



The Oregonian

“The Old Schoolhouse”

By John Foyston

September 6, 1993

You can almost hear the wind sigh and time silt up around Gary Canazzi’s old schools.

He reckons he’s found 30 of them in all, old one-room schoolhouses scattered here and there on dusty highways and back roads, standing isolated and undaunted against the severe backdrop of Eastern Oregon.

Window frames sag and sun blazes through empty doorways and missing shingles. But the schools remain, solid and solitary against vast skies rendered dark by polarizing filters in Canazzi’s stark black-and-white photographs.

An office manager with a Vancouver engineering firm, Canazzi, 39, has long enjoyed his hobby of photography. His passion is roaming the high deserts and rural communities of Eastern Oregon, an old 1960 Speed Graphic press camera in hand.

“I love driving that area with another photographer friend,” said Canazzi, “but we weren’t looking for anything specific; we were just shooting what interested us.”

“I started looking through my files and noticed that I had a bunch of one-room schoolhouses, and realized that something was going on here: I was fascinated by the history and the solidity of the old schools.”

Canazzi’s dense black-and-white photos convey that fascination. They range in size from the tiny cracker-box that was Ajax school near Condon, to relatively imposing structures such as Endersby School or Douglas Hollow School with its classic eaves and belfry. But they all call to mind the pioneers who settled this country and built schools that survived them by decades.

“The people are what really fascinated me,” said Canazzi. “I’m impressed with the craftsmanship they put into these buildings – look around at some of these schools; there isn’t a tree for 20 miles. All this wood had to be carted in from a long way away.”

The old schools proved to be a continuing education for Canazzi. He started digging up century-old maps to locate school sites and began reading everything he could about the early history of the settlers.

“It led me into some pretty interesting areas – I’d love to talk to some of the last students, but they must be getting pretty old.”

Although he hasn’t found an alumnus yet, he has come close: “I was taking a shot inside the Clarno schoolhouse and came upon a recent inscription scratched in the wall that said, ‘I was a student here in 1932.’ That really brought home the sense of history for me.”

Canazzi recently had an exhibition at Powell’s City of Books, and he is submitting his work to some fine-art galleries around the state. Photography remains an avocation and searching for new images and new bits of history is still his passion.

His biggest discovery came in a schoolhouse he won’t name. “Usually, there’s not much inside but pigeons,” he said, “sometimes a couple of desks. But in this school there was a whole bookcase full of schoolbooks from the 1930s – it took my breath away. I admired it, and left it just the way I found it.”

But not without taking a photograph, of course. “Forgotten Books” it’s called: stacks of dog-eared books, some open with their wind-stirred pages blurring before the lens of his old press camera.

Cameras are just tools to Canazzi, but that ponderous old Speed Graphic frames his style. “It makes you think about every shot,” he said. “It slows you down because every shot is made with a tripod. It makes you wait for the perfect moment of sun and cloud and light.”

An appreciation of such subtleties led Canazzi to black-and-white photography more than a decade ago.

“I saw some black-and-white prints and I was really impressed by how involved you become with the image. It isn’t like color that shows everything. It makes you think.”