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Snapshots of a Photographer's Life

Del Ankers photographed presidents, filmed Porsches.

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"As a photographer, I've a most interesting career."

Sitting at his kitchen table, surrounded with file folders and envelopes filled with photographs, stacks piling up as he tells his stories, Del Ankers of Great Falls might be underestimating the work he's done, photographing presidents, politicians, the occasional funeral and wedding and, of course, The Muppets.

When he was 17, Ankers took a job working as an usher at the Lowes Fox Theater in Washington, D.C., where movies were often combined with live entertainment and were part of a double-feature outing.

"These were the days of Red Skelton and Frankie Lane," he said. "When the movie changed, so did the stage show."

The shows regularly featured tap dancers, flame-throwers, acrobats, couples who balanced themselves on tall thin metal poles. A man hired by the movie

theater would photograph the stage show using the light available in the theater, without a flash.

“He showed me how to take pictures with existing light and I went out and bought a camera body and an F2 lens and set up a dark room in my aunt’s house, where I was living,” Ankers said.

He started taking photos of the stage shows for a local radio station, WRC, of boxer Primo Cranero.

“One day a salesman came into the radio station and said Sanitary Grocery stores wanted pictures of the inside of their stores in Washington. I told them I’d do it for 50 cents per shot,” Ankers said.

After three hundred stores, and six pictures per store, Ankers found himself \$900 richer.

“I paid for my film, gasoline and processing the pictures out of it,” he said. “Two days later the money was gone. I went out and bought new equipment. I was a photographer.”

When recounting the tales from his past, Ankers closes his eyes, sometimes for several minutes, as though searching the photographic darkroom of his memory to perfectly retell the story as he remembers it.

One of his first jobs was with the Mount Vernon, a ship from the Wilson line that gave rides up and down the waterfront in Washington.

“There were two women that worked in the office and eventually, after a few trips, I got up the nerve to ask one of the women out. She reluctantly agreed,” Ankers said.

The woman, Jane Van Doren, was a pretty blond woman with a bright smile and cheerful personality, he said. After working together and going on a few dates, Ankers came up with a proposal -- sort of.

“I told her if she’d come to work for me and answer the phones and help out, let’s get married, and she did,” he said with a laugh, smiling and remembering the wild days of his youth.

Thus began Del Ankers Photographers, with a studio at 1122 Vermont Ave. in Washington, D.C.

THIS WAS during the early days of World War II, and four times Ankers went to the recruiter's office to enlist. Four times he was turned away, which made him think of some classmates who were able to enlist.

"I went to school in Bedford County, with the Bedford Boys," he said. "They all belonged to the National Guard, and I wanted to join because every time you went to train with them, you got \$1 and didn't have to do menial tasks at home," he said. "Of course, they all got killed at D-Day. The town of Bedford lost more men by the size of their population than anywhere else during the war."

The reason Ankers was repeatedly turned away was, ironically, his vision.

"I was playing baseball in grade school one day and I hit a home run," he tells the story. "I don't know how it happened, but somehow I put out my eye."

He closes his eyes and remembers: Something punctured his right eye, draining all the fluid down his face. "I didn't even know anything had happened, except it felt like there was water on my face," he said. "I can see motion in the eye, but I can't see colors. Everything blends together."

Somehow, he was able to create a career out of capturing the images of presidents and politicians, photographing weddings and making movies, using his good eye.

During the war, Ankers photographed soldiers in their uniforms enjoying leave in Washington, and took their portraits.

He dabbled in motion pictures courtesy of the American Trucking Association, which would hire him to travel to various skills competitions and photograph the events. He and his partner, Fritz Roland, toyed around with a movie camera, making little safety movies and commercials that were sold to the hometown television stations of the winners.

That little experiment would prove to be profitable for Ankers, who struck a deal with the Civil Defense Agency to create the "Voice of America" films,

simulating drills and lifesaving techniques to be dubbed in French, German, Italian and Japanese.

“I was working with Peter Van Zahn, a German man working as a correspondent for a German newspaper, to make these films highlighting fellow Germans living in the U.S.,” he said. “Everywhere we went, he’d find someone from Germany and we’d shoot films about different aspects of life, like farming and fishing. These were very successful films.”

He would later shoot a series of films glamorizing what was labeled the “Porsche Lifestyle,” which paid off in a working vacation at the company’s factory in Germany and a Porsche as payment for the first series of racing movies.

It was during a break from shooting German films that Ankers had his first brush with the law.

“I was hired by the Board of Trade to shoot pictures of Franklin Roosevelt lighting the Capital Christmas Tree one year, and I took a picture of a chauffer picking FDR up from the car and putting him into his wheelchair,” he said. “A Secret Service man came over and pulled my film out of the camera. ‘You know better than that,’ the guy told me, and I put another roll of film in and kept shooting,” he said.

IN HIS SEVERAL decades in the photography and movie business, Ankers made many famous friends, including the late puppeteer, Jim Henson, the father of the Muppets.

“Jim and his wife Jane had a little show on WRC’s 11 p.m. news broadcast and one guy who worked for the station thought it would be a good idea to film a commercial with the Muppets holding a can of Wilkins’ Coffee,” he said. After a few commercials, the idea spread to include other regional coffees and products. Ankers worked with Henson until he moved the Muppets to New York City for Sesame Street.

He also developed a long-standing relationship with one half of the Joy Boys, WRC’s comedy program.

“I used to work with Willard Scott and Eddie Walker all the time. Willard just wrote to me in the last year to see if we could catch up soon,” he said. “We

keep missing each other but hopefully we'll get together sometime."

Other projects Ankers' photographs were used for include chronicling Felix de Weldon's creation of the Iwo Jima monument and photographs from which the official bust of President Harry S. Truman was made.

"A while later, I was hired by the Iowa Corn Growers Association to shoot their annual meeting, where Truman was guest speaker," he said. One of his fellow photographers, a young man with the Associated Press, had a little too much to drink for lunch, and the President asked Ankers to take a photograph to give to him. "He didn't want to see the kid lose his job. He was a good man," Ankers said, eyes closed in memory.

Not all of his stories are happy ones, however.

DURING THE RIOTS in Washington, Ankers and his wife lived above their studio at 316 F St. Northeast. "Our neighbor, a woman of the name of Bess Green, was friendly with my wife. When H Street was burning up, we were upstairs worrying about what would happen to us."

One of the only Caucasian couples in the neighborhood, Ankers and his wife waited in their apartment for over a day for a brick to be thrown into their apartment, but nothing happened.

"When we finally went downstairs, we saw that Bess had painted the words 'soul sister' on our front windows," he said. "We were left alone."

Wanting to leave the story on a lighter note, he told of a small grocery on the corner down the street.

"There was a big African American cop standing in front of the store, which had been looted, and this little boy ran up and said he hadn't gotten anything out of the store," Ankers said, chuckling. "The boy ran in, grabbed some candy and ran out between the cop's knees. The cop didn't say anything, he was laughing too hard."

"What I find remarkable is that Del came from nothing and taught himself to do this. He created something out of it that employed other people," said Elizabeth Freire, whom Ankers married several years after his wife died of a type of vascular disease associated with cancer.

“I don’t know if I could do nearly as well with a camera with both of my eyes. Del has taken these amazing pictures with, essentially, one eye,” she said.

He has received many photographic gifts from the people he’s met along the way, including the camera lens from a U2 bomber jet, an accordion-style camera, and a crank-turned movie camera that contained footage from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires.

“The film he shot, the commercials he made that you can still see on TV Land at night, it’s incredible, Freire said. “This man saw the beginning of Kermit the Frog. He found himself with presidents. This is the typical American man, the way America was, who decided to go out and get something for himself.”

Former partner Nelson Funk credits Ankers with helping him get started in the movie business.

“He had a commercial photography business when I came to him,” Funk said. “He got an offer to do some kind of short film but didn’t have anyone who could record the sound, and when I told him I could, we branched out into movies and commercials.”

Their 40-year partnership proved educational for Funk, who describes Ankers as a “self-made man” from whom he learned that “if you work hard, you will succeed.”

“There are definitely a lot of things, looking back, that he probably wouldn’t do again today, but he still gets out and drives around on his property in his tractors,” he said. “Del is as honest as the day is long. He worked very hard to get what he has and became friendly with a lot of people that may not have seemed like anything at the time but now, it’s incredible.”

Mike Holleran, former president of McLean Rotary, invited Ankers to talk at a weekly meeting a few months ago. Ankers brought photographs of McLean from decades past and told stories of what life used to be like in what is now a busy town.

“He told us stories about how he used to be able to just walk up to the White House and they’d recognize him and let him in,” Holleran said. “He talked a lot about old McLean, how there used to be cows and farms.”

Ankers has “such a positive outlook on things,” the Rotarians were enamored with him from the beginning, he said.

“He’s a phenomenal man. He lets nothing slow him down,” he said. “He’s the Will Rogers of McLean, a wonderful storyteller.”

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