

# *Powder River, Let 'er Buck*

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*by*

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... a family of deer, my dad and a Native American set me on a journey that has lasted more than four decades. I remember like it was yesterday. In 1970 when I was 14, my dad took me fishing outside Lander, Wyoming, with Ben Henan, a member of the Shoshoni tribe. We ventured onto the Wind River Reservation where the Little Wind River flows near Fort Washakie. The ride was a mixture of breathtaking views of the mountains and the realities of life on the reservation. When we reached our destination, I wrapped my arms around the fence post and struggled with all my strength to open a barbwire fence gate. After passing through the gate, the road turned into a winding two-track trail.

What was in reality just a short drive seemed to go on forever. I could reach out the window and feel the tall green grass on both sides of the trail blowing back and forth with the breeze. Once at the fishing spot, I waded out into the meandering curves of the river. The frigid water was about knee deep, with rushing water flowing over the small slippery rocks. Tree leaves rustled in the wind, the sun shimmered on the water and the aspens reflected in deep pools. While I was fishing in the middle of the river, two deer and their fawns walked out of the tall grass and into the river. They stopped for a drink, then lifted up their heads to look at me. I thought, "How magnificent. Boy, do I wish I had a camera." This was the moment in my life that sent me on a path to becoming a photographer.

Earlier, in 1958, my family had moved to Wyoming, the Cowboy State, where I grew up and currently live. The first 10 years were spent on a ranch 13 miles northwest of Cheyenne on Iron Mountain Road, growing up in the same countryside where cowboys and Indians once roamed. Living in a rural area has given me a love for the western way of life – hard work from sunup to sundown. As captured in the old cowboy phrase, "Powder River, Let'er Buck," this Wyoming spirit is the basic value my parents instilled in me and has become the photography philosophy that I embrace.

My parents were not wealthy, but they weren't poor either; I never wanted for anything. My dad was a hardworking heavy equipment operator, and my mother was a dedicated elementary school teacher. I was in seventh grade in January 1968, when my parents bought a house in Cheyenne, moving us from the country to the city. My oldest brother, Larry, was already in the Marines and in Vietnam, and my brother, Charles, was a senior in high school, getting ready to graduate and enter the U.S. Army. That summer I found myself discovering the city on the many treks I took on my bicycle. Although I had lived northwest of Cheyenne, moving to town was still an eye opener for me, having gone from a setting where the closest neighbor was a mile away to having kids my age right across the street.

Charles brought a Pentax 35mm camera home during one of his visits from overseas. Although I only "borrowed" it from him, it was mine for the next couple of years.

That camera ignited my passion for photography. As soon as I got into high school, I registered for a photography class where I learned some of the basics of photography. Working in the darkroom was intense. Loading the film on the metal reel in total darkness and the uncertainty of whether the images would develop was agonizing. I was eager to learn everything I could about photography including the rules of composition. One of these rules, the Rule of Thirds, is my mantra today.

After my sophomore year, I became a student assistant for two years in the photography class. While in high school, I met the love of my life, Susan Carroll. After many sleepless nights, I got up the nerve to ask her out on a date and took her to a movie. The weather in the colder months in Wyoming can be unpredictable. Forecasters called for snowy conditions that night so my dad told me to come home right after the movie. Naturally I did the opposite and took Susan cruising downtown. Needless to say, my car hit an icy patch and started to slide. I thought I had the car back under control when the front fender hit a "No Parking" sign. Despite our slippery beginning, we continued to date.

While a senior in high school I sold my first photograph for \$3.25, thanks to Susan, who always

believed in me. She told her mom that I could take a photo for her ladies' Civic League. I was so excited that someone was actually paying me for a photograph. I still get that same excitement when I sell some of my fine-art pieces.

After graduating from high school, I went to work shoveling asphalt and was using muscles I didn't even know existed. The money was decent, so I bought my first medium-format camera. When the camera arrived, I could hardly wait to go out and take photos. The Laramie County Library provided me with a supply of books to study. I checked out and read dozens of photography books and started to implement the techniques I was learning.

Susan has been a major part of my career as a photographer. She knew I wasn't happy working in construction, and I didn't want to make it my livelihood. Believing in my abilities, Susan asked her mom to introduce me to Kaye Hashimoto, owner of a local portrait studio. After interviewing with him, Kaye offered me an internship in October 1974. Kaye was my mentor. I started working in his black-and-white and color darkrooms, processing sheet film and operating a Nord color processor. When I wasn't in the darkroom, I worked as his assistant, photographing school children and weddings. After completing my regular duties, I would help Kaye with his portrait sessions, where he taught me lighting and composition.

After six years of working with Kaye, I bought his photo studio and became my own boss at the age of 24. This new adventure proved to be an up-and-down experience. The

highs were truly memorable, and the lows were a nightmare. I found the amount of time involved in operating a studio, managing staff, working with clients, doing the books and paying the bills was at times overwhelming. However, the relationships I formed during this time were the high points of operating my business full time. No two days were ever the same. My days were busy taking elementary school photos, senior portraits, family groups and weddings on the weekends. Although I enjoyed my days, I couldn't find time for my passion – fine-art photography.

When my landlord unexpectedly doubled my rent, I faced a difficult decision. After seven months of enduring the high rental fee, I decided owning my own building for the business was the best way to go. I purchased the Historic Hebard house and remodeled it into a studio. I moved my business to this historic section of Cheyenne, where I could work in the middle of all the city had to offer.

One of my deepest low points came in the summer of 1985, when an immense thunderstorm developed over the city. It rained heavily for three hours. After checking on my parents, I drove to the studio. Everything looked fine until I went to the basement. It was completely full of water. The shock of finding negatives floating everywhere was gut wrenching. My darkrooms, storage, and photo prep area were all in the basement. Of course insurance didn't cover the flood damage and it was devastating to my business. However, I overcame this tragedy and continued to endure. Susan and I continued to date while she went to college and I worked at the studio. After Susan's college graduation we established our chosen careers, and in November of 1987, we were married.

In 1989 I needed a change. Another phase of my career began when I went to work for the Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT) in the Planning Program. Traveling five days a week throughout Wyoming to gather traffic statistics gave me the opportunity to rekindle my love for photography. Although I was working in a very different field, I was always learning about photography. During this time, I closed my full-time portrait studio, opting to operate my business out of my home on the weekends. This gave me the opportunity to focus on my WYDOT job during the weekdays and to further work on my fine-art photography in the evenings.

Overhead was so much less that I was actually making a profit with my home-based business. Thanks to this economic upturn, Susan and I went on a vacation to San Francisco for the first time. Sara Francis taught me the technique of manipulating SX-70 prints, which was the only camera I took to California. While Susan was shopping, I would sit on the street curb and move the emulsion around. Before long, I would have a group of people watching what I was creating.

After nearly five years, my hard work and sacrifice paid off. I once again was able to focus all of my attention and abilities on photography becoming the senior photographer at

WYDOT. My new boss, Public Affairs Manager Keith Rounds, believed in me. He encouraged me to be involved in the Professional Photographers of America, Wyoming Professional Photographers Association, and Rocky Mountain Professional Photographers, serving as a board member for the latter two organizations. Membership in these organizations helped me merge the latest computer methods of image manipulation and techniques into my photography. Doug McGee, the current Public Affairs manager, has supported me in continuing and improving the photography section of WYDOT. I feel being the photographer for WYDOT is the best job in Wyoming state government because I have the opportunity to travel the state. Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Tetons and Devils Tower are just a few of the amazing places that I am fortunate to photograph on a regular basis for our state map and Wyoming Travel and Tourism.

Being the type of person who always wants to learn, I wasn't satisfied with the status quo. WYDOT once again gave me the opportunity to grow as a photographer. Through WYDOT, I attended a training program that taught me the need to set goals and write them down, so I could be reminded of them every day. That brightly colored sticky note placed on my computer with the words "Print Competition" served as a constant reminder that I needed to start the process for my Master of Photography. This tactic really worked, and I started entering state, regional, and national PPA competitions. In four years' time, I became certified, and in 2000 earned my Master of Photography degree. Soon after earning my Master of Photography degree, WYDOT gave me a raise, which was undoubtedly a result of my educational achievement through PPA. My next step was to achieve my Photographic Craftsman degree. I used the same motivational technique and earned my Craftsman degree in 2006.

Throughout my career, I've been fortunate to study and learn from many leading photographers in the industry. In 1978 I went to the West Coast School of Professional Photographers in Santa Barbara, where I had the privilege to study and learn from a leading photographic artist of our time, Jay Stock. His exhibit, "Faces of Today's American Indian," inspired me to create my own unique style that I now incorporate in my Native American scenes and other images. After that course in California, I was inspired to create photographic studies. I am always trying new concepts, never wanting to become static. For example, I photograph scenes with the idea of placing teepees, cowboys or other interesting subjects to create one-of-a-kind images.

I was fortunate to spend two days with Frank Cricchio and Dave Davis at Slot Canyon, Arizona. Photographing Native Americans with available light in the canyons was an unbelievable experience. As we walked into the canyon, the sun wasn't quite overhead, making it appear as though it was a dark and dreary place. Eventually, the sun moved above us and the rays streamed through the crevasses, bringing the canyon to life. Frank posed a Native American woman in the scene making it an unforgettable experience. I

realized that no matter how beautiful a scene, by adding another element, it can become breathtaking.

Painters Joseph Mallord William Turner and Thomas Moran, and photographer Edward Curtis have influenced my photography. I always wanted to travel to a foreign place, and I finally fulfilled that wish when my wife and I went on a voyage around the Mediterranean. I couldn't put the camera down; everywhere I looked was an awe-inspiring image. As Turner had done, I tried to capture the history and essence of European life. When we returned, I continued studying paintings by Turner. His paintings in

spired me to create my own Old World look and feel in my images "Venetian Splendor", "The Crowning Point" and "Peasant Passage."

While in Yellowstone National Park, I can imagine Thomas Moran walking about the park sketching or painting. I look for similar places of inspiration. One of these places is Yellowstone Falls. In 1917, William Henry Holmes, curator of the National Gallery of Art, said Thomas Moran's painting, "The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone," was declared "the greatest work in landscape that the world has produced." One of the most rewarding honors I have received was the ASP Rocky Mountain regional award for my image of Yellowstone Falls entitled, "Moran's Inspiration." I incorporated my mantra, the Rule of Thirds, into this image by the placement of the waterfall and horizon.

Another inspiration was Edward Curtis' photogravures portraying the Native American way of life. Curtis would add details on the copper photogravures or delete details that were part of the original negative. Like Curtis, I add to my digital negative by photographing different elements for a final creation. "Sacred Ground" has a special meaning to me, because everything came together as I visualized. This was a perfect setting for a Native American village to balance the early morning light shining on the rugged mountain peaks. My greatest honor in photographic competition came when "Sacred Ground" was selected as the 2008 ASP Silver Medallion award.

Jonathan Penney, master printer of Center Moriches, New York, has a profound influence on my photography. Through the creation of edge effects from old glass negatives, totypes and vintage photos used as an overlay, give my images a distressed, aged look. After talking with Jonathan about my photographs and reading his blog, I have applied his creative vision to my photography by applying effects created by Jonathan or me. This collaboration has brought a fine-art look to my work. The presentation of my images is a museum mount with an inset panel. The image is then float mounted, creating a timeless piece. This technique was created by Jonathan.

The Rule of Thirds is the first thing I consider when looking through the viewfinder and deciding how many elements will be in a composition. I feel a composition is more

dynamic by adding one, three, five, or seven elements. An odd number keeps the eye moving across the image. Another crucial aspect of my images is the direction of light. Elements I add need to have the same light direction, contrast, hue and shadows. I wasn't able to create what I visualized in my mind until I adopted Adobe Photoshop. When I am out on location photographing the Rocky Mountains or abroad, I imagine what elements can be added for impact. For example, in my photograph "Ghosts of the Red Desert" I photographed a group of wild horses running across the prairie. The horses stopped and watched me photograph them. In photoshop I selected the horses running in the background, turned the opacity down and placed them in the upper third quadrant of the image.

Over the last three decades, although I have gained knowledge and inspiration from seminars and conferences, the most memorable times have involved getting together with friends and photographers, talking about photographs and embarking on photo safaris, Roger Carey, Bob Hede, Tom Henn, and Virg Nyman are just a few who have sustained my never ending enthusiasm for photography. I look back and think what would have happened 39 years ago if my dad hadn't taken me fishing that day. I choose to embody the spirit of "Powder River, Let 'er Buck," a phrase coined by a cowboy in Wyoming long ago. To me, this phrase means overcoming any obstacle to be the best of which you are capable. My photographic path has been a winding, rocky road with many hills to climb and a few mountains to conquer. With the support of Susan, family and friends, I am still climbing.

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