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Developing Images with Camera and Pen

Mom bought a small trailer that was no longer in shape for traveling the highways of the nation, blocked it in place just back of her garden, light-proofed the windows and doors, set up her equipment, and developed film and printed photographs. She made part of her living selling landscapes she hand-colored with oils.

That summer, I lived just off the dirt road that led to Nimshew Cemetery, across Nimshew Ridge road from Mom. I lived in a small cabin hidden in tall, black-locust trees on the rocky, steep edge of the canyon Little Butte Creek had eroded over millennia on its way down the mountain to the Sacramento River. I built gardens, mowed lawns, replaced broken windows, repaired plumbing and roofs for people who lived on the mountain. Sometimes, I helped Mom with her darkroom work, so it was easy to develop my film and print pictures from the negatives.

Days when no one needed me for work, I walked the mountain. Some rambling days, I photographed the ridge and the canyon. I photographed natural scenes on the mountain, and I photographed history of the ridge as recorded by the etching on headstones in the old cemetery at the end of my dirt road.

I photographed another perspective on history at dumps near long-unused mines in the area. Artifacts of technological man blended with nature as decades passed, and that blending sometimes gave me startling images. Moss took over an ancient, cut stump. The growth rings showing clearly in the saw-exposed wood blended with ageless moss.

Some child, long-ago grown and gone into the world, left a toy machine on the dump at a mine, and someone set fire to the dump, years ago. Now it takes viewers of the photo a moment to realize they look at a small toy and not a large crane stripped of paint by blackening fire and rusted by time.

Some days, Mom and I sat on her porch and talked, watched water run by in the irrigation ditch, planned to work in the darkroom, and didn't get started. Usually though, we completed whatever project we had in mind and became so absorbed in the work, we didn't talk much. We projected

images onto photographic paper, watched images appear on the paper when we floated it in developer, then shepherded the photograph through the stop bath, into the fixative, into the water wash and then into the dryer.

Mom captured the long views of an abandoned house and orchard and the forest, mountain, and sky behind the house. I took closeups of the weathered grain in the ancient boards of the house, closeups of the texture of the bark on an apple tree. She developed sixteen-by-twenty inch photos and colored them. I kept my finished prints eight-by-ten inches or less and kept them black and white.

I accumulated eighty photographs that I liked. I mounted and framed the photos, then took them to a gallery in San Francisco, and the owner liked them and arranged a show. I didn't sell many of the photos. It didn't matter. I hadn't put the show together for money but to show the theme, humankind's history blending into nature.

After that summer, I left photography as an art form behind. I concentrated on writing. Writing is the most portable medium. I knew I could carry a pencil and notebook into whatever future I walked into. I didn't have to buy film, lenses, darkroom supplies and equipment. My eye and my mind became the lens. Pictures developed in my mind became the images that knit together my stories, essays, and poems. With writing as my medium, I could afford to build anything I could imagine.

Through many years, I carry memories of working on photography with my mother. In my memory, I carry the images I found that year on the ridge. Some of the images have come with me through all the changes in my life as black and white photographs in a box made to hold eight-by-ten photographic paper. A few of those photographs, I've scanned recently, so I could put resulting digital images on my website.

I write about that time, about the images we worked on together. Communication with my mother, photography, the capture of images, and writing, the evocation of images and their meanings, blend in my memory and become part of my existence.