

GOING DOWN MEMORY LANE: A HISTORY OF THE NIH CAMERA CLUB
By Vickie Allin

This article began with a deceptively simple question: *When did the NIH Camera Club get started?* **Gosia Bodurka** asked **Margaret Sprott** that question and it inspired Margaret to ask me to write an article on the history of the club. When I agreed, I had no idea that attempting to answer that question would lead me on such a long and fascinating journey through the memories and materials of current and former NIHCC members, as well as the archives of the club, the NIH R&W Association and the NIH Record. And I still don't have an answer!!

My first move on this project was to visit Margaret. As we all know, she and her husband, Dick, have been mainstays of the club since the early 1980's and have both served as President. Margaret showed me copies of old newsletters going back to 1983. Boy, has this club had fun!! The descriptions of the field trips, and the pictures of the grinning participants, made me wish I had joined the club much sooner than I did!!

Margaret didn't know when the club got started but we both agreed the person to ask was **John Boretos**. I had a wonderful conversation with John, including many great memories of the field trips he has organized for the club over the past 25-30 years. (See more on this subject below.) He joined the club in 1972 and said its basic structure, including monthly speakers and competitions, was already well-established at that time. One of his suggestions was that I contact **Dr. Tom Waldmann**, a stalwart member of the club for many years whose membership predated John's.

Basic Structure

Dr. Waldmann is still working at NIH and I was able to speak with him by telephone. He said he joined in 1965(!) and the club was operating pretty much the same as it is today. There were monthly speakers, who also served as judges for the monthly competitions. Topics varied but four themes recurred – nature, photojournalism, people and experimental. Competition categories were the same as now – Black & White, Color Slides and Color Prints – except that we now have the new Digital Slide Category. Dr. Waldmann mentioned that during one 20 year period, he was Color Slide Photographer of the Year for 19 of those 20 years!!

Soon competition categories diverged between Novice and Advanced, based on points. Once per year, the club competition was opened up to non-members in the **NIH-wide Open Competition**. This proved to be a great way to attract interest in the club and new members. At that time, the club membership was restricted to NIH employees and contractors. It was not until much later, after the 1987 merger between the NIH and NOAA R&W Associations, that the club decided to become open to members from outside NIH. **Dick Sprott** was President of the NIHCC at the time and he said that the club opened up in two stages. First, the club opened up to members from other government agencies. Second, after 2001, entering the NIH campus became very

difficult and the club started meeting off-campus. After that, it made no sense to keep the membership restricted at all. Most camera clubs are open to all and this decision was seen as a way of expanding the vitality and membership of the club.

Dr. Waldmann and several other members mentioned the NIH darkroom. It was in Building 1, just East of Building 31. **Lois Kochanski**, a long-time member and former President of the NIHCC, as well as Director of the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES), remembers using the darkroom to make her own Black & White prints. She says she loved it and “never wanted to come out.” **Dick Terrill**, the NIHCC’s long-time webmaster, said the darkroom was still there when he joined the club in the late 1980’s, but wasn’t there when he retired in 1999.

Dick designed the club’s first website in 1999 and has been updating it ever since on the R&W server. To access this website, go to: <http://recgov.org/r&w/camera.html> Recently, **Jeremy Swan** has been developing a companion website that gives more information on the club calendar, competitions, rules and activities. It also posts newsletters going back to 2001. However, it is not updated as regularly as Dick’s website. To visit this website, go to <http://nihcc.org>.

The old newsletters make for fascinating reading and we owe a lot to all of the newsletter editors over the years. We owe a special thank you to Margaret Sprott, who has done such an outstanding job of producing a document that is not only a timely source of information and communication among members, but is also a beautiful publication judged by the Photographic Society of America (PSA) in 2007(?) as the outstanding newsletter in the country. With Gosia Bodurka, our Vice President, as the co-editor, the NIHCC newsletter, *Cameraderie*, continues to set the standard, not just for our region but nationally.

I also checked with **Pete Guion**, our Secretary, in my quest to determine when the club was founded. I was hoping to find a dated copy of the original By-laws. However, Pete said the archival materials only go back to the early 1980’s, so no luck there. Since the club is sponsored by the NIH/NOAA R&W Association, that was my next stop. I emailed **Randy Schools** and he sent me a copy of the R&W Timeline. This shows when many of the R&W sponsored clubs got started, but unfortunately does not mention the NIHCC. However, Randy has been with the R&W Association for many years, so I asked him for a “best guess” about when the NIHCC was founded and he agreed with Dr. Waldmann – late 50’s. My last hope was the NIH Record. I visited the Record website and was amazed to find an online archive of the Record going back to the 1940’s. I sampled copies of the Record from 1957 to 1964, but could find no mention of the NIHCC. So...the late 1950’s is as close to an answer as I could find.

Field Trips

When talking to the club members and going through old newsletters, one of the things that stands out is the club field trips. John Boretos planned field trips for the club for 30+ years. He says 3-day weekends were ideal and up to 20 people would go. He well

remembers all of the trips to the Blue Ridge Mountains and West Virginia for the Fall colors. A favorite trip was to *Dot Hartley's* Farm in Gettysburg, PA. The club went for the weekend, for three years in a row. They stayed at the farmhouse; John says everyone slept on the floor. They would get up at 5 AM and take sunrise pictures of the nearby Gettysburg battlefield. He says one early morning they were all standing on a hill when the sun came up and Dick Sprott said to him, "John, you really planned this trip well! The only thing missing is three geese flying through the scene." At that moment, three geese flew through!! Click, click, click filled the air!!

Another favorite was the Marriott Ranch in the Shenandoah Valley between New Market and Luray. John used to spend a lot of weekends scouting places, and he happened to stumble on it. The Ranch would put on special exhibitions of cowboy riding and roping for our club photographers. *Sharon Antonelli* remembers, "I signed up and for the first time in my life, I took photographs just for the sake of taking photographs." After the workshop, she showed John some of the pictures she took during their stopover at the Marriott Ranch. He selected a few and helped her to mat them. "One of them won a 3rd place ribbon and I guess I got hooked," she said.

Another thing they did was to go to the National Zoo's quarantine facility at Front Royal, VA. It is closed to the public but John went to the NIH Director, who was a friend of the Director of the quarantine facility. Through him, John got permission for the field trips. They took pictures of all kinds of exotic animals there, including an elusive Russian lynx.

They also went to Skyline Drive for the launching of the hot air balloons and to nature photography weekend workshops locally at the Smith Nature Center in Rockville. John would have an ornithologist come out to the Center, as well as National Geographic photographers, who would also spend the weekend with them and lecture.

For many years, John did at least two long trips and two weekend trips per year. He got started on the longer trips with *Yellowstone in Winter* in 1984. The trip was limited to the number of people who could ride in two snow coaches – 12/14 people. They went to Mammoth and Old Faithful, with all the marvelous snow-covered geysers and bison. Then the trip continued on to Jackson Hole and Granite Canyon. At the end of an exciting snow-mobile run through the canyon was a hot spring that had been made into a swimming pool. All of the participants would tramp through the deep snow and go swimming and then have a steak cookout with Irish Cream heart warmers.

John chartered buses to take the photographers to various places. He wanted bus drivers who were tolerant of photographers, who would want to make frequent and abrupt stops when they saw something they wanted to photograph. For a trip to Norway, he found a bus driver who was also a photographer. The only problem was he lived in Sweden. So John paid to have him flown to Oslo so he could drive for them. He said everybody loved him! On that trip, *Donna Martin's* Norwegian relatives hosted them to a big garden party with ancient Norwegian dishes, such as rubbard wine and cakes made of pretzel dough. They had the party at an old farm that was up a very narrow road, so narrow and steep that the bus could not make it up. So their hosts ferried them up in cars.

From the farm there was a spectacular view down the valley and fjords. Donna became part of John's team of planning and executing the field trips, as did *Jim Rogers*.

John also organized trips to many other places, including many National and State Parks, as well as international trips to Canada, Nova Scotia, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Mexico, Thailand and Turkey. The trip to Turkey was going on at the time of the September 11, 2001 attack. The participants on that trip remember how appreciative and touched they were by the kindness and sympathy of the Turkish people.

I was lucky enough to go on John's Eastern Washington and Arizona Canyon Walls trips, and I was so impressed by how well-planned they were and by the camaraderie and helpfulness of all of the participants. After each trip, John collected favorite photographs from all of the participants and created a photo book to help us all remember the fun times and beautiful places. He also could usually be persuaded to do a slide show for the entire club, complete with music.

However, John is not the only NIHCC member to organize field trips. The club is very lucky to have had Margaret and Dick Sprott, *Harvey Kupferberg* and now *Suzanne Dater*, among others, organize field trips both near and far. Dick and Margaret took the club to Bar Harbor, Maine for a 10-day field trip, and Dick invited club members to participate on the local field trips that he organized for his photography classes through the FAES (see below). Harvey has organized local field trips for the club for several years, including trips to the National Building Museum, the Franciscan Monastery, the National Cathedral, Kennilworth Aquatic Gardens, Antietam Battlefield, and Calvert Cliffs. Harvey says, "the members are very nice people and I enjoy being with them and teaching them about how to use their cameras." In December of 2008, Suzanne Dater organized a wonderful field trip to the Library of Congress to photograph the Great Hall and visit the Division of Prints and Photography. Suzanne obtained permission to bring tripods into the magnificent Great Hall. The Principal Cataloguer of the Prints and Photography Division, Woody Woodis, whom Suzanne had met on a photography workshop, gave the group a personal tour of the archives. He organized a special viewing of about one hundred photographs from the Library's collection, including examples from the Life Magazine collection which the Library rescued from destruction. In May of 2009, Suzanne led a field trip to the Hillwood estate and gardens. So...as Harvey says, "the club always has something special going on. It is just as much fun now as it was when I joined (in 1987)."

Interclub Competitions

One topic that was mentioned by several of the people I interviewed was the *Greater Washington Council of Camera Clubs (GWCCC)*, which no longer exists. Sharon Antonelli remembers, "It was a wonderful organization that was composed of about 8 or 10 camera clubs in the Metro Area. Twice yearly there would be a big competition. Clubs would enter their members' work in slides and prints in several categories and in novice and advanced levels. Once a year, [the GWCCC] would put on an all-day seminar. It was a wonderful organization and great competitions. But only a few

‘worker bees’ were willing to do all of the work that went into the competitions and the seminar day, and the Board decided to cancel all activities.”

The NIHCC currently participates in a multi-club competition with Silver Spring Camera Club and Bowie-Crofton Camera Club. In fact, the NIHCC won the interclub competition last year (by one point!). However, there are several other camera clubs in the area and Sharon thinks it would be wonderful to revive the GWCCC. Lois Kochanski also lamented the loss of the GWCCC. Lois was a member and at one time President of BOTH the NIHCC and the North Bethesda Camera Club. She said the GWCCC “fostered communication between the camera clubs.”

Photography Classes

When I joined the NIHCC in 2003, one of the things that impressed me was the many opportunities the club provides for learning. Not only were the monthly speakers very informative and inspiring, but frequently there would be special sessions on topic of interest. For instance, John Boretos gave a series of mini-classes in various digital photography techniques and put his lectures up on his website so that people could access them. I found through researching this article that the club has a long history of these special classes. For instance, I spoke with *Chip Clark*, who belonged to the club from about 1976-1981. Chip put together several mini-classes on Black & White Photography topics. He sent me his notes from one of the classes, on “Theory and Manufacture of Black & White Photographic Emulsions.” Knowledge of the sensitivity and photographic characteristics of the various emulsions gave Black & White film photographers a better idea of how to expose their pictures to achieve the effects they wanted.

Lois Kochanski, the Director of the *Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES)*, wanted to bring photography back into the FAES curriculum. She saw some of John Boretos’ work at the GWCCC competition and was inspired to ask him to teach a photography class through the FAES. She says, “I caught him at a weak moment and he said yes.”

Lois said the FAES already had a photography class when she arrived in 1970. However, John took over the class for several years in the 1980’s and it became “Improving Your Color Photography.” This course emphasized basic principles of exposure and composition that can be used with any camera to improve the impact of the pictures you take. Later a follow-on class was added, “Advanced Color Photography,” which provided in-depth instruction on portraiture, close-ups, and scenic images, and helped each student to develop his/her primary photographic interests.

In addition to these basic classes, John also taught several specialized classes such as Experimental Photography, Nature Photography, Close-up & Abstract Photography, and Black & White Photography. He says Lois was an excellent Administrator to work with and very supportive. For instance, for his class on experimental photography, she got a laboratory assigned to him so that the class could do a lot of things with slide film to

make experimental pictures. One technique was diazochrome, in which you use regular slide film and diazochrome film to make slide “sandwiches.” You take a slide negative and a diazochrome negative and layer them between two pieces of glass, expose them to bright light for a few seconds, then suspend the diazochrome film in a mayonnaise jar filled with ammonia fumes. When you register the diazochrome film with the original slide, you get a base relief that enhances parts of the slide, can make a bald sky blue, and other neat effects. He said everyone came away from that class with at least a dozen techniques that they could use to create special effects with their slides.

All of his students also came away from his classes with knowledge of what makes a good picture. He still laughs about one of his students, who, after taking several of John’s classes, said: “John’s classes are a valuable asset to the camera club and the NIH. Before, I took beautiful pictures and didn’t know why. Now, I take terrible pictures, but at least I know why!”

After several years, John turned the classes over to Dick Sprott. Dick had taken John’s classes and then had gone to Montgomery College to get a Photography degree. When John retired, he wanted to get out of the long courses so that he would have the freedom to travel, so Dick took them over and John taught mini-classes. Dick taught the FAES classes for 16 years, until 2005, when the press of work left him no time to spare. Many current members of the NIHCC took these classes and learned how to use their cameras to capture the visions in their mind’s eye. Dick says he really enjoyed teaching the classes because he enjoyed seeing his students come into the camera club and do well in our competitions. He also says, “just about every year I would get the chance to change someone’s life. There would be someone who would sign up for my class with a vague curiosity about photography, and that person would emerge with a new passion, with a way to stay engaged with people who had similar interests, and with a new method of self-expression.”

Sadly, the FAES classes have been discontinued. Although there are many other sources of photographic instruction, nothing has the comprehensive coverage that these classes provided. Dick points out that whoever teaches the classes next needs to have expertise in digital photography. I know of several people who would like to sign up. Do we have any interested potential teachers?

Conclusion

Like any organization, the vitality of the NIHCC comes down to its members. All of the people I interviewed for this project cited their pleasure in being with and learning from other members of the club. *Jim Rogers* talked about the “relaxed atmosphere” of the club. He said, “they squeeze a lot into one monthly meeting, but that is the way it has always been and it works. There is a lot of turnover because NIH is a transient society – but the club is always being replenished with new members. It is just a good group of people.”

List of Contacts

Sharon Antonelli
Virginia Blow
John Boretos
Chip Clark
Pete Guion
Lois Kochanski
Harvey Kupferberg
Jim Rogers
Randy Schools
Dick and Margaret Sprott
Dick Terrill
Dr. Tom Waldman