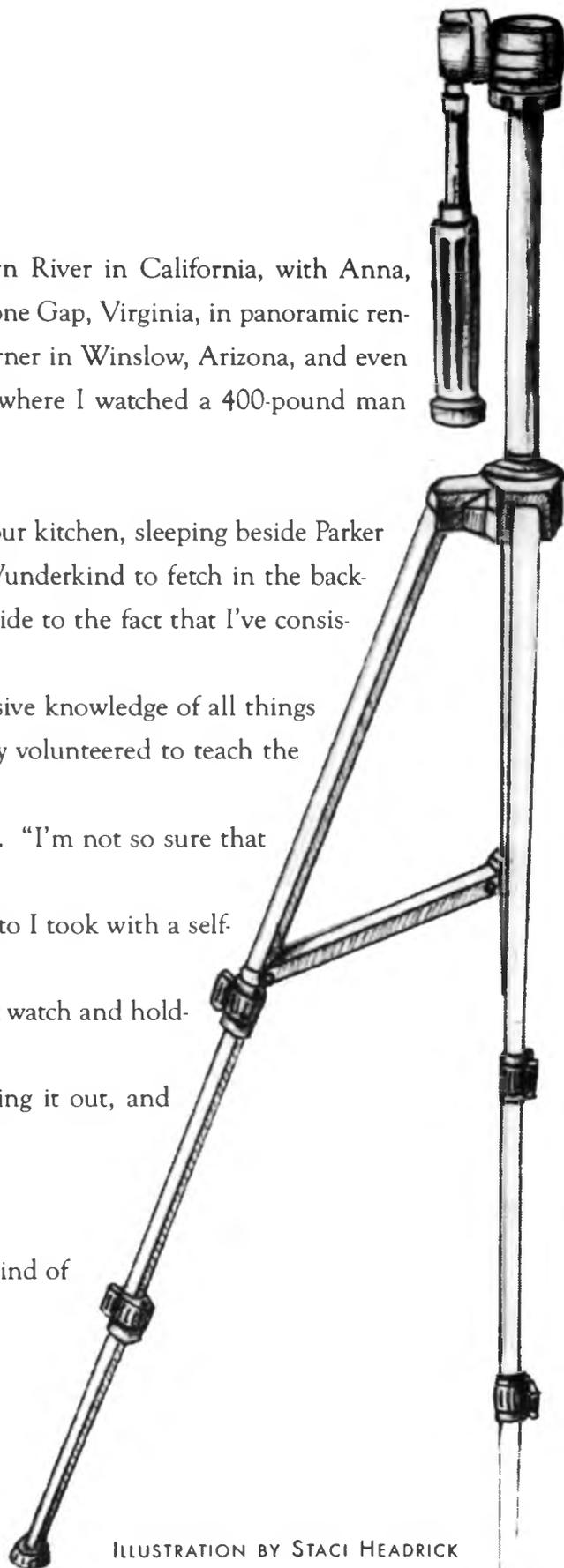


ILLUSTRATION BY STACI HEADRICK