

Blue River Anthology

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Introduction

"Blue River Anthology" is a series of black and white photographs taken in Blue River, Oregon during the Winter and Spring of 1993-94. The photographs are divided into two groups. One group has buildings and the surroundings of Blue River as the subject. The other group features inhabitants of Blue River. The series represents a documentary portrait of the village.

The photographs were exhibited April 4-15, 1994 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Ranger Station in Blue River for the enjoyment of the inhabitants; and in fulfillment of the B.F.A. Terminal Project requirements of the Department of Fine Arts of the University of Oregon.

The photographs will be on exhibit May 28 to July 16, 1994 at the Lane County Historical Museum in Eugene, Oregon.

I

The original purpose of "Blue River Anthology" was to present an urban landscape of Blue River, Oregon, a village I first encountered while making a series of photographs of rural fire stations. The emphasis in "Blue River Anthology" was to be the physical appearance of a dilapidated village. The genre was to be urban documentation where the subject was the locality in which people lived or worked. The intent was to show my reaction to Blue River, rather than the interaction of people with the village. The name of the series was taken from "Spoon River Anthology" by Edgar Lee Masters, where the voices of the dead tell the story of the town. I planned to let the dead buildings tell the story of the village.

Inspiration for the series came from a mixture of Eugene Atget's, Paris, and Berenice Abbott's, New York. Blue River is no Paris or New York, but then again, I'm no Atget or Abbott. The more immediate reason was a notification for an exhibition of photographs emulating the modernist style of the 30's, 40's, and 50's. I took as a model the photographs of small American towns made by Walker Evans and Paul Strand. Other influences included photographs of America by Robert Evans, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, and Eudora Welty.

In the first set of photographs I concentrated on the ramshackle buildings and streets in the village. Most of the stores were either boarded up or had "for sale" signs. Many of the houses contained gardens of junk autos watched over by lonely dogs. One could call it a picturesque view of Appalachia in the Cascades. At least, that was the idea I had when taking the photographs.

The first series of photographs formed a portfolio for an Advanced Photography class in the 1994 Winter term. I also planned to exhibit the series at the PhotoZone Gallery in Eugene. Discussions with Professor Dell, as well as comments by members of the PhotoZone Gallery, led to the conclusion that the series was not an honest representation of Blue River. My changing impressions of the village were not reflected in the photographs I was making. The viewers seemed to share my feeling that the photographs only touched the surface of the subject.

In order to convey more depth and a better understanding of Blue River, I decided to expand the series with photographs of some of the inhabitants and the surroundings.

II

The main subject of most of the photographic series I made, prior to "Blue River Anthology", was of urban landscapes and structures in and around Eugene, Oregon. These included the Amazon Creek, downtown parking buildings, school buildings and playgrounds, fire hydrants, and rural fire stations. These were each a series of black and white photographs made to present a picture or portrait of a single subject. They appeared to be documentary photographs, but were meant to be exhibited for local amusement rather than as a record of local scenes. The presence of people in these scenes was secondary to the content of the photographs.

Before taking up "Fine Art Photography", I worked for many years writing computer software. My approach to photography was not too different from that of programming. They are both solitary sports that require a certain amount of creativity. Both involve finding elegant solutions to given problems within given constraints. In programming as in art, the solutions vary as one redefines the problem. This goes on until a mutually accepted set of problems and answers are found. In photography as in programming I preferred problems that were impersonal and calculable.

Up to this time I generally avoided taking photographs of people per se. Taking photographs of people seemed to add a complication to the ritual. I felt that I would either be dependent upon the haphazard movements of people, or that I would have to manipulate them. Neither of which appealed to me. However, in order to better define Blue Rivers, I began to include photographs of the people I came in contact with while walking about the village.

The size of Blue River made it difficult to avoid making their acquaintance. Their good nature made it easier for me to ask them to pose for photographs.

III

The unincorporated community of Blue River lies at the junction of the Blue and McKenzie rivers about 40 miles east of the Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area. It is located on the edge of the Willamette National Forest in the Western Cascades, and is accessible only by the McKenzie Highway, a route opened in 1863 that led the early pioneers to the Willamette Valley. In that same year gold was discovered in the area.

The name Blue River comes from the reflections of the blue rock formations through which the river runs. The Blue River post office was established in 1886. The name Blue River City was recorded in 1900, although the community never became incorporated. During the first decade of the 1900's the area was subdivided, at which time there was a hotel, sawmill, blacksmith shop, Chinese laundry, and several saloons to cater to the more than 250 transient workers. By 1917 the last mine had closed.

In 1930 there were 122 residents in Blue River. The population increased to an all-time high of 580 in 1950. By 1970 the population was 520. At that time it included the U.S. Forest Service Ranger Station and the McKenzie District elementary and high schools. The commercial facilities included two markets, three gas stations, two cafes, two taverns, a gift shop, a barber shop, a motel, and a trailer camp.

In 1975 a plan for the development of Blue River was established by Lane County. It called for removal of the dilapidated houses, improving the streets and the water system, and setting up of a fire district.

Today, except for the existence of a fire station, it does not appear that the development plan for Blue River led to a revival of the village. The construction of the bypass of McKenzie Highway around Blue River reduced the number of tourists upon which many shops depended. The only businesses left in 1994 are two markets, a tavern, a cafe, a garage, and a laundromat. The present population is about 250. The main activity along the main street seems to come from local people or campers picking up beer from the market or their mail from the post office. However, the dispirited look of Blue River does not reflect on its inhabitants.

There is a core of long time residents and a number of retired people who prefer life in the mountains rather than in a mobile home subdivision in Arizona.

The 20 slides included in this report represent the essence of the series. The exhibitions of "Blue River Anthology" contained about 30 black and white photographs. The photographs are primarily frontal views made in direct sunshine on Kodak TMAX 400 developed in HC-110. The prints were made on Ilford Multigrade III Deluxe.

In keeping with the spirit of the documentary style of the years 1930-1950, and the subject matter, I decided to use a Zeiss Super Ikonta B camera of that period. This is a folding roll-film camera that makes 2 1/4" square negatives. The camera and format seemed to fit the tempo and age of the town as well as my own.

Artist Statement

As a youth I did photography to please paying customers and employers. Now I take photographs to entertain myself and the occasional spectator. Making photographs for mutual pleasure is like a comedian telling jokes to an appreciative audience. The only difference is that comedy is more serious than photography.

I like to show something familiar in an unfamiliar way. It may be an abstraction of an everyday scene, or the substitution of one abstraction by another. I try to illustrate a particular subject or viewpoint with a series of photographs that give an air of cohesiveness to the documentary style. In any case, I remain a straight black and white photographer with an occasional kink or gray area.

The subject, or object, of the photographs depends on the weather and opportunity, as well as any aspiration or inspiration. My approach to making photographs is more intellectual than emotional. I do not try to send messages or arouse passions. In many ways I feel like a tourist taking snapshots in order to show the folks back home where I have been and what I have seen.