

Sweet Shots

Associated Press photographer Barry Sweet chronicles four decades of contemporary American scenes from the Pacific Northwest and beyond



Above, Richard Nixon campaigns in Oregon in 1968. At left, a woman smiles and applauds as soldiers return home to Seattle from the Vietnam War, 1969.
PHOTOS BY BARRY SWEET



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Our concept of contemporary history is forever married to the storytelling powers of photography. Consider the Apollo 11 splashdown.

On July 21, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person to walk on the moon, gliding out from lunar-landing module Apollo 11 onto the Sea of Tranquility. Three days later, Apollo 11, containing Armstrong, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. and Michal Collins, splashed down in the Pacific Ocean. One black-and-white photo from the event reveals a white plume of ocean water as the spacecraft, with three open parachutes above it, strikes the Pacific. A color shot shows three astronauts in gray spacesuits sitting in an orange life raft awaiting helicopter pick-up. In another, a Navy helicopter motors off.

Great photos, but they weren't easy to take, according to photographer Barry Sweet.

An Associated Press photographer at the time, Sweet was on a Navy aircraft carrier. Usually, Sweet would take photos and send the images back to AP over an FM signal. That's how he transmitted the wire photo. But being in the Pacific placed him below the equator in the Southern Hemisphere, which meant any signal sent from the ship would head off into space and never come back to Earth. What to do?

Sweet realized there was a TV on board. Navy personnel told him it worked via satellite. Then it struck him: bounce the image off a satellite to send back to Earth. So the earliest pictures of the Apollo 11 splashdown traveled from ship to satellite to San Francisco to the front page of newspapers. Sweet said it was the first time AP employed a satellite to send images.

Based in Seattle, Sweet worked for AP for more than 30 years. During that time he captured soldiers returning from the Vietnam War, Jimi Hendrix's funeral, the aftermath of the eruption of Mount St.

Helens, the construction of the Tacoma Dome and the destruction of the Kingdome. These pictures and others grace the pages of "Split Seconds: Four Decades of News Photography from the Pacific Northwest and Beyond" (Raleigh Press, \$19.95). The book is a time capsule of local and national contemporary history.

But books sometimes require book tours, so Sweet journeyed from his current home outside Las Vegas to the Northwest. While he says he's thrilled the book is out, it comes with a price: Because nearly every photo in the book was taken while he worked for AP, he doesn't own the rights. He had to purchase them to run them in a book he self-produced (Raleigh Press is named after his wife, Raleigh). Even so, when he talked about his work while seated recently in the Panama Hotel, where photos on the wall depict the era when local Japanese residents were interned, Sweet spoke with the tone of a proud father. And over the course of nearly an hour, we flipped through the book and discussed history, photography and just another day at the office.

Rosette Royale: *This book covers four decades. So let's start in the early ones.*

Barry Sweet: The early stuff, basically, is the anti-Vietnam war movement. I was living in Madison, Wis., and I was working for a paper called the Wisconsin State Journal. The University of Wisconsin was a hotbed for protesting, and they were really organizing demonstrations all over the country. I took pictures of the demonstrations in Madison, so that's where my thing started. If you look at the pictures, these were hippies. Their haircuts and the way they look: So normal, but back in those days they were the radicals.

This particular picture (of the smiling woman clapping) was taken here in Seattle, on Fourth Avenue. When the Vietnam War was slowing down, the first troops came

back to Fort Lewis, McChord (Air Force Base). They brought them into Seattle and gave them a welcome home parade. This is that particular parade, and this is a lady who was watching troops march down Fourth. There's a lot of talk about how Vietnam vets, people didn't think much of them when they came home. Not true in Seattle. The first vets who came back got a ceremony. I believe the rest of the vets in the other parts of the country, they were treated as: "Why were you doing this? Don't you have any brains?" But here in Seattle they gave them respect.

R.R.: *Why?*

B.S.: I really couldn't tell you. But there were people lined up two and three deep. It was amazing.

There's also another story: Everything (for AP publication) went through a picture editor. I looked at (the pictures the editor selected) and said, "I don't see the picture of this lady. Whatever happened to her?" The editor told me, "Well, I don't remember it." So I dug up the picture and showed it to him, he says, "Yeah, that's not bad. We'll put it on second cycle." Back in those days, most towns had two newspapers, a morning and an afternoon. Morning would be the first cycle, p.m. the second. So he was delaying it for 12 hours. Not more than 20 minutes after we sent that picture, the phone started ringing like crazy. It was New York, and they were really upset. They wanted to know why that picture was a second cycle instead of first, because they thought it was amazing. But that picture almost didn't even get published.

From Wisconsin I moved to Topeka, Kan. I worked for a paper called The Capital-Journal. I photographed Martin Luther King in 1965. A lot of people I photograph, you have no idea what they're going to become, what their future is. Martin Luther King was just a preacher who came to Kansas to talk about (Brown vs.) Board of Education.

These are all tornado pictures, victims of the tornadoes. One of the things I love to do is to take pictures of emotions. This particular picture, a woman took to the storm cellars when the storm was coming. She left her wedding ring on her dresser. She's trying to find her ring, and she can't. It's just the emotions: This is what I love, this is Barry.

R.R.: *What is it that gets to you?*

B.S.: I think people are more important than things. I look at you, and I see your face, and I see your emotions. That's the way I photograph people. It's not so much an event as who is the person at the event.

R.R.: *So let's head into the 1970s. Ahh. Here's a picture, this funeral of Jimi Hendrix.*

B.S.: It was just a normal day at the office. I knew who Jimi Hendrix was, and I knew they brought his body back. I contacted the family, his father. I asked about the funeral and if I could photograph, and they said, "Come on out. We'll make a space. We're not going to let you in the chapel, but you'll have other access." And it was, like I say, another day at the office, but there was a lot of emotion there. I did a lot with funerals here in town. I did Bruce Lee, who's buried up on Capitol Hill. I did his son Brandon, who's also buried up on Capitol Hill. I did (U.S. Senator Henry) "Scoop" Jackson, (U.S. Senator) Warren Magnuson. If there was a funeral, I was probably gonna go to it.

R.R.: *When you're at a funeral, do you become emotional?*

B.S.: I don't. My wife doesn't understand it. I don't know, but it doesn't seem to faze me. I do get emotional about people sick that I know or injuries, or somebody retiring, or a high school or college graduation. I don't think it's because I have no respect. Maybe I was too busy just taking pictures. I don't know if that makes sense. I've seen a lot of disasters, I've seen a lot of people in trouble, I've seen a lot of people die.

(Looking at another photo) It's the total eclipse. I shot that outside of Olympia on Interstate 5.

R.R.: *How do you shoot an eclipse? You can't look at it, can you?*

B.S.: I did research, and they told me that if I buy this silver thing like aluminum foil and put it over the lens of my camera, my eyes would be protected.

I didn't expect to see it because I was in Seattle, and I got up in the morning and you couldn't see anything: fog. So I figured I'll drive south on Interstate 5. I got down near Olympia and got a flat tire and had to pull over. A state patrolman came and said he'd send somebody to get a tow truck. And I'm sitting on the side of the road, and it's