THE CARPENTER PORTFOLIO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

JOE LIPKA

Photographing the not-so Grand Landscape
The Long and the Short of It

by

Joe Lipka

Was it a vacation? Backpacking a 5 x 7 camera, tripod, film holders, and the necessary paraphernalia does not qualifies as a “vacation.” I was happy to get back home to rest.

“So, how long did you spend photographing on your vacation?”

I had just returned from traveling 4,000 air miles and 1,400 driving miles during a seven-and-a-half day photographic adventure through Wyoming.

“Well, I think it was about a minute and a half, and that was only because I had two 30-second exposures.”

The response, while humorous, was accurate. After a week of photography, that doesn’t seem like a lot. But when your life is divided into thirtieths and sixtieths of a second, that is an awful lot of photography – especially with a view camera. Within that little bit of humor, however, was a pretty interesting thought. That thought, grounded in the humor of exaggeration, relates the long and short of landscape, the grand and the not-so-grand of landscape.

In photographing the grand landscape, the scale is tremendous. Photographs can include many, many miles from horizon to horizon. To change a viewpoint significantly, you have to pack up the camera and move a few miles. After you travel miles to change the viewpoint, and then finally position the camera, the success of the photograph is so often decided in the last fraction of an inch on

the ground glass. Just where did you place the horizon? How far will that rock extend into the photograph? How everything fits into the photograph is measured in fractions of inches. In those little details lie the success of the photograph.

Then there is the other end of the scale. In Wyoming, there are roadside signs that identify the ages of the rock formations in hundreds of millions of years. Stop at a formation and you might have to wait for an hour or two until the sunlight feels right for the image you want to make. If the vagaries of the weather, passing traffic and changing light favorably coincide, you may capture that one thirtieth of a second with the perfect latent image on the film. Funny, the results of hundreds of millions of years of weathering and the current ephemeral conditions are recorded on film in fractions of a second. Sometimes the rocks have waited patiently for two hundred million years, and you arrive two minutes too late to record the right thirtieth of a second. How many times have you come onto a “perfect” photograph and just had to sit there and watch the landscape because there was not enough time to set up the camera for a photograph? Even Ansel Adams was treated that way. One late afternoon, Adams made a “grab shot” of a graveyard and church outside of Hernandez, New Mexico. If it wasn’t for his travelling companion’s help with the tripod, film and lenses (plus Adams’ “guess” at the correct exposure), he might be best known for some image other than Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico.

During my formative photographic years – the 1960’s and 1970’s – fine art photography and photographs of the American West were synonymous terms. When I moved to the West Coast, I could do more than dream of photographing in the West – I finally had access to make the photographs I had seen and loved. Or should I say “remake.” I made photographic clones of famous West Coast school photographs. Compulsories, I called them, similar to the skill tests performed by figure skaters. All large format photographers have them: Yosemite, sand dunes, Point Lobos, the Zone VII Church and the ever-popular Vegetable Still Life.

When I returned east, I naturally tried to do West Coast photography in my new home of North Carolina. Try as I might, the results were universally disappointing. My conclusion was that the things that made West Coast Photography and the grand landscape possible were not available in my corner of North Carolina. This situation forced me to consider the overall dynamics of landscape photography. Why do landscape photographs look like they do? Can landscape photographs exist without what I have considered the essential elements of the landscape? Is there an approach to photographing the land that could be transported from one part of the country to another?

One of the characteristics of the grand landscape of the American West is that the land, along with the weather and the light, is an actor in a climatic (and climactic) drama. Clearing winter storms, snowfall, sun (and especially) moonrises, rain and fog are all contributors to this grand performance on the stage of the grand landscape. Of course, the play is now well-known and the outcome perfectly predictable. We have photographs of the famous landmarks of the West in just about every circumstance, format and weather condition possible. (You can just hear the gallery owner telling you that he is overstocked with hand-colored, Bromoil, infrared photographs of Half Dome in an early spring snowstorm.) The quest, then, becomes for even more

exotic, inaccessible subjects for landscape photographs. But now even that route is heavily traveled. I recently discovered an Internet site devoted to the large format landscape photographs of Macchu Picchu. If there are enough images of ancient, inaccessible Peruvian ruins to stock a web site, what is the possibility of a truly fresh image of Point Lobos, Half Dome or Zabriskie Point?

So where does one go, or more importantly, where do I go to pursue landscape photography? While waiting for that answer to be revealed to me, I began to photograph what was available to me – the land around my home. The more I photographed around my home, the more I glimpsed the answer to my question. I learned I don't have to go far from home to photograph the landscape – I simply needed to learn how to see. I had become so accustomed to considering landscape in terms of the West that I was blind to the landscape in my region. It is up to the photographer (that's you and me) to make the proper artistic interpretation of the landscape. And, so I learned another obvious conclusion hidden in plain sight. To photograph the landscape more often, we must change Horace Greeley's exhortation from "Go West, young man" to "Go Home, young man."

The majesty of the western landscape is, of course, the land and the beauty of nature. These are the primary subjects of most western landscape photographs. In the earliest photographs, a lone figure or the photographer's wagon served to educate the viewer as to the immensity of the American West. In these grand landscapes, the hand of man is almost or completely invisible.

Unless you are one of the few photographers who live near one of the locales of western landscape photography, your local landscape is different. The prime difference is most likely that the scale of the subject matter is dramatically different – that is, the relative distance, near to far, left to right. Your local near is probably nearer, and far, locally speaking is probably not all that far. The same goes for the left to right distance between your hometown and left to right in a place like Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

There are other differences, however, that can be more important in "home grown" landscape photography. You and I are expert in our local geographies. Not every square inch of our hometowns has been photographed. Not everyone knows what your hometown looks like. But it's just my home, you might say. Look, if George Tice can find enough subject matter to make books (yes, books – that's plural, as in more than one) of the landscape of northeastern New Jersey, then you have no excuses. In a nutshell, you don't need wide-open spaces to make landscape photographs.

Consider what happens to the dynamics of the landscape photograph as the scale changes. Man's influence on the western landscape is minimal, but when we reduce the scale of the landscape, man's influence in the landscape increases dramatically. The effect of one man on a large landscape is minimal. The essence of the small landscape is the details. It is in this detail that the hand of man can be most apparent. Because the emphasis is on detail, the composition can take on an added level of complexity that a large photograph cannot sustain. Man can exert incredible influence on small parts of the landscape in a rather dramatic fashion. Not only can changes be effected to a small part of the landscape dramatically, they can be

effected quickly.

I live in an area of rapid growth. In 1960, my town had a population of 6,000 residents. Forty years later our town has a population exceeding 100,000. Most of that growth has occurred in the last twenty years. Such a rapid change in population has caused dramatic shifts in land use and the landscape. Our house has gone from being “on the edge of town,” to being “centrally located.” This growth has given rise to some very interesting juxtaposition. This spring I will have the choice of buying strawberries at a grocery store, or going directly across the street and picking berries from the bush. One morning I watched a John Deere tractor, a BMW, a pickup truck (4 wheel drive, shotgun rack with overall wearin’ good ol’ boys) and a group of bicycle riders (Italian racing bikes, Oakleys, spandex and helmets) all pass through the same intersection within the space of a half hour.

This is the world I have been photographing for almost a year. Small, rapidly changing landscapes. The center of my attention has been Carpenter, North Carolina. Carpenter is located at the intersection of the Carpenter-Upchurch Road, and the Morrisville-Carpenter Road. More accurately, Carpenter is a state of mind rather than an actual town. It mainly consists of the Carpenter Feed Store, continuously operated by the Carpenter family since 1885.

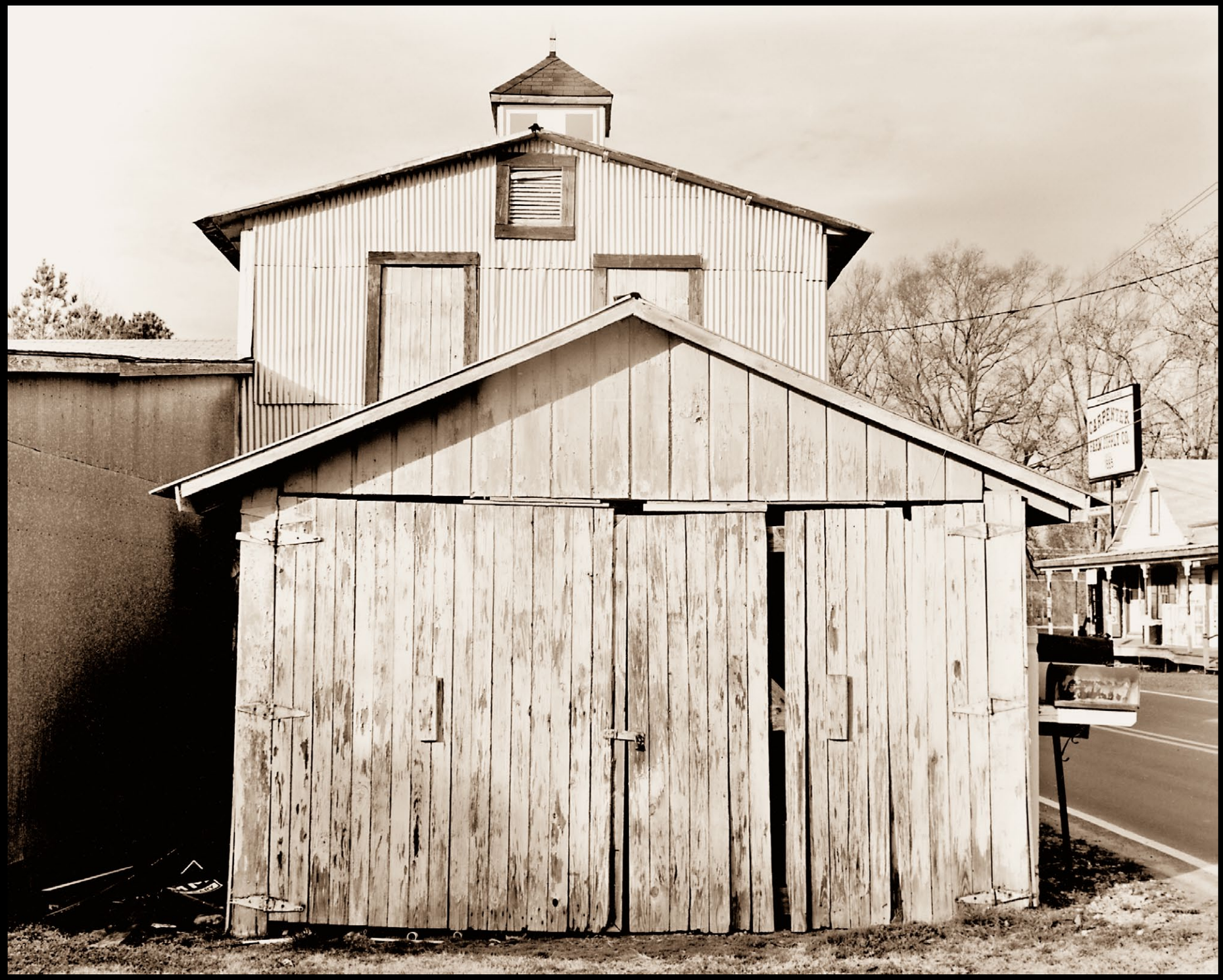
With my West Coast mentality, I’d gone out photographing to capture light, texture, form, shadow, foreground and background, and some really great old buildings in a rapidly changing environment. I made those photographs. But they just weren’t interesting like my photographs from the west coast. I was puzzled. After looking at lots of proofs, variations and series, I noticed one thing: People. To be specific, the lack of people. There were no people in the pictures. I was thinking more about how important man is in the small landscape, and yet I’d not included any people in these images. Not including the folks that work, shop, visit and make this place was the major flaw in my “landscape” photographs.

But, didn’t I start out with a discussion on landscape photography? I started out questioning the dynamics of landscape photography – the long and short of it. I like to think of myself as a landscape photographer, but once I started to focus on the smaller landscape (and its inhabitants) the look and feel of the images quickly moved from grand landscape to something closer to documentary photography. So are the photographs “landscape” or “documentary”? Where does one end and the other begin? At what distance does a landscape become a grand landscape? As I move to a smaller vista, at what point does the tiny figure in the foreground become the subject of the image? I hesitate to try to answer just yet.

The one thing I do know is that the more I work in the small landscape, the more I see that landscape and manscape are not nearly as different as I thought.

Joe Lipka

February, 2004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Final Words

These Photographs were exhibited at Louisburg College, in Louisburg, North Carolina in September 2004. A selection of these photographs was published in Issue 47 of Black & White Photography, June 2005.

The article “Photographing the Not So Grand Landscape” was printed in LensWork Magazine, issue 51. It is reprinted with permission from LensWork.

For those interested in the Technical provenance of this project, in camera negatives were made using a Wista Field 45 camera and Kodak TMAX 400 4 x 5 film. The negatives were developed in D-23 (two bath version). 8 x 10 prints were made on Ilford Multigrade IV Deluxe RC enlarging paper. These prints were scanned and perfected in Photoshop. With one exception, the only adjustments made were to burn, dodge, spot and adjust tonality. The exception is a bit of digital chicanery with the image, Merchandise. In the upper right hand corner there is remarkable consistency among the boxes stacked on the top shelf.

Revere Graphics in Portland, Oregon produced the 8 x 10 negatives from the Photoshop files. The platinum/palladium prints were printed on hand coated Bergger COT 320 paper.

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