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Ansel Adams Has An Heir

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By [Timothy D. Naegele\[1\]](#)

When I was a kid growing up in West Los Angeles, my mother had a Kodak “Brownie” box camera[2], and it seemed as though she took photos of everyone. Her love of photography was passed on to me; and later in life, I discovered that what I loved most about the art form was encapsulated in the photography of Ansel Adams[3] and no one else. Let me correct that. Between my mother’s photography and that of Ansel[4], there was the breathtaking photography of the great Mathew Brady during the U.S. Civil War, which was a precursor of today’s photojournalism.[5]

Ansel was from San Francisco where I had lived when I attended law school at Berkeley; and he was a concert pianist before arthritis affected his ability to perform at the levels to which he aspired. He chose to pursue a life in photography; and that changed lots of other lives, including my own. On a whim, I picked up the phone one day at my condominium in Northern Virginia; and I called information for Carmel, California, and asked for a listing in his name. I was connected; and to my great surprise, his wife Virginia answered the phone at their home in the Carmel Highlands.

I asked how I might study with him; and she gave me information about whom to contact at his workshops. The next thing I knew, I had applied for his workshop in the Yosemite Valley, I was accepted, and I

went.^[6] I knew very little about the man personally, although I soon learned that his base of operations at Yosemite was the Ansel Adams Galley, which had been the Best's Studio^[7]. His wife was Virginia Best Adams; and her family owned the gallery before she and Ansel met.

When I arrived, there were sycophants aplenty surrounding the “master,” like I assume must have happened with Leonardo di Vinci, Pablo Picasso, and the other great artists. In a sense, we “students” were sycophants too, although I did not realize it fully until much later. Having grown up in the shadows of Hollywood, and then having worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., I had been around lots of them. When our group of students traveled to the “high country” of Yosemite with Ansel, and had other photographic experiences with him, I did not delude myself and knew that I would be lucky if my knowledge of photography was ever a fraction of his.

Indeed, in the high country one day, I had my tripod set up with a Minolta 35mm camera on it; and I framed a scene that I believed was picture perfect. Ansel came over and looked through the lens, and said it was all wrong, and moved the tripod about a foot or so, and took the “perfect” photo of what I had been trying to capture. He included a nearby tree branch, instead of merely photographing interesting rock formations in the distance; and of course, he was right.

In his darkroom at Yosemite, he kept a metronome from his days with music, which he used to time the placement of negatives in trays of various liquid solutions as he was developing them into photographs. He apparently liked his drinks at the end of each day too; and I was told that he did not make any “big money” until he limited his output to museum collections only, which drove up the values of his photography and allowed him to live comfortably for the rest of his life.

He told many stories, but the one I will always remember is how he took his most famous photograph, “Moonrise Hernandez.”^[8] He was driving in the countryside on a lonely highway near the small town of Hernandez, New Mexico; and all of a sudden, he saw the moon over a little cemetery, and he stopped his car. Pulling out his equipment, he could not find his trusty light meter; and hence, using his “zone system,” he guessed at the proper settings for the photograph and took it. As with so many things in life, it was a miracle; and he created the one photograph by which he may be remembered forever.

When I saw him later at Carmel, his health had declined, and he was a “figurehead” at the workshop that I attended.^[9] However, he was as jovial as ever, albeit “protected” by those who were part of his inner circle. After his death, one of his instructors and I met with Robert Baker, who had co-authored or been the “Collaborator” of several of Ansel's books^[10]. Bob was very talented, low-key and nice, and not ego-driven or a “hero worshipping” sycophant like so many of those who surrounded Ansel.

We talked over lunch about a book that he and Ansel had been working on when the master died. My interests were always in color photography, not black and white; and Ansel had avoided it because he could not control the colors like he wanted. His book with Bob might have been the definitive book in the world on the subject, but it was not to be, because of Ansel's death. After that, it seemed that the focus of attention was on preserving the master's image for posterity, instead of advancing the science of photography, as Ansel and Bob Baker had done.

Of all the photographers whom I had met at the Yosemite workshop, one stood out and his photography stands out today, and that is William Neill.^[11] Bill was then, and he remains today the finest color photographer in the United States, if not the world. Of all the photographers who surrounded Ansel at Yosemite, Bill was special. He was head and shoulders above the rest. I will always remember a small

color photo of his, which he took at the Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona.^[12] It was exquisite.

What makes a great photographer, in terms of Brady, Adams and Neill? I believe it is “photo-realism,” which takes the viewer to the spot where the photograph was taken, and puts him or her in the eyes of the photographer. It is so true that once a photo is taken, that image will never appear again in history, nor did it ever appear before. The photographer captures a moment in time, as if time literally stood still. Take a look at Brady’s photos of the Civil War, or Louis Daguerre’s magnificent photographs of France^[13], or Ansel’s photos, or Bill Neill’s. You will see true masterpieces.

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^[2] *See, e.g.,* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownie_\(camera\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brownie_(camera))

^[3] *See* http://www.anseladams.com/content/ansel_info/anseladams_biography2.html; *see also* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ansel_Adams

^[4] “Ansel” was the way everyone referred to him, even in his presence. He seemed to encourage it, and was a bit folksy in such ways, which was disarming and endearing. Lots of books have been written about him, by insiders such as Bob Baker and others. I was never an insider, nor do I profess to be. I got close enough to learn what I wished to know about photography from a master—perhaps “the” master in the history of photography worldwide—and that was enough for me.

^[5] *See* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathew_Brady

^[6] *See, e.g.,* http://www.anseladams.com/photography_education.html

^[7] *See* <http://www.anseladams.com/> and http://www.anseladams.com/content/customer_service/history.html

^[8] *See, e.g.,* http://www.anseladams.com/content/ansel_info/ansel_ancedotes.html

^[9] I dated a lovely instructor whom I met there, and we gave thought to marrying; and I will always love her and wish her well.

^[10] *See, e.g.,* (1) <http://www.amazon.com/Polaroid-Land-Photography-Ansel-Adams/dp/0821207296> and (2) http://www.amazon.com/Camera-Ansel-Adams-Photography-Book/dp/0821221841/ref=sr_1_1?

[ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1265948749&sr=1-1](#) and (3) http://www.amazon.com/Print-Ansel-Adams-Photography-Book/dp/0821221876/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1265948838&sr=1-2 and (4) http://www.amazon.com/Negative-Ansel-Adams-Photography-Book/dp/0821221868/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1265948931&sr=1-3; *see also* http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Robert+Baker%2C+Ansel+Adams&x=0&y=0

[11] *See* <http://www.williamneill.com>




I was so taken by Bill's photography and talents that I commissioned him to build a darkroom at my home in Malibu, California, which was under construction after we met. It was never finished in the way that I envisioned; and hence, Bill was never able to work his "magic" on the darkroom.

[12] *See* <http://www.nps.gov/cach/index.htm> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canyon_de_Chelly_National_Monument

[13] *See* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Daguerre; *see also* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_photography

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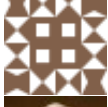
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