

Cal Olson and Photojournalism

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In his coverage of the 1957 tornado that devastated Fargo, North Dakota, destroying 329 homes in the city's north edge, *Fargo Forum* photographer Cal Olson used the best techniques of photography to tell the story of the tragedy.

This was the heyday of the photo essay and photojournalism, where pictures were used to tell stories, particularly in publications like *Life* and *Look* magazines.

In covering the tornado and in making his memorable photo of the man carrying a severely injured and soon to die baby, Olson used his camera to set the scene of the man walking through rubble with a dazed look on his face from the shock of the swiftness of the devastation, and the horror of finding and trying to save the young child. In one shot, Olson had managed to combine many images into a single frame of film that instantly told a vivid story.

Olson's vision that day was of a true, professional photo essayist or photojournalist. His ability to see an event literally taking form in front of him, defining itself through a clear and distinct visual configuration, is remarkable in itself. Olson's ability to fix that event at the one moment when the pieces fit into a finished puzzle, at the instant when chaos coalesces into order before dissolving into chaos again, is hard to imagine, given the circumstances of the tragedy. It demands a special balance between attentiveness and detachment, expectancy and patience. And of course, a good dose of good fortune or the luck of being in the right place at the right time.

The fact that the tornado hit at sunset meant that Olson worked in extremely difficult lighting conditions given the cameras and film of that time. Olson's famous photo proves, and his long career confirms, that Olson possessed the rarest kind of union between the photographer and his camera. The tornado picture proves the camera is as much a part of him as his hand. It is because his visual intelligence and refinement are so embedded together, so much a way of sensing and participating in the world around him, that Olson's work serves to remind us of what using our eyes, *really using our eyes*, can mean.

Although Olson often used the standard newspaper camera of that time, a bulky 4-by-5 inch Speed Graphic camera that used film cut in sheets, on this day he used a Rolleiflex, which used 120 roll film that produced a square negative of two and one-

quarter inches. The 'Rollei' was a reliable camera much favored by professionals, who looking down into the viewfinder, could quickly expose for the light, focus, trip the shutter and turn the advance crank to the next frame. The film rolls contained either 12 or 24 exposures per roll. In the case of the tornado pictures, Olson worked quickly and instinctively in the early evening darkness. He wouldn't know his photos were in focus until later when he made the prints that would appear in the newspaper.

Some 10 years later when he went to Vietnam to report on military service people from Red River valley communities, Olson was equipped with much smaller, compact cameras using 35-millimeter film in strips of 36 exposures. The easy to handle cameras were equipped with fast aperture lenses that could capture images in nearly every kind of light with new, faster, reliable films.

The effect was freeing to photographers. In the old Speed Graphic 4x5 days, photos were often staged and elaborately lit because of the restrictions of slow films and bulky, "slow" cameras. But now, photographers could work quickly and candidly, recording images as the events unfolded before their eyes.

One of the great heroes of the photo essay and photojournalism was W. Eugene Smith of Life magazine. His essays in the 1950s of Albert Schweitzer working in Africa, of a village in Spain, the life of a country doctor in Colorado and the famous bathing scene in Minamata, Japan in 1971, all inspired a generation of journalists and set the standard for the photo essay. Smith only used small, 35-mm Leica cameras with fast lenses in order to capture his subjects in natural light in a candid style.

Since the 1960s, motor drives, electronic flash, auto-focus, better lenses and other camera enhancements have made picture taking easier. New digital cameras free photojournalists from the limitation of film roll length, as thousands of images can be stored on a single memory card. Cal Olson never experienced this luxury professionally. Throughout his career his working tools were decidedly "old school."

Technically, photojournalism is distinguished from other branches of photography (i.e., documentary photography, social documentary photography, street photography or celebrity photography) by these important qualities:

- Timeliness — the images have meaning as a record of events.
- Objectivity — the situation implied by the images is a fair and accurate representation of the events they depict in both content and tone.

- Narrative — the images combine with other news elements to make facts relatable to the viewer or reader on a visual level.

Content remains the most important element of photojournalism, but the ability to extend deadlines with rapid gathering and editing of images has brought significant changes. As recently as 15 years ago, nearly 30 minutes were needed to scan and transmit a single photograph from a remote location to a news office for printing. Now, equipped with a digital camera, a mobile phone and a laptop computer, a photojournalist can send a high-quality image in minutes, even seconds, after an event occurs. Camera phones and portable satellite links increasingly allow for the mobile transmission of images from almost any point on earth.

There is some concern by news photographers that the profession of photojournalism as it is known today could change to such a degree that it is unrecognizable as image-capturing technology naturally progresses. Citizen journalism and the increase in free user contributions and submission of amateur photos to news sites are becoming more widespread.

The age of the citizen journalist and the attainment of news photos from amateur bystanders have contributed to the art of photojournalism and the timeliness of news events, but these contributions lack the trained eye of a Cal Olson, who could quickly cut through the extraneous and get to the heart of the matter. One only needs to look at his tornado photos to see how the citizen journalist will never replace the work of a true professional who saw life's events with careful eyes, a no-nonsense head and a great heart.