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Lens on History

Photographer Del Ankers prepares for a special presentation at the Great Falls Library.

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Walking through Del Ankers' storage space at his home in Great Falls is like walking through history. Stacked on shelves and stuffed in every nook and cranny, are a plethora of furniture items, housewares and old photography equipment — all from a multitude of eras.

"I am the world's biggest packrat," confessed Ankers, who is 89. "I grew up in the Depression, so I don't like to throw anything away."

Ankers has been taking pictures as a professional photographer since the 1930's. His work has appeared in the "Washington Post," "the "Evening Star," and the "Times-Herald." He did not exactly plan on becoming a photographer. The course of events of his life just seemed to lead him down that path. When Ankers graduated from high school in 1933, he wanted to hitchhike from his hometown of Bedford to Texas.

"My mother wouldn't let me," said Ankers. "She said I could hitchhike to D.C."

Ankers did just that, and once there, he got a job working at Lowes Theater, near the National Press Club. It was at Lowes Theater that Ankers got his first taste of taking pictures.

"There was a Japanese photographer there, and he would take pictures of all the activities on the stage," said Ankers.

Ankers tried to use his own camera to do the same, but had no luck. His film was not fast enough, so his pictures came up blank. However, the Japanese photographer showed him how to get around this by unrolling his film in a tray in a dark room over a jug of mercury. Health concerns aside, Ankers still has that jug of mercury in his storage space, albeit with a cap on it.

"Finally I got to a point where I could take a decent picture," said Ankers. "Not as good as him, but decent."

From there, Ankers went on to work for a local radio station. He ran errands for the staff and put away the records that were pulled every morning by the disc jockeys. One particular day, Ankers was asked to take some photographs of a chain of stores.

"To this day I still don't know how I did it, but there were 300 stores, I charged 50 cents a picture, and even with gas and other costs, I managed to make a little profit," said Ankers. "But in the next day or two it was all gone because I bought all the equipment I couldn't afford until then, and I was literally in business."

From that point on, Ankers worked as a photographer. He was hired to take photographs of anything and everything — aerial shots of the city, group pictures of various organizations and clubs, and portraits of children to name a few.

"99 percent of my business came by recommendation," said Ankers.

On one particular job, Ankers' attention was caught by "a good looking woman in the office." He asked her out but was turned down.

"I found out later that she thought I was good looking enough, but she wasn't too sure about my sanity since she had watched me climb all over everything while I was trying to take pictures," said Ankers with a laugh.

However, he persisted in his request for a date and finally won her over. That woman soon became his wife, Elizabeth Ankers. They lived off of Kirby Rd. in McLean and were married for 54 years.

"She became very proficient at printing, and she was very business-like and she ran the office just fine," said Ankers.

ANKERS EVENTUALLY MOVED INTO "MOVING PICTURES" instead of photography. Taking on a competitor as a business partner, Ankers started Rodel Productions.

"We were very successful for at least 10 years," said Ankers. "I was busy all day, everyday."

Later, Ankers went on to work on various documentary productions. In his career, Ankers has taken photographs of past presidents, various political figures, celebrities, buildings and local dedications and events. Recently, the Newseum in Washington D.C. used several of Ankers' photos for its displays.

In 1994, Elizabeth Ankers died of a rare disease called vasculitis which causes inflammation of the blood cells. Ankers remarried in 1997. His current wife, Elizabeth Freire, was renting Ankers' property in Great Falls.

"He just has so many amazing stories," said Freire, who is a local sculptor.

Once married, Ankers moved in with Freire in Great Falls. They live in their home off of Springvale Rd. to this day. On Saturday, March 18, Ankers will give a presentation at the Great Falls Library. He will show historic pictures and artifacts.

Andrew Pendergrass, former branch manager of the Great Falls Library helped to arrange the presentation. Ankers gave a presentation at Dolley Madison Library last fall, and he came highly recommended to Pendergrass.

"I was told that he gave a very entertaining, informative and educational program and I was thrilled to hear about it," said Pendergrass.

Pendergrass recently left his position at the Great Falls Library to become branch manager at Patrick Henry Library in Vienna. However, he plans to return to attend Ankers' presentation this month.

"I've had great interactions with Del and I'm looking forward to the program," said Pendergrass.

Dolley Madison Library branch manager Carolyn Heyer says that Ankers' program was very well received last fall.

"For adult programs, it's very challenging sometimes because people are very busy, and it's difficult to get a large crowd," said Heyer. "There were at least 35-45 people at his, and we are usually happy if we get 10."

After running through his collection of photos and vintage camera equipment, Ankers fielded questions from the audience.

"He is a delightful gentleman and the program he did was just wonderful," said Heyer.

<ro>Photo Presentation

<lst>Del Ankers' photographic presentation is scheduled for Saturday, March 18, at 2 p.m. at the Great Falls Library. Register at the library, or call 703-757-8560 and then press 4.

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