

Brad Washburn, Remembered

Never underestimate the power of the hand-written note.

Several years ago, while working on my series of photographs of rime ice on the top of New Hampshire's Mount Washington, I needed some advice. As the "home of the world's worst weather," this place is famous for its weather extremes – particularly its wind in winter. I work with a wooden view camera, and although I had built a shroud to protect it from the wind, I was still having problems with vibrations. So, I figured that I should ask the person who has probably taken more photographs of ice than anyone else in the world: Brad Washburn.

Brad was known as a mountaineer, the founder of the world-class Museum of Science in Boston, and a cartographer. As a map maker, he began making aerial photographs of remote places, and his work quickly evolved into an art. Brad's photographs of mountain ranges and glaciers are truly breathtaking, and his photographs of glaciers from the 1940s have formed an impressive "baseline" in the study of global warming. So, I wrote him a short note, asking him to look at my work and give me some advice about working in the wind.

Several weeks later – much to my surprise – he called me. I explained what I wanted, and we agreed on a date to get together. He said: "pick a time, any time between 6 AM and midnight." Having met him, I don't think he was kidding. He was 93 at the time.

I showed up at his home in Lexington, MA at the appointed date and time, expecting to sit around his kitchen table and talk about my work. At my wife's suggestion, I brought flowers for his wife Barbara.

However, Brad had different plans. He had some errands to run, and I was going to be his chauffeur. When we were done with what he needed to do, he said we could go down to "the lab" – Panopticon Gallery in Waltham – to have a look at some of his work, and talk about mine. Thus began one of the more interesting 2 hours of my life.

As we drove, Brad never stopped talking. I heard about his mountaineering, his aerial photography, and his work in Alaska testing cold-weather gear during World War II. I was rather awestruck with the fact that I was driving one of the icons of the 20th century in my 10 year old car. I hadn't even gotten it washed.

I was also awestruck by Brad's photographs. When we got to Panopticon, there was an exhibit of his work: mural sized prints of glaciers from around the world. We sat at a table to look at my "small" 16x20 prints, which I think he truly enjoyed. In response to one of my photographs of ice on Mount Washington's

Sherman Adams building, he remarked: “Sherman Adams – he was a really nice guy.” (Sherman Adams was governor of New Hampshire in the early 1950s, and then served as Chief of Staff for President Eisenhower.) When he saw one of my photographs of aspen trees, he said: “Ansel had one just like it” – which of course was not exactly true. Ansel’s was much better, but at least I think Brad liked my work. In fact, he liked it enough to introduce me to Tony Decaneas, owner of Panopticon, who now carries my photographs.

Just before we left Panopticon, I remembered to ask Brad my original question: how to work with a large format camera in high wind. I expected a volume of information from this great man of science, founder of a major science museum, world-class large format photographer of desolate places, and rugged outdoorsman. Here’s what he said: “Use a fast shutter speed.”

Brad was 96 when he died.

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Photographs of my work from Mount Washington can be found here:
<http://www.paulwainwrightphotography.com/mwo.shtml>

Some of Brad’s photographs can be viewed here:
<http://www.panopt.com/images.php?a=1>