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CLEVENGER'S PASSIONS

Renee Shadforth

Picture this: A middle-aged woman is strolling through an art show, husband in tow. He sluggishly carries plastic bags of art. He has no idea what's in the bags. All he knows is that the weight he's been shouldering the last few hours is the result of his wife spending their hard-earned money on what she calls "art." The woman turns around and mouths to her husband, "Not much longer," - again. She veers into a booth of so-called art - again. She turns around and says, "Bob, come look at this!" - again. Before Bob can roll his eyes, he peers at a photograph in the booth that reveals the splendor of El Capitan. Bob is drawn by one of Vern Clevenger's creations.

"I always knew the city wasn't for me," says Clevenger, who was born in Oakland, Calif., in 1955.

Clevenger would escape urban chaos while in high school on the weekends. He went to Berkeley, the Bay-Area climbing Mecca, to ascend a practice climbing rock. It was there that he met Galen Rowell: fellow climber, photographer, and mentor.

After he graduated from high school at 17, Clevenger decided to move to the Sierra and pursue his love of rock climbing. "I had a passion to climb in Yosemite. I had to get out of the Bay Area. I couldn't miss what was being called 'the golden age of free climbing.'" (Free climbing is ascending a cliff's natural features with protective gear but no hanging rope for support.)

Clevenger looks more like a construction worker than a photographer. He has the build of robust mountain man, with the eccentric enthusiasm of an artist. He radiates the combustible energy of a little boy on Christmas morning.

Rowell took the energetic, eager climber out to Yosemite for the first time in 1972. "It was obvious that he was a cut above the rest of the climbers," Rowell says. "I'm not sure how well he did in school, but when it came to climbing, he was far smarter than the rest." He adds that although Clevenger had enthusiasm for the outdoors, at the time he was not a photographer.

He had numerous first ascents in Tuolumne, where he built quite a reputation for himself in the free-climbing community.

In 1977, after a few years of climbing in Yosemite and several visits from Rowell, who was shooting photos of the Sierra, Clevenger decided it was time to try his hand at photography. “Climbing opened my eyes to wonderful things that, ordinarily, many people don’t get to see,” he says. “I wanted everyone to be able to enjoy Yosemite the way I was.”

So Clevenger took up photography at full steam and set out for the backcountry with a 35-mm camera.

Climbing had given Clevenger a familiarity with the Sierra Nevada’s landscape. “I found that climbing and photography don’t go hand in hand. The equipment is too heavy. That’s how I started mountaineering.”

The unseasoned photographer showed his work to fellow climbers in Tuolumne and started to build a new reputation in photography.

Clevenger’s growing notoriety affected no one more than Margaret, a native New Yorker climbing in Yosemite for the summer. She had heard of Clevenger and his death-defying climbs. “I’d assumed he was a gnarly looking, pock-faced crazy man.”

Then, one day on a beach in Tuolumne Meadows, a friend pointed Clevenger out to Margaret. “He looked like a teddy bear – I couldn’t believe it!” she recalls.

Margaret arranged to “bump into” Clevenger when he was showing his photos at a nearby picnic table.

“We went climbing together that day and started hanging out,” she said.

“The engagement ring was a nylon climbing cord,” Clevenger recalls. “We were married in Tuolumne at Parsons Lodge [on Aug. 23, 1980]. It was a legendary party that nobody remembers,” he said with a chuckle.

After the bills from the wedding were paid, Clevenger switched from a 35-mm camera to an entry-level 4-by-5 camera – much like the one he uses today. The camera and equipment are heavy – 100 pounds.

“It’s worth it,” he says. “It’s easier to communicate with a 4-by-5 because of the larger format.”

Clevenger’s creations use intense, radiant, natural light. Many say the pictures express special, fortuitous instants. It’s not just a sunset on a mountain - it goes beyond that. “They’re rare moments of clarity,”

Clevenger explains. “I think it’s important to communicate what you felt and saw at the moment of exposure accurately to the viewer.”

“Vern has integrity in using the natural in his photography,” Rowell said. “You can count on that: [his subject] was in front of his camera and in his heart.”

“He captures the more obscure landscapes in the backcountry that many people will never see,” says Christina Reed, Clevenger’s assistant. “He’s intimately acquainted with the landscape – every crevasse, nook, and cranny.”

He’ll freely share the secret to his ability.

“I’ve always looked for people better than me to learn from.” And, with the likes of Galen Rowell on his list of mentors, it’s clear how significant that is.

Another teacher Clevenger pursued was Nevada City, Calif., photographer Steve Solinsky. “When he’d just started photography, he saw my work at an art show,” Solinsky says. “He was not shy. He just walked right up and introduced himself. If he sees anybody he can learn from, he seeks them out. He’s very passionate about his art.”

Clevenger’s true passion isn’t photography. In fact, it is difficult to get him to discuss his art. What he really wants to talk about is his son, Dylan, 12, and daughter, Sabrina, 4.

Dylan and Sabrina tag along on most shoots. “They’re a huge part of the process,” Reed said. “Vern’s always looking for their opinions.”

According to Reed, of all the hundreds of photos Clevenger shoots each year, only 30 to 50 are actually printed. “When he chooses what to print he looks for a consensus from his family. He makes those close to him part of the process.”

In June 2000, Clevenger took his family on the shoot of a lifetime. They hiked the 212-mile John Muir Trail. That’s a 33-day excursion with an 11- and 3-year-old in tow.

“We started out with our friend Lee Frees from Mammoth. We hired him to help cook and carry equipment. He made it possible for me to be closer to the kids and the camera,” Clevenger says.

“Margaret’s full-time job was keeping the family happy and working as a unit. Anyone who has kids would understand the importance of that,” he continued. Margaret also carried 33-pound Sabrina in a baby pack most of the way.

For a couple weeks, the Clevengers had the assistance of llamas to pack in supplies. “The llamas were great,” Clevenger says. “They’re gentle animals and easy on the trail. They’re also easy on the landscape, because they don’t graze the grass.” Llamas browse, meaning they don’t pull from the roots and kill the grass, while horses’ graze, eating the grass, roots and all. “But the llamas didn’t move as fast as we thought they would.”

They were getting short on time – and food.

As the Clevengers neared Mount Whitney, they had to leave the llamas in Taboose, because llamas aren’t allowed beyond that point.

Frees had to return to Mammoth, because he was out of vacation time.

Clevenger had been carrying an enormous pack of 105 pounds, with camera equipment and supplies while they had had the llamas. Now the family had to haul what had been on the llamas as well.


“I had to leave my camera behind in Taboose and shoulder the monstrous pack of supplies so we could move on,” says Clevenger. “I missed a lot of opportunities to shoot pictures.”

But the Clevengers made it to Mount Whitney, and the complications only added to the adventure.

If the Clevengers are anything, they're a mountain family. "There's nothing we enjoy more than piling in a tent together to play 52-card poker, with lightning crashing all around," Clevenger says. "We always have a great time."

As time goes on, photography gets easier for Clevenger. "Your eye gets more trained, and the kids are older now. I think that most parents can relate to that. When you have a kid in diapers next to you, and they lose a bottle or need a pacifier, it can be a little hard to concentrate."

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Back at the art show ... Concentrating on the image of El Capitan, Bob decides to make his first purchase of the day. 

Renee Shadforth graduated in December 2002 with a degree in Journalism. She is currently reporting for the Sierra Sun in Truckee near Lake Tahoe.