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WEEKEND BREAK

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SAVING MEMORIES

BUILDING PHOTO ARCHIVES, SELLING THEM OFF AND WHY IT MATTERS

By MATT WINTERS
 EO Media Group

Since tromping around the Argentine Andes together many years ago, my adventures have become steadily more bland while Zbigniew Bzdak's are dazzling and profound. As a lead photographer for the *Chicago Tribune*, Zbigniew had a front-row spot for President Obama's farewell address this week. This is because his sharp eyes, expansive mind and decades of training make him capable of reliably documenting the most important events of our age.



If it were up to me and Zbigniew, all honorable lives would merit the same lavish attention usually conferred only on the powerful and beautiful. Back in the 1980s, one of his best photo essays documented the work of itinerant shepherders, capturing their dignity in ways that should reverberate down the corridors of time. Humble people, they nevertheless were recipients of the most consequential gift: Being remembered.

Zbigniew is exceptional. But viewing the job of recording life as a near-sacred responsibility is woven into the personalities of all serious press photographers. They are members of a sort of priesthood of light, though few of them would ever be so pretentious to say so.

This is true even here, where a pantheon of talented photographers at *The Daily Astorian* and *Chinook Observer* have labored in one of the newsiest and dramatic locales on the continent. The legacy of images they have created in the course of routine — and some would say underpaid — newspaper assignments will long outlive us all. Centuries from now, if our lives on this remote coastline are still considered in any way, it is likely to be because of the striking images recorded by these usually ignored men and women shooting photos. The work of crabbers, loggers, gillnetters, store owners and dozens of other occupations are far more meaningful than most now realize. In our individual boring ways, we all are vital players in the fast-passing panorama of early 21st century humanity.

One of my first acts as editor was to personally gather up thousands of feet of film negatives from our attic and deliver them to what is now the Columbia Pacific Heritage Museum. Though this work product is expensive to produce — I guess, for example, that the *Observer* spends something approaching \$50,000 a year photographing and reporting high school sports alone — in a sense this work is a testament belonging to the community. Hopefully, thanks to the museum and our photographers, distant generations will be able to see what life was like back in the ancient mid-20th century.

The switch to digital

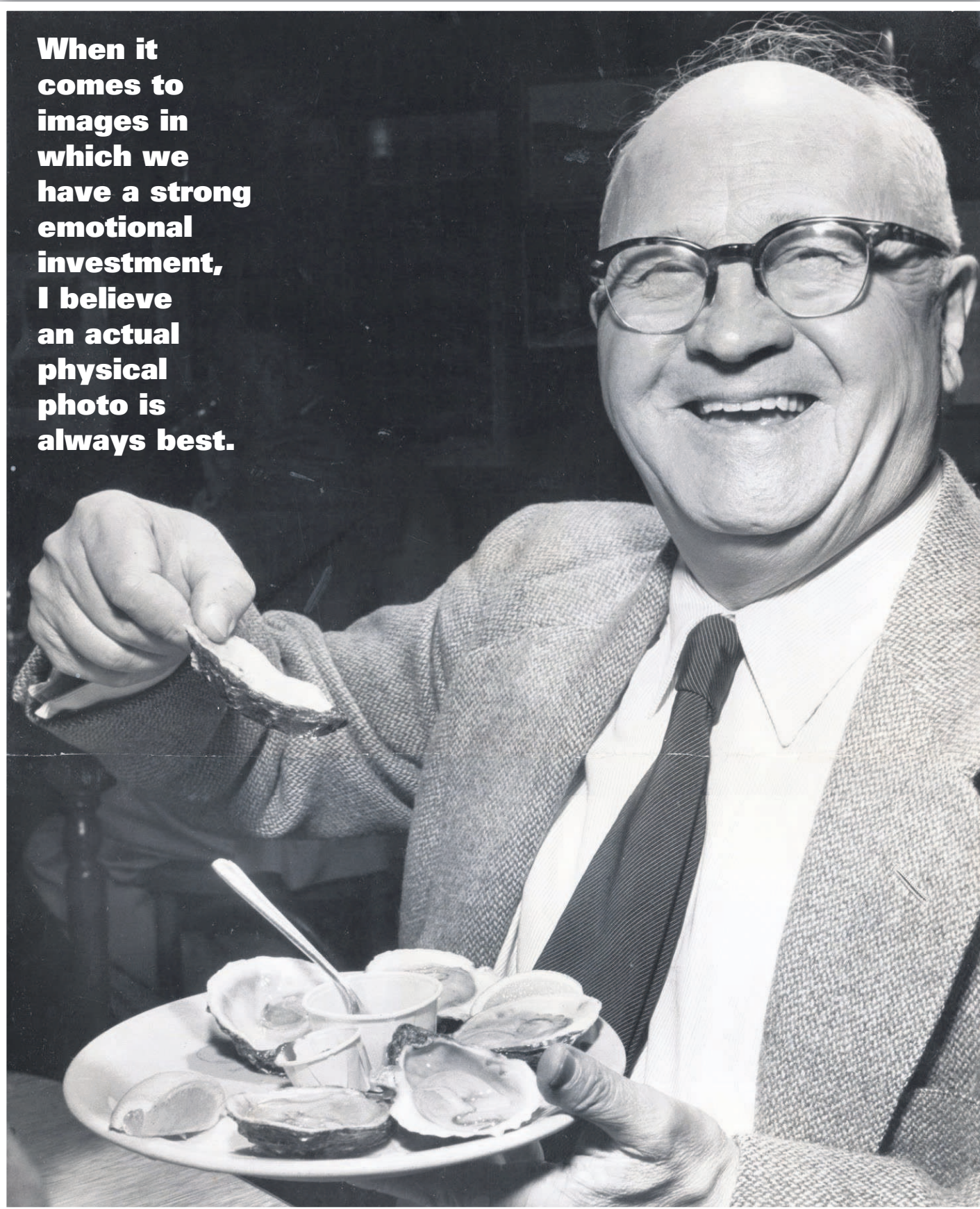
Digital photography and internet cloud archiving have tremendously impacted the concept of image ownership and sharing. About a dozen years ago, we quit using film and made the switch to digital photos stored on computer hard drives — and now in the cloud. I don't know how or if we will ever make those images accessible to the public. For every photo that appears in print and online versions of our publications, sometimes there are hundreds of others that don't make the cut but which will still be interesting to someone. As the cost of storage comes down, it's my hope we may someday be able to upload complete photo shoots and provide some way for people to view them.

Newspapers grapple with this issue in a variety of ways. A while back, the *Oregonian* and its sister paper the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* sold off their vast photo archives to Memphis-based HistoricImages.com, which sells the original photos on eBay. The *Oregonian's* parent company, Advance Publications, retained any underlying copyrights. Part of the deal is that HistoricImages scanned photos into a digital format that the selling newspapers can now try to market themselves.

"If a picture is worth a thousand words, a Memphis company sells the equivalent of an encyclopedia every day," the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* newspaper reported last year. "HistoricImages has crammed dozens of metal file cabinets in every available space of its East Memphis offices. They contain millions of hard copy photographs acquired from various sources, most notably the archives of eight newspapers." Another 1.2 million of their photos were bought from the Newspaper Enterprise Association, part of the E.W. Scripps publishing empire.

There are many fantastic photos of the Pacific Northwest available to buy from HistoricImages. Besides the once-great *Oregonian*, the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* has sold its archives. I've bought quite a few myself and find HistoricImages a pleasure to do business with.

When it comes to images in which we have a strong emotional investment, I believe an actual physical photo is always best.



Photos from the MATT WINTERS COLLECTION

Allan J. deLay, an Oregonian staff photographer, took this photo of Oregonian wildlife editor Jim McCool in 1954, toward the end of McCool's career as a Pacific Northwest journalist. It was part of an enormous photo archive sold by the newspaper a few years ago.

Writer's Notebook

Memories dispersed and shared

All the same, it's troubling to think about these newspapers dispersing their physical archives, even if the digital versions become thus more available to the computer literate. For some people, this all will be a moot and vaguely elitist point, resembling the revived niche market for vinyl audio records. But as with vinyl's ability to record subtle sounds, in some cases the actual original photograph is a richer and more nuanced medium than digital is capable of being.

I have thousands of both physical and digital images. Sometimes a digital photo can be repaired and enhanced in ways a print photo can't be. And the digital versions are a way of insuring memories: Hundreds of our family photos are safe from being utterly lost in a fire or flood. They are readily available for downloading and printing from where they're stored on the web.

However, when it comes to images in which we have a strong emotional investment, I believe an actual physical photo is always best.

We in the news business have misplaced some early digital photos as computer technology has changed. It's possible to imagine scenarios in which even today's more sophisticated storage mechanisms might fail or become degraded. That's not a reason to avoid digitizing archival photos, but when there is a hard-copy original, computers should back up it up, not replace it.

Honoring the past

In the *Oregonian's* case, it occupies a central position in recording life in a state where history is highly valued. Wouldn't it have been wonderful for its archives to have gone to the Oregon Historical Society, the State Archives, or the University of Oregon?



An Oregonian photographer was there to record an amused World War II shipyard worker looking on as a boss tried his hand at welding. As a routine aspect of journalism, newspapers are the primary recorder of such memories. How to best save and share these images is a subject of debate within the industry.

One of the photos I acquired from HistoricImages even goes directly to the *Oregonian's* own institutional history: A large-format print of its long-time wildlife editor, James McCool. Born in 1883 and an attendee of the U.S. Naval Academy, McCool worked for the *O* from 1921 to 1959, famously documenting the sad fate of Ethelbert the killer whale, which became stranded in the Columbia Slough near Jantzen Beach in October 1931. (McCool's career intersected with that of *The Daily Astorian's* delightful and esteemed Bud Forrester, who worked at the *Oregonian* as a sports writer in the early 1930s.)

I would no more sell off a photo of a devoted wife staffer than I would photos of my grandfather. But, on the other hand, the *Oregonian's* decision to sell means I'm able to remind readers here on the coast about the hard-working journalist Jim McCool, whose life still deserves to be celebrated. So perhaps there isn't any substantial down side to their



Sandy Rock, an opener at the Newport farm of Oregon Oyster Co., was photographed in 1975 by the *Oregonian*. The photographer wasn't identified. It is an example of the thousands of newspaper archive photos available from HistoricImages.com on its own website and eBay. There are many taken in Clatsop County and elsewhere on the coast.

archive liquidation. Only time will tell.

In closing, allow me to also mention the loss this month of Nancy Butterfield, who had a long career at the *Astorian* before joining me at the *Observer*. She retired about a decade ago. She, too, cared about accurately and fairly recording the lives of ordinary people here at the mouth of the Columbia. Though she could be an ornery curmudgeon when it came to interacting with editors, I never doubted that she had her readers' and neighbors' best interests at heart. May she find exciting scoops, cheap smokes and lots of laughs in the great hereafter.

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