

TeeJaw Blog

To Ride, Shoot Straight and Speak the Truth



Fred Picker's Zone VI Workshop

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Fred Picker (1927-2002) was a black and white photographer who pioneered the "Zone VI" variation of the Zone System of B&W photography first perfected by Ansel Adams. Whereas Ansel exposed for the shadows and developed the negative for the high values, Fred liked to "put the highest value on Zone VIII and take the picture." But with a corollary of "except Sometimes," he said. "When there is not enough contrast place the high value on Zone VI-1/2 and develop to Zone VIII." He felt that these practices would result in a more usable negative capable of producing the best results in the darkroom.

It's a shame he didn't live to see the possibilities of digital black and white photography. Digital photography was well under way before he died on April 3, 2002, so he might have had some thoughts on it. Whatever those thoughts may have been I don't know but given that he believed the best parts of photography were the methods employed by the photographer in the field at the moment the photograph was first visualized in the mind's eye, the equipment set up, and the negative exposed, I'm not sure he would have been enthusiastic about digital photography, at least in the black and white format.

He liked to use a 4×5 view camera not only because of its large negative but also because of the time for concentration and reflection allowed the photographer while setting up the equipment to take the shot. Snap shots are made with point and shoot cameras, but well crafted photographs are to be taken with 4×5 cameras. Ansel used an 8×10 as did Edward Weston. It's not that the equipment makes the photographer, but these friendly old cameras slow you down and let you put your artistic talents, such as they may be, to work.

The Legacy Of Fred Picker

If the world is a just place, Fred Picker will be remembered as one of the best teachers of photography in the history of the medium. His methods enabled anyone to learn the craft, while his emphasis remained on the art. "Don't be creative when you should be mechanical," Fred constantly said, "And don't be mechanical when you should be creative." He tried to clearly separate the technical aspects, the craft, from the aesthetic, the art, finding ways to make the craft easier and more consistent, so that it took less of the photographer's attention. Ideally, that attention, freed up by routines and habits could be applied to making better pictures. "The hardest part of photography," Fred admonished, "Is finding the right place to stand." Meaning that the technical stuff is really quite easy, while finding and framing pictures worth making is a life's work. His emphasis on simplified equipment, using one film and developer combination, and making habits of processing and printing were liberating, because eliminating choices freed the imagination to more closely explore the world.

The rest of **The Legacy of Fred Picker** can be found at Circle of the Sun Productions

Fred Picker owned and operated Zone VI Studio of Newfane, Vermont where he manufactured fine 4×5 cameras and specialized photographic equipment sought out by fine art photographers. Calumet of Chicago bought his company before he died and today makes and markets products based upon Fred's original designs. Fred Picker ran summer workshops for budding fine art photographers in Vermont every year for at least twenty years.

I attended Fred's Zone VI summer workshop in Putney, Vermont from August 2nd to August 10th of 1986. I kept a diary of that week that I occasionally read in order to re-live the adventure. It's quite a memory.

It is probably narcissism that makes one want to share a diary with the world and the height of chutzpah to think that anyone else will want to read it. Nevertheless, I have with great temerity decided to post it here because it is as much or more about the Zone VI workshop and Fred Picker as it is about me.

So here, dear reader, is that diary:

Saturday, August 2, 1986

The Putney School is a private boarding school for boys and girls grades 9 through 12. It is academically well regarded. While it was once most noted as a music school it now tries to avoid classification. Music appears to be an important part of the curriculum, but a broad-based liberal arts education with emphasis on personal learning experience is the desired goal.

All this was learned from Adrian, an 11th grade student who showed me to my room. Adrian is originally from Keene, N.H., but now considers The Putney School her home. Her parents reside in Keene. Adrian isn't sure where she'll go to college, but it will definitely be an ivy league school, "If I can get in," she said.

The Putney campus is a farm. It is about a half mile down (up?) a broken asphalt road that connects with one of the many scenic and well-paved country lanes in the area. It is on relatively high ground with scenic vistas in three directions. The milking barn and stables are important landmarks as are the many beautiful swimming holes. Most of the campus is densely forested. What isn't planted in corn, that is. Dirt roads and trails snake the campus like veins.

The dormitories are two-story wood frame structures nestled in the trees. I was lucky. My room is a double on the 2nd floor with bay windows at opposite ends of the room. The downstairs rooms must accommodate the hallway so have only one window.

The room is all wood. Walls, furniture, closets, everything. The view from the bay window is of dense forest. The light in the room is sparse, except in the bay window where it is wonderful soft light filtered through the trees. The sides of each window open allowing a breeze. I am sitting in the bay window with my back to one side, my feet to the other. I imagine that much learning is done in this room, in this spot, in this position.

Upon arrival I checked in, met Lil Farber and picked up an information packet containing a copy of *Vermont Life*, some Maps and a Zone VI catalog. After moving into my room my instructions are to turn in my portfolio to a staff member who gives me a brief interview.

"What do you expect to get out of this workshop?" she asks. I give her a glib answer. She is about 30, blonde, and has the hairiest legs I've ever seen.

Next, I go to another building to discuss my "homework" with Tim Frazier, a staff member. He is also about 30, lean, and a runner. He promises to show me all the running courses he has scouted out around the farm. The campus at Putney School is referred to as "the farm."

Next I get my picture taken. This is not as unpleasant as it could have been, considering that I don't like to smile.

These tasks completed I have about two hours to kill before dinner. This time was well spent moving into my room and feeling like a kid. If I were a kid, a student here, I wouldn't have this room to myself. At least I might hope for a better roommate than the three or four blowhards downstairs smoking cigarettes and trying to impress each other with conversation.

Alone in my room, at this moment, is very satisfying. But now it is 6 PM, time for supper.

* * *

And it was great. Buffet of artichoke and chicken dumplings, fresh vegetables and fruit, wine and coffee. My seat was next to Brad, a pro from Philadelphia who is an alumnus, i.e., this is his second time at the Zone VI Workshop. While we are on field trips he will talk to the instructors about special problems he has encountered, etc.

The emphasis is not on technique. It is perception, they say, that must be developed. I think they are right. Technique is mechanical and most anyone can learn it. A perfect exposure that is perfectly printed is a waste of time if it isn't a picture worth looking at. The final print should convey to the viewer the emotional impact the scene made on the photographer at the time the photograph was taken. If the photographer lacks the sensitivity to receive the emotion of the scene, the photograph won't convey anything to the viewer.

Fred Picker gave a lecture tonight in which he said they try to overcome the students' preoccupation with technique and get them to start seeing. I see what he means. I overheard conversations all day by people talking about f-stops and how primitive the equipment is here.

* * *

Fred Picker said in his lecture that he started in photography by going to an Ansel Adams workshop in Carmel, California when he was 40. So, I'm not too old. I found out the woman with hairy legs is 39 and she is world renowned for her photography. Her work is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other museums. She was a personal friend of Paul Strand and has several published books. She's probably too busy to shave.

I'm going running tomorrow with Tim Frazier, one of the instructors. He is also accomplished with several published books of his work. He runs 7:15 miles, about 8 at a time.

Sunday, August 3, 1986

My room is full of all manner of flying insects. The things are enormous. I killed a red one last night, a pale green one this morning. It was 2 inches long and unlike anything I have ever seen. Maybe I should have photographed it. No, I don't need any bugs.

After a four-mile run and hearty breakfast we had a lecture by Fred Picker on the Zone System. He's got a good sense of humor. When one of his demonstrations didn't work he threw up his hands and said "Well, you get the idea." Of course, then he repeated it, made it work, and explained what had happened the first time. If had to do with the difference in response of polaroid film to daylight and tungsten light.

The most important thing I learned this morning is that even though 8 zones are a pretty natural phenomenon that might have been predicted by a theorist, the difference in reflectance between a white card and black card *in the same light*, whether bright sun or shade, is only four stops. That means the two cards would not show up as pure white and pure black in a black and white photograph. You could choose an exposure that would place either the black card as pure black or the white card as pure white, but the other would be gray. Introduce shade into the scene and everything

changes. If the black card were in shade rather than bright sun, its reflectance would be 2-1/2 stops less. Now there would be 6-1/2 stops difference if the white card were in the sun. If the black card were placed on Zone II, almost pure black, the white card would fall on Zone VIII-1/2, almost pure white. No more than about 10% (or less) of the entire scene in a B&W photograph should ever be pure black or pure white. Otherwise, it will have no life. It will be like Bach played on a computer.

Skipped lunch, wisely. Took some polaroids and threw them away. My contribution to art for today.

Spent the afternoon in the darkroom learning technique for making a proper proof, test strip for a pilot print and film developing pointers. I must learn to load a stainless steel reel in the dark. It's a matter of outsmarting the imps who design such things.

Lil Farber is a rather elegant senior citizen who is determined to impart artistic appreciation to the Zone VI workshop students. This was the assignment after supper, to retire to the gallery and name your favorite photograph there and tell how it makes you feel, what emotions it evokes. No explanations, no reasons, she warned. Just say what you feel. Does it move you? How? Don't try to explain the photograph. Just describe the feeling you get from it. It, just one out of the whole collection, whichever one it is that casts a spell on you. I don't know about this approach. I don't think it works for me. I guess I don't trust "feelings" that much. Intuition I trust. Feelings are something else. Too 60's, if it feels good go for it sort of thing. That approach to life has caused a lot of trouble. Feelings need to be explained, not just felt. Feelings need to be moderated by thinking. So, sorry Lil, I can't do it that way. I know you mean well, though. Maybe it works for you. I will say one thing for feelings, though. While things that feel good can be bad for you, and usually are, things that feel bad really are bad most of the time. Human condition I guess.

There are many good photographs in the collection. I envy them. I want to do it like that! It is easy when you see it, impossible until you do.

Finally, a movie on Edward Weston. He remains unequalled. I guess all good photographers should be because two don't see the same. His photographs are striking. He wrote that people often said he must have a very good camera and lens. He was actually using a mediocre lens and his camera was an ancient cumbersome thing that was falling apart. He wondered why people didn't understand that "a photograph, like all good things, is made with the brain." Of course, you still need a camera of some sort. It would be nice if you could look at something, think real hard about it, and have a finished print come out your ear. But I get his point.

Weston kept a "day book" that was eventually published. He burned about 3 years of it once. He later regretted it and vowed to never do it again. He had done it because it was painful to go back and see how immature he had been. I'm not immature, but I may be something as bad, or worse. Therefore, I shall never read this. [!]



Maybe Weston's nude photos were made during his immature period. Too bad he didn't burn those as well because, with one exception, they are awful. Lacking in life, they could be coroner's photos. Of course, if he had burned them we might not have the one great one that he did make. It's the one in which he achieves his goal of "a stronger way of seeing."

Weston was compelled to keep a journal. He said, "I've discovered why I write. It is because it is a way of learning. It enables me to clarify my thoughts."

* * *

The dormitory is for real. The guys downstairs are mostly over 50 [that seemed old then, not now], but they make noise until late so it's impossible to get to sleep early. The building is like cardboard. If someone farts at the South end, everyone in the North end can hear it. Outside, at night, a strong one could be heard for miles.

Tomorrow's events are unknown at this point.

Monday, August 4, 1986

"Put the high value on Zone VIII,* and take the picture." This is Fred Picker's simplified Zone System. It is the antithesis of "expose for the shadows and develop for the high values." Fred's system gives you the most density in a usable negative, therefore the best negative, supposedly. I'll try it. I hope there's a newsletter on this [there was].

[At this point my diary has the following comment in the margin, responding to the asterisk above:

"Except sometimes. When not enough contrast place high value on Zone VI -1/2 and develop to Zone VIII." *The idea of "placing the high value" assumes the use of a spot meter to find the high and low values in the scene, preferable a Zone VI modified Pentax Spot Meter.]*

Vermont is the blueberry capital of the world. For a lover of blueberries, such as I, it is heaven. Blueberries are as common here as rocks in Colorado.

More about Putney school. The woman who is head of the school (headmistress?) spoke briefly yesterday. The school was founded 50 years ago by a woman who believed students age 14-18 need a farm experience. All students at Putney School have "AM farm chores." That means milking cows in the worst smelling, s— smeared barn I've ever seen, at 5:00 AM. *[I've since confirmed that dairy cow barns smell a lot worse than the herford barns I knew growing up in Wyoming. Actually the barn smell was only in the morning because the students not only milked the dairy cows, they also shoveled out the manure which was hauled away daily in a large trailer]*

They grow their own vegetables here and they are delicious. We have a sampling at dinner every evening.

I wasn't sure of the time for developing with HC-110. I developed 9:40 as I do with D-76. It was too long and ruined the film. I'm not going to do that anymore. Fred says making the negative is the score, making the print in the darkroom is the performance.

Tuesday, August 5, 1986

[no entry]

Wednesday, August 6, 1986

It must be inevitable that devotion becomes skepticism at some point. My initial acceptance as gospel of whatever was said by a Zone VI staff member is now tempered by mild skepticism. Not as to technical matters; there they are masters. But I cannot without qualification accept everything they say about the aesthetic quality of a photograph. Some of the photographs held up as examples of

greatness just seem dull to me. A few of my own photographs seem as good aesthetically, if not technically, to a few of the greats here. I seldom think other people's photographs are worse than mine.

The woman with the hairy legs and hairy arm pits is Susan B———, not Susan B———, as I earlier was mistaken. She is famous. She was a personal friend of Paul Strand and, after his death, was chosen to print many of his photographs. Strand's photographs are marvelous, amazing, terrific. I don't care much for her or her photographs, though.

She thinks it is wrong to explain what is good about a photograph. Look at it, say how it makes you feel. You must have feeling about any photograph she announces as great. But don't explain it and don't ask her for an explanation. It is all supposed to be abstract and esoteric. If you know how to see, you know. No explanation is necessary. In fact, it is wrong to think about an explanation.

[Reading this now it reminds of the Harley Davidson riders who say when asked why they ride a Harley, "If I have to explain it to you, you won't understand."]

This may be right *[no it isn't]* but it goes too far. People need instruction on what makes art, what makes it good. There are common themes and patterns. Why can't they be identified? Ansel Adams wasn't afraid to say what he thought made a photograph good, and Robert Frost wrote his essay, "The Figure a Poem Makes," which explained his theory of poetry. He said, "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." That sounds like an explanation, a terse and witty explanation, and not a reliance on fickle and fallible "feelings." *[Alliterative explanation there]*

I think most great artists have made an attempt to explain their medium in one way or another. The attitude here is too much "us" and "them." The "us" is those few good photographers who can see and make good photographs. Everybody who isn't delighted is "them," the great mass of dumbbells who can't appreciate fine art. This is snobbery. I want to make photographs that most, or at least many, people would like. The attitude here is the better you are the smaller your audience. My audience is pretty small right now!

I hope to get better so more, not fewer, people will like my photographs.

[under construction, keep checking back]

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Comments

Fred Picker's Zone VI Workshop — 9 Comments



Andrew

on December 16, 2010 at 22:25 said:

Thanks for posting, it was a good read. I moved recently and while unpacking came across the Zone VI Newsletters. Never met the man but he seems like a nice chap and his workshop would have

been a treat. After playing with digital for a few years, I am thinking about photographing with large format again. I have one of Fred's Zone VI cameras. Digital may have some advantages; but, I enjoyed the process and craft and mystery of old school photography.



TeeJaw

on December 17, 2010 at 19:48 said:

Andrew,

Black and white film photography seemed like magic when I first tried it. Making the best negative you can in the camera, developing the film in total darkness, choosing a negative to print, watching the image come up in the developer tray under the red light, it was all very special and I miss it. But time constraints got in the way, I've sold all my darkroom equipment, etc. It a great memory that I wouldn't trade for anything. Best of luck to you.



JB Harlin

on February 10, 2011 at 22:59 said:

Picker & Zone VI was where photography finally began to make sense. . . we did not make it to a workshop, nor to meet Fred, but he was instrumental in finding the way to photographic creativity. I miss the Zone VI Newsletter. Very much looking forward to seeing the rest of your diary!

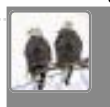


Larry

on March 25, 2011 at 21:14 said:

I too attended a workshop in the mid 80's. Fond memories. I will need to go back and determine the year for sure.

Thanks for sharing it brings back many memories.



TeeJaw

on March 25, 2011 at 21:33 said:

It's a great memory of things past. Glad you found my post about it, and thanks for the comment.



Tedric

on December 20, 2012 at 15:52 said:

I had every one of the news letters and looked at most of his pictures on line. Eventually I worked out that Fred Picker was the most brilliant teacher but could not take a photograph worth a second look. He was, like many people, obsessed with technique to the exclusion of every thing else. It was, as you said in your blog: 'A perfect exposure that is perfectly printed is a waste of time if it isn't a picture worth looking at'. His beaver pond photographs became photographic cliches.

It gets worse. I was a working commercial photographer and when I retired I sold my equipment (including a 5 x 4 Sinar P) and bought the full Zone VI outfit. I was never so disappointed in my life. The camera was clunky to use and in spite of being touted as the most beautiful camera in the world,

it was poorly finished and not worth the money. I sold it to a second hand dealer within six months who could not give me a good price for it because he already had three of them on his shelves. So, in Melbourne, Australia – not a huge market for Zone VI products – possibly the only four people who bought his camera had already got rid of them.

I could go on, but will leave it and answer any questions.



TeeJaw

on December 20, 2012 at 17:12 said:

I sold all my film equipment on eBay several years ago. I had a lot of Zone VI stuff and it all went too. Most of it went to buyers in China. Kodak is pretty much out of business. The world is full of people who never owned a film SLR and have never heard of Kodachrome or Tri-X. Zone VI and Fred Picker are fond memories of a different time.

Digital has opened the door for a lot of people to make good photographs who were not ever going to be interested in the technical details of darkroom work or large format cameras.



Don

on January 1, 2013 at 07:20 said:

Thanks for publishing these notes; I subscribed to the newsletter and loved reading Picker's views on consistency and record keeping with the goal of making photos a joy rather than a continuing technical hassle. Though I was a 35mm guy, I wanted to bring the Zone discipline into my shooting and printing. Picker's writings convinced me to standardize on one film-developer-paper combo, and to buy a cold-light head for my enlarger.

The need to earn a living and focus on people, rather than spend hours alone in a darkroom, led me to give up B&W photography, but I still miss the creative pleasure. It seems digital photography is all about Photoshop, and the creation of hundreds of nearly identical, bland images (including the paradox of images manipulated to make them so technically perfect that their brilliance appears otherworldly and, therefore, unconvincing). We see so many digital images online now, that it's hard to think there's anything special about any image at all. And then there's the miraculous digital photo-frame, which convinces us not to study any image at all because 500 other images are coming up at 30-second intervals. I won't go at all into Pinterest.

During the time I was an avid photographer, I also read the collected notebooks of the novelist Thomas Wolfe. He took a tour of Italy and, like any American, was overwhelmed by the beauty of the thousands of paintings, drawings and sculptures he viewed in museums across Italy. But he was left fatigued by it all, and wrote that when everything is beautiful, then nothing is beautiful anymore. Through the amazing gift of museum collections, his aesthetic sensibility was sated and dulled.

That's what I think digital photo technology is doing to us as a culture. Photoshop and similar programs can make even the most insipid image – like the example above of Picker's beaver ponds? – look technically brilliant. We've all seen how the level of female beauty has been skewed by Photoshopped images that try to convince us there are women alive who are impossibly beautiful – otherworldly beautiful. The superabundance of technically gorgeous images of people, products, landscapes, etc., leaves me – as U2 sang in the 90s – “numb” rather than delighted. I can experience Wolfe's dilemma not by taking a two-week tour of Italy, but simply by going online for a few hours. It makes me look wistfully back at the just- finished photo age, when we had to work so hard – all through the photo-making process- to generate just a few images that pleased us enough to share with the world.



TeeJaw

on January 1, 2013 at 12:03 said:

Don, There is wisdom in your statement that "when everything is beautiful nothing is beautiful." There must be night or day would be meaningless. There's a quote from Daniel Woodrell, from his novel, *Woe To Live On*: "If all meals were dessert, you'd yearn for a cold potato."