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That Much Further West



July was the Badlands and Wind Cave. Glacier was August. In October, they saw Great Sand Dunes, Canyonlands, Mesa Verde and Monument Valley. “Every park is different, and just when you think you’ve seen it all, you see some crazy new feature,” says Dr. Bruce Ellingson, professor of media studies.

From June through November 2010, as part of a faculty sabbatical, he and his wife Margie visited 11 national parks west of the Mississippi plus Monument Valley. They travelled via van, alternating between a few weeks on the road and a few in Storm Lake, using digital multiple-exposure camera technology to – well, just look for yourself.

In the process, the Ellingsons traversed two frontiers, one iconic and one virtual: the classic landscape of the American West, and the ever-evolving world of social media. *The lessons he learned from and about both, he takes back to the classroom, providing a working example for students of the opportunities and methods today’s creative professionals utilize.*

HIGH DYNAMIC RANGE

America – or at least Americana – looks West. It was westward expansion – the mythic Old West, Horace Greely’s



Yellowstone National Park • Sunset from Lake Butte

exhortation to “go west young man, and grow up with the country” – that defined the American dream of the 19th century. The West Coast dream factory of Hollywood dominated the imagery of the 20th. The innovations of Silicon Valley shape the 21st.

“Maybe it’s a Midwestern point of view, but when I think of rugged terrain, I think west,” says Bruce Ellingson. “My very first family trip was west. As a kid, what really spoke to me were adventures of real people like Zebulon Pike and Lewis and Clark. In my mind those were always about the West.”

In 2010, Bruce set out to photograph places set aside to prove the backdrops to the American legend are real and tangible. The diversity of the mountains, deserts, and prairies of our National Parks remain largely as their first visitors saw them. Some are well-known. Others are obscure. All are beautiful and distinctive.

“It’s been six months, 15 states, 20,000 miles, and 11 national parks,” is how Margie measures it. “It was a lot of driving, but I’ve seen a lot of great sights.”

“We started at Teddy Roosevelt in June,” says Bruce. “There are virtually no iconic images there, because no one has cared enough to record them. At Glacier, we knew we were going to a place where you could go on the Internet and see 1,000 pictures. I can shoot what I want to

shoot, though. If I don’t want to shoot the most popular tourist spot, I don’t have to. The only person who feels any pressure is me.”

Of course, even as Silicon Valley is a center for technological innovation, it is just another geographic location on the “flat world.” From a laptop, Bruce and Margie upload the photos on the Internet through Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and their own Web site.

“My number one job is taking pictures

of Bruce taking pictures, and those get posted to the Nature’s Image page on Facebook,” says Margie.

“We like to publish little snippets with five sentences, and Facebook is a perfect space for that,” Bruce says. “I tweet about my pictures.”

Bruce’s pictures are “high dynamic range” panoramas, which use a compositing technique to capture a range of light and detail that are not possible with traditional methods of photography. The simplified version of how it works: he takes a series of exposures at different settings with his Canon EOS 5D Mark II, then shifts the camera a few degrees and does some more. Later, utilizing a combination of editing programs, he composites the pictures to create a detailed panoramic image.

“By harnessing the power of digital photography, I can get every single tone that exists naturally, then make a composite and render that back the same way you actually see it with your own eyes,” Bruce says. “Ansel Adams, the father of modern landscape photography, would do similar things by exposing the same film for the shadow and for the details. Like the photographers of today, he was doing the same things as people who invented photography, but expanding on them.”

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

“At first glance, there seems to be a

disembodied gray, orange, and blue blob in the center of trees,” posted Kyle French, Class of 2010, on Facebook of Bruce’s picture of Yellowstone’s Porcelain Springs. “It works as an abstraction.”

“This is stunning!! The lines, the colours, the textures, oh my!” noted Deborah Twigg of Hamilton, Ontario on one of Great Sand Dunes on Flickr.

Eight people “like” one photo. 163 have viewed this picture; 12 have commented on that one. The feedback loop between the artist and audience is instantaneous, and arguably unprecedented. “Twenty-five years ago, mass communication was one way, broadcast from the creator to the viewer,” says Bruce. “Today, everything is two-way interactive.”

Growing up on a farm in Western Minnesota, Bruce had little interest in farming as a profession. What did fascinate him was the way light changed and how it played across the snow and the fields during the early mornings and days and evenings, as well as the human connections offered by mass media.

“I would come home to the farmhouse from first grade and turn on a huge table-size model radio, and I just remember being fascinated by the stories,” he says. “Then TV came. Years later, I wrote a paper on *Giants in the Earth*, a novel about a Norwegian immigrant family that settles west of Jackson, Minn. One of the characters, Beret, goes crazy in the winter. I couldn’t help but think if she had a cell phone, she could have posted pictures for her family in Norway. It wasn’t the space that drove her mad, but the lack of connection.”

In the late 60s, when Bruce was a mass communications major at Moorhead State University, the term meant print and broadcast: newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. There, he was editor of his college newspaper. In high school, he had worked with a linotype as a printer’s devil. Afterwards, he went into journalism.

“Visual communication is now a part of everyday practice,” he says. “Twenty-five years ago, it was rare to find a student who had developed 35 millimeter film. Today, every single person on this campus has some sort of recording device in his or her pocket.”

When he arrived at BV in 1984, Bruce helped to renovate Lage Communication Center to install brand new laser printers, as well as photography labs that were fundamentally the same as ones built in the 1840s. He earned his PhD in journalism and mass communication from the University of Iowa in 1999, finishing it with the help of a semester-long sabbatical. Both his recent and 1997 sabbaticals have allowed Bruce opportunities he could not have pursued while teaching full-time – and have resulted in professional development and experiences that he takes directly to the classroom for the benefit of BVU’s students.

To adapt to the forward drive of technology Bruce has been part of a

“Early in my career I decided that if you wanted to teach someone photography, it would be the technical skills,” Bruce says. “All that did was to make students uninterested in the technical details. I learned that people come to photography classes because they’ve been inspired, and want to create that feeling themselves.”

Among Bruce’s photography projects, in 1999, he and Dennis Dykema – then professor and now professor emeritus of art – went to the Loess Hills of western Iowa. Dennis painted. Bruce photographed. Their pictures adorn the walls of the second floor of the Estelle Siebens Science Center. More recently, Bruce produced color landscapes commissioned for Storm Lake’s Methodist Manor and the United Community Health Care Center.

Prints, including photos from Bruce’s 2010 trip west, are available at the Dynamic Panoramic Landscapes Web site, <http://bruceellingson.com/>.

major revision of the Media Studies major. Starting fall 2011, the program will become Digital Media and include greater emphasis on the business aspect – how the individual creator can utilize technology and social connections to find success in the information age. While Bruce’s journey produces amazing images, his social media experiments provide a working example for students.

“Newspapers aren’t hiring, but the job want ads today are for the likes of ‘social media directors,’” Bruce says. “To a large extent, things really do rest on the shoulders of the entrepreneur. We in the media are beginning to accept the fact that when you create materials, you have to publish them as well. You’ve got Flickr and Youtube. You’ve got Facebook, and your friends are a natural audience. The challenge is how do you translate social capital into market capital?”

THE WESTWARD EXPANSION

“My professional perspective has always been based on practical experience, more like a journalist’s than an academic one,” Bruce says. “As a news photographer, I enjoyed being at the scene of activity. When I was young, I wanted to be a fireman or a cop. If I hadn’t been a photographer, I might have been.”

Bruce worked as a journalist full-time from 1972 to 1980, and part-time while he earned his master’s degree from the University of Missouri School of Journalism from 1980 to 1984. While in Missouri, he reconsidered what the challenges of constantly being on the scene might mean for his life. “One time I got a call saying there was going to be a Barbara Mandrell concert at the Missouri State Penitentiary,” he recalls. “They ushered me into a gym, like the old one at BVU’s Edson Hall, filled with convicts and when I walked to the stage one of the inmates gave me a look that said, ‘take a picture with that camera and it’ll wind up in your body somewhere.’ I wasn’t sure I wanted to do stuff like that, spending my life on the road away from my family.”

It’s teaching, the life Bruce chose instead of life on the road, that (eventually) afforded Bruce and Margie

the chance to go on the road together. Last year was the 40th year since Bruce and Margie married. They previously took a major trip through the western national parks 30 years ago when their oldest son Ben, Class of 1994, was young. “It’s been a lot of togetherness in the car,” Margie jokes. “We’ll see how we survive this time.”

Bruce takes pictures. Margie records where and when the pictures are taken. She sometimes sleeps in during the mornings, and looks for places to record the sunset. She takes pictures of Bruce taking pictures. Bruce looks at his pictures in terms of light. Margie is apt to describe shapes.

“When I’m at Arches or Great Sand Dunes, I see so many different textures: the lines, the tones, the sand dunes that are smooth with the peaks on them,” says Margie, “And I think – how can the wind and weather do this all?”

There is perhaps an inherent tension, or at least an irony, present in using the most up-to-date technology to capture images of such rugged terrain. Bruce, however, views the technological advances as a way to depict reality with further detail, to provide an image that is closer to the way the eye sees it, and an opportunity to feel closer to the experience himself.

“When the sun hasn’t risen yet, and I look off to the west and see the first visible light catch some mountain peak – that is a moment when you are really present in the real world,” he says. “The rest of all this is just a way to share. The chatter of social media, the incredible flood of information can cause you to forget reality. Photography narrows the moment. One little tree can narrow the moment, and I’m reminded of when my dad got me out of bed on the farm at 6 a.m., and I’d see a little feature of nature that I hadn’t seen before. I’d be all by myself, just enjoying that moment.”

And Bruce Ellingson continues westward, merging subject with the medium, and reconciling the photographer to both.