

Truth *with a* Camera

50 YEARS OF WORKSHOPS FOCUS ON MISSOURI

UNLIKE MOST GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY celebrants, when the Missouri Photo Workshop reached that milestone this past October, it did not arrive shuffling gingerly with vision blurred by age. It plunged into the 50th annual "workshop week" at flank speed, shooting and editing color film for the first time and exhibiting the week's results with an exhibit of 182 high-quality, computer-generated color prints of host town Boonville, Mo. It was an impressive performance for this senior citizen of journalism education and solid proof that great ideas, properly nourished, can improve with age.

Back in 1949 there were reasons to question the idea. How could a professional-level photo workshop succeed 1,500 miles from New York, the publishing hub of the universe? The country was still recovering from World War II. Air travel was in its infancy, and there was no interstate highway system. Would quality professional staff and students leave their jobs for a week and travel to Missouri at the invitation of a slight, plain speaking, folksy, look-you-in-the-eye, but virtually unknown journalism school instructor named Cliff Edom?

Yes, they would and they did. At a time when most news photography was of the posed "handshake" style shot with 4-by-5 Speed Graphics armed with spotlight-size flashguns, there was this Missouri fellow preaching a no-pose, honest, candid, creative and thoughtful approach. "Truth with a camera," he called it. Edom's workshop attracted top people perhaps

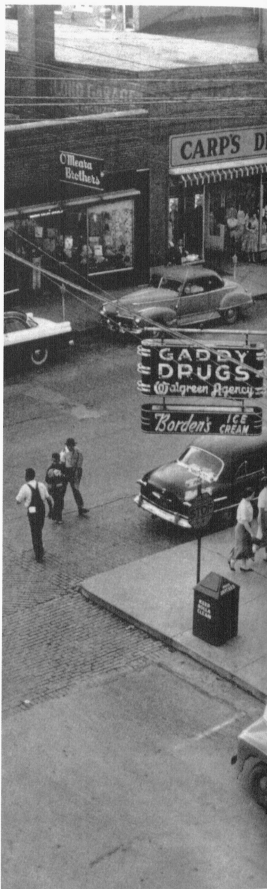


because he shared their zeal to improve the profession. Word spread that the best total immersion, crash course in ethical, state-of-the-art photojournalism in the world was out in Missouri. Never a photojournalist himself, in 1943 Edom had come to MU from teaching at the little Aurora, Mo., School of Photo-Engraving to be both an instructor in photography and an undergraduate student, not earning his BJ until 1946. Always the student, Cliff admitted to a selfish motive in starting the workshop. "I wanted to learn from the greats in photojournalism, but most of them were in the East. So I decided to bring them here to me."

The first "here" was Columbia, Mo., in 1949. The format: For five days some 30 students would shoot a *Life* magazine-style picture story on the town that would be edited and critiqued daily by top professional photographers and editors. The natural leader of that first five-man faculty was Roy Stryker, the famed director of the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) landmark photographic coverage of the dust bowl of the '30s.

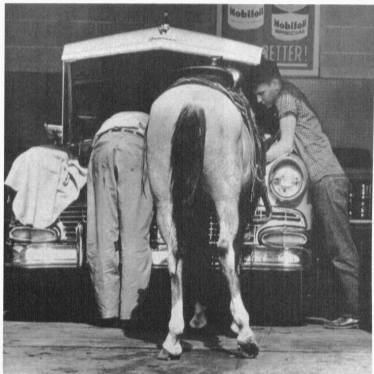
Both Roy and Cliff were dedicated to "showing truth with a camera." Philosophers have forever sought to find, define and redefine truth. Whether Cliff and his workshops found elusive truth in small-town Missouri can be argued, but no one can doubt that they found and preserved many truths. Like an intellectual snowball, the workshop rolled across Missouri over the decades, gaining in reputation, sophistication and importance.

The "students as photojournalists"





SALEM, 1996



JOPLIN, 1962

STORY BY BILL GARRETT, BJ '54

PHOTOS BY WORKSHOP PHOTOGRAPHERS

ROLLA, 1953



CARTHAGE, 1997

and “staff as editors” format evolved and improved. But the unique core of the workshop experience remains the merciless, no-holds-barred, evening critique sessions that often run into the wee hours. They lead to painful, tearful, joyful, maddening, enlightening, inspirational, sleepless, introspective, rewarding, memorable and emotional involvement. Not all students can deal with it. Over the years several have left quietly after a few days.

I must pause to explain what all faculty and students soon learned. Cliff was always half of a team. As one wit noted, “Cliff would take on any project that his wife, Vi, could handle.” In fairness, they were a team in every way, each with talents that supplemented the other, and both would admit that neither could have succeeded alone. Cliff is gone but the sprightly Vi stands as the only person to have attended all 50 workshops.

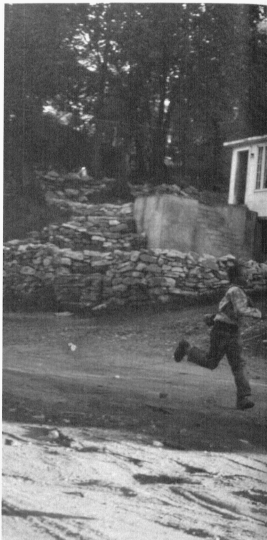
Like casting directors, for 38 years Cliff and Vi Edom sustained the workshop’s creative tension by their thoughtful direction and selection of the host towns and faculty and students. Photojournalism Professor Bill Kuykendall, Edom’s successor, and his workshop co-director, Duane Dailey, have sustained the tension and the format while improving

the logistics in the 12 workshops since.

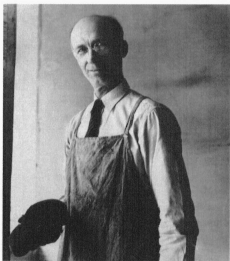
A complete roster of workshop students and staff is a who’s who of photojournalists in the 20th century. Through their efforts the workshop has enjoyed a powerful effect on newspapers and magazines. And many of us can thank the workshop for our jobs and our success.

But perhaps the most important and tangible product of the workshops is an unplanned bonus. Except for a few repeats, each workshop has focused on a different small town in Missouri—leaving in its wake a unique, priceless half-century photographic record of a changing middle America; of its small towns and the family farms they serve; of the people and their loves, their hatreds, and their unique, often bucolic but rock-solid values. The small towns of the mid-20th century—inspirations for Sinclair Lewis and Thornton Wilder—are mostly historical artifacts now, swept away by interstate highways, Wal-Mart-like super stores, corporate farms, and the massive movement of people to the urban centers.

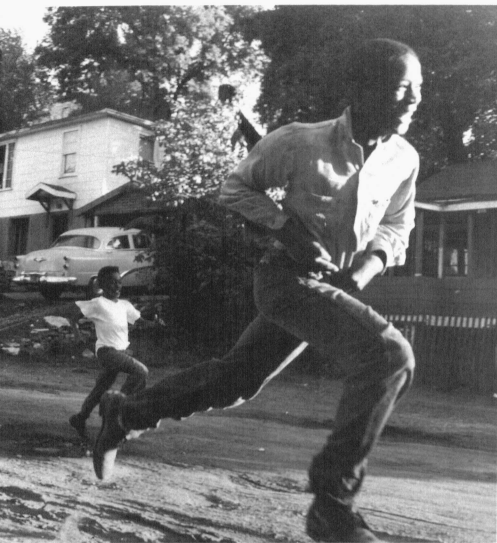
Thanks to the workshops these changes are documented in an evolving archive that rivals in importance Stryker’s dust bowl collection—itsself an inspiration for Cliff Edom’s workshop. ●



HANNIBAL, 1957



BOONVILLE, 1953



COLUMBIA, 1959



KIRKSVILLE, 1973



WASHINGTON, 1994

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Bill Garrett, retired editor of National Geographic Magazine, was a J-School Missouri Honor Medalist in 1984 and was named Magazine Photographer of the Year in the 1969 Pictures of the Year competition for his Vietnam War coverage.