

Del Ankers | 1916-2008

A photographer trained his camera on everything around him, but his most interesting subject may have been himself

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It is impossible to tell, from a pass through the archives of commercial photographer Del Ankers, what his specialty was. Ankers, who died in May of congestive heart failure, was self-taught. He took up photography for a livelihood in the early 1930s, a time when the profession was still evolving and smart photographers diversified. But even by the standards of the day, he was omnivorous. He photographed pies for a canned foods association and shot lobotomy surgeries for educational materials. He made a studio portrait of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, delicately lit, a sheaf of orchids pinned to her bosom, and took snapshots for servicemen to send to their mothers during WWII. For construction companies, he shot pictures while hanging out of prop planes and off the tops of towers; for corporations, he shot numberless banquets in cavernous halls, seas of dark suits and little white faces. He photographed presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy; also Larry King, Grace Kelly, and the evangelist Oral Roberts holding a tent revival. At a funeral home, he took a group shot for an Italian family with their dead relative propped up in the casket.

But there is also a much smaller, more revealing archive of Ankers's work, a curious series of photographs he took throughout his life: photographs of his own injuries. In these pictures, he has just suffered some grievous accident and has paused to photograph it, sometimes before getting help or even mopping himself off. There are pictures from when he was young, including a shot of one of his fingers, the end of which had been severed and reattached after a tripod fell on it during a shoot; and one of him with blood streaming down Ankers's face, his nephew Bill Van Doren recalls, after a tractor Ankers was working on threw a bolt that hit him in the forehead. There was one of his foot, a piece of iron protruding from it, after an accident cutting a piece of reinforcing bar. And as a much older, more fragile man, he documented the stitches and incisions of his various surgeries, including a particularly lurid scar on his leg, where surgeons had removed an artery to use to repair his heart.

There are more flattering pictures of Ankers in his collection: As a young man, and even as an old man, he had a swashbuckling handsomeness, and his assignments lent themselves to a certain daredevil glamour. But the pictures of him on the job are taken by others and scattered unceremoniously throughout his files with the rest of his works. He carried the pictures of his injuries in his wallet.

Those who knew him say that Ankers's outsize personality was matched by his humility and a readiness to laugh at himself. He was utterly "unconcerned with himself or his image or status," says Van Doren. The wallet photos were the most visible evidence of

this, he says, "the ability to see the things that happened to him with the same curiosity he had about everything else."

Ankers was apparently unafraid of risk, which provided ample material for these photographs over the course of a lifetime. He drove fast ("He was a speed-demon," says his longtime friend Hubert McGee), scaled radio towers hand over hand, crouched among the high beams of unfinished buildings. On aerial assignments, while his colleagues photographed through the windows, "Del had a habit of opening the door of the helicopter and putting his feet on the strut out there and just hanging out the door taking pictures," says Morris Semiatin, who worked for him for nearly 40 years.

As a boy, Frank Lafayette Ankers lost the sight in his right eye in an accident, an event that, if it sensitized him to the fallibilities of the body, he never made much of. (It is impossible to tell, from any pictures of him, which eye is blind.) But though his approach to the world was headlong, it wasn't self-destructive. There was not much of a dark side to Ankers, nor melodrama -- by all accounts he was a buoyant, pragmatic man with a boundless curiosity, for whom the ordinary wonders of the world were entertainment enough. He was still taking road trips with some of his younger friends well into his 80s. In a picture taken at a party toward the end of his life, he is mugging for the camera, wearing a sort of hat fashioned from what appears to be an apple juice label.

In 1994, Ankers's first wife, Elizabeth, died of cancer, after 53 years of marriage. The couple had lived in McLean since 1981. Two years later, Ankers married Elizabeth Freire, a sculptor from Brazil who was in her late 40s, and the couple lived in an old farmhouse on a pretty swatch of land in Great Falls, Va., which Ankers had bought in the 1980s.

The house in Great Falls is a sunny, rambling, upright old frame house, with a few additions that Ankers built to house his equipment and his prints. One of these rooms is at the back of the house, reachable through a small anteroom off the open kitchen. It is piled high with boxes of his work, the files labeled in Ankers's block handwriting: "NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS I GOT CREDIT FOR." "JUST GOOD PICTURES." There is, between the anteroom and the addition, a half-step down. Written in black grease pencil on the step, in the same handwriting, are the words "STEP" and "STEP UP," added in the months before Ankers died, after he took a tumble there.

Freire, working in her studio that day, recalls having "a feeling" that something was not quite right on the other side of the house. Entering the room, she saw her husband, who had fallen over the threshold. "He had knocked his eye into a box, and it was round and black and bleeding," she says. "I was frantic. 'We have to go to the hospital,' I said. 'Let's go see if you have a concussion.' "

But Ankers was having none of it. "Get my camera," he told her. It was a bright day, and he arranged himself in a ray of sunlight, setting up the camera and instructing Freire as she photographed him. "He didn't like the angle," she remembers. "Take another one," he told her, until he was satisfied.

The picture from that day is a close shot of Ankers's face, unsparingly lit by the sidelong angle of the sun, the background dissolving into blackness behind him. It is the face of a very old man. The shiner -- his good eye -- is a doozy, the size of a fist, and in the sunshine it practically fluoresces, a bloom of purple and red darkening almost to black. His blind eye, in shadow, is almost closed, but his injured eye, in the exact center of the frame, is looking straight at the viewer.

To say that Ankers was a commercial photographer without a specialty is ultimately to pay him a compliment of the highest order. Of the thousands of photographs he made in his lifetime, only a few -- a very old one of his first wife and his mother working together in the kitchen, for example, or the sunrises he began shooting at the end of his life -- betray the emotions of the cameraman. The rest were technically masterful, frankly seen, seemingly without bias or ego. This, perhaps, is why his career was so long-lived and so wide-ranging. People trusted him; what he found in his subjects was less lofty than an artist's idea of truth. It was more direct and more durable. And though Ankers would have never been so presumptuous as to say so, this way of looking began with himself, where he was unafraid -- even eager -- to see things as they were.