

Booklet #4: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR CAMERA CLUB

by

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PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter* and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at www.NVACC.org.

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on www.NVACC.com where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at JoeMiller@NVACC.org.

* Dave Carter, one of the creators of this booklet and a founding father of NVACC has passed but his photographic skill and artistic vision live on in the technique of all photographers who were fortunate enough to work with him.



Getting the Most From Your Camera Club

Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to help you, the individual camera club member — regardless of your photographic skills — get the most from your club experience. Along with good formal training from a quality educational institution, camera clubs provide an excellent way for members to reach a high level of proficiency. Your expectations and needs should be in line with the purposes of your club. There are many different types and sizes of camera clubs. Some have only a few members, while others have hundreds. Some are relatively new, while the oldest in the world (located in Philadelphia) dates back to 1862. Clubs also vary widely in the quality of services they provide. The appropriateness of the comments that follow will vary from club to club. In any event, the comments are the opinions of the authors. We hope that this booklet will help you, personally, get more from your camera club.

Our message can be stated very simply: Participate at every level you can. Learning photography is not a passive process. Feel free to ask questions of fellow members and of speakers and other guests of your club. Attend every club function you can, and go with an open mind. By all means, read your club's newsletter. It is the one source of information that reaches all club members.

Photography is part science, part art. Just what makes a good image is certainly subjective, and there are many perspectives on this subject. The more viewpoints you can learn, the better able you will be to make photographs that will please you and others. Don't expect to become an expert quickly. It may take several years to reach the level to which you aspire. And your aspirations may grow. Patience is a virtue in all aspects of photography.

The three authors have, among them, many years of camera club experience, including terms as club president, supervising and planning programs, competitions, workshops and field trips, editing club newsletters, giving photographic programs, frequently judging competitions, teaching courses in photography, and often competing. We have drawn from these experiences in the preparation of this document.

This booklet seemed necessary because members at all levels of experience are often reluctant to become sufficiently involved to make a major contribution to their club. The authors hope to allay some of the concerns of members by helping them establish realistic expectations of club membership, and by articulating how and why most camera clubs operate the way they do.

What is the purpose of a camera club?

Camera clubs serve several functions. First and foremost, the principal purpose of most,

if not all, camera clubs is to educate its members. Talks by invited speakers and competitions attract large number of members. Other club activities which provide educational opportunities are workshops and field trips. These generally are attended by fewer members. Clubs may also provide social opportunities. The best opportunities to get to know long-established members are at those events which attract smaller numbers. Attend field trips and workshops, even if you don't know the other participants. You won't be strangers for long.

Members of camera clubs may have joined for many reasons. They may wish to learn more about photography, but they may also wish to make new friends, especially if they are new to the area, to compete, to show off their best work, to learn where to go to take pictures, and, in the case of experienced photographers, to pass their photographic wisdom on to others. Everyone has personal reasons for joining a camera club. When these reasons include a serious desire to learn more about photography, participation in the club is more satisfying.

A camera club cannot be everything to everybody. Longtime members may have different needs from those of newer members. Be open to learning new aspects of photography. Be receptive to what you can learn from other camera club members. The majority of club members are willing to share their knowledge with other photographers. Take advantage of this resource, but remember, the responsibility to participate is largely yours.

To what skill level are camera clubs geared?

The answer to this question is simple. Camera clubs cater to intermediate level photographers. Beginning photographers usually are not confident enough to become active club members, and educational opportunities are somewhat limited for advanced members. Because there are more intermediate photographers, activities such as programs and workshops are usually geared to them.

Although they are few in number, advanced photographers are an enormously valuable resource for any club. They should be nurtured to keep them involved. Factors which keep them active in camera clubs include the opportunities to compete, to share their knowledge with others, and to maintain frequent contact with long-time, close friends.

What can a club offer beginning photographers?

Education, of course, is the obvious answer. Frequently, beginning photographers can feel out of place in a camera club. They may not understand all the technical terms used during programs, competitions, and other club activities. Terms and phrases such as effective aperture opening, transforming a three-dimensional subject into a two-dimensional format, etc., can be bewildering to someone whose formal photographic education consists only of reading a camera manual. In addition, novices may not

understand formal principles of composition. Feel free to ask what terms mean, as well as other technical questions. It might also be useful to take a beginners course at a local community college or city recreation department.

What can a club offer advanced photographers?

This issue is more difficult, but the opportunity to teach can be very attractive. Advanced photographers are a club's greatest resource. Over the years, most have derived many benefits from their association with their camera club. Advanced photographers should, we believe, recognize their responsibility to repay their fellow club members by sharing their knowledge and skills, not only with newer members, but with all members. This raises the level of the club as a whole, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that skilled photographers again will be able to derive more from club membership. The responsibility is theirs.

What can members offer a camera club?

Everyone can help. There are never enough people to do all the work that needs to be done. Some members often stay in the background because either they fail to see what needs to be done or they feel they do not have the knowledge or skills required to help. Not all jobs in a camera club require highly specialized skills. Supporting other members who lead the various efforts to run the club is always appreciated.

There are rich rewards for those who help, even in small ways. The rewards are of three kinds: (1) getting acquainted more easily with other members; (2) knowing you have helped your club become all that it can be, and; (3) providing opportunities for you to have input into the affairs of your club. Most clubs are governed by an Executive Board. Attending Board meetings gives all members an excellent opportunity to learn how their club operates.

No club can be really successful unless everyone works toward goals shared by its members. As our lives get busier and busier, it is easy to let other members do the work. But everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the good of the club. Officers of most camera clubs make frequent appeals for help. Be ready to answer the call. Or ask the club president how you can help. There are many opportunities to help, both big and small.

It sometimes appears to members that their club is run by a clique of just a few because the same members are on the Board year after year. More often than not, board members serve repeatedly (while dreaming of retirement) because nobody steps forward to replace them. It is essential that all members be willing to serve the club in a variety of ways to provide fresh ideas and new leadership.

What is the usual structure of camera clubs?

Camera clubs are usually run by an Executive Board (Board of Directors) consisting of a combination of officers elected by members-at-large and others appointed by the president. The formal structure is described in the constitution and a set of by-laws. All members should have copies of, and be familiar with, these documents. If you don't have copies, ask the membership chairperson or the club president to provide them.

Officers are most likely to include a president, a vice president for programs, a vice president for competitions, a secretary, a treasurer, a field trips chairperson, a workshops chairperson, and a newsletter editor. Depending on each club's needs, there may be officers who serve as liaisons to other organizations and fulfill other specialized duties.

What are the usual camera club activities?

Certainly the activities are likely to include a program of outside speakers, competitions which are usually judged by someone from outside the club, field trips, and workshops. Some clubs have end-of-year competitions and award ceremonies, exhibitions, parties and picnics. Very few members have the time to attend all club functions. Don't feel bad if you find yourself in this position. Even board members cannot attend all events. We encourage you to sample a variety of activities to broaden your photographic interests. Remember the quickest way to learn and to get to know other members is to participate in as many activities as possible. Make the time.

What can members learn from programs?

Good programs can give club members an understanding of both technique and composition. A varied program menu provides the opportunity to see how different photographers approach their craft. Members get to see good work by the best photographers, work they might otherwise not see. Speakers help provide insight into some of the ways in which successful photographers work. In most cases, programs provide an enjoyable evening and perhaps become a source of inspiration.

A word of caution may be appropriate. Attending programs, by itself, does not require one to be active in photography. Be sure to attend those activities which require your active involvement, such as field trips and workshops, if you want to become a better photographer.

What can members learn from competitions?

Usually, clubs invite a different judge every month. This provides a variety of viewpoints concerning what constitutes a good image. This is an issue which concerns us all. Every judge will have a different answer. It is the job of the judge to articulate the

reasons for the decision to keep or eliminate each slide and print. The quality of comments varies widely from one judge to another. The club must find the most articulate judges in the area if competitions are to help members improve their photography. Poor quality comments hinder the learning process. Each competitor and each observer must decide whether the judge's comments are appropriate, not an easy task for beginners, or even for more advanced photographers.

Competitions should be both educational and fun. Judges' comments provide helpful feedback on submitted work, but keep competitions in perspective. It's nice to win, but learning is most important. By no means is a competition outcome a commentary on an individual's photographic abilities. To make such an assessment requires a large body of work, often over a long period of time.

It is very important that members not talk during competitions. It makes it difficult for others to hear what the judge is saying, and on occasion, may even influence the judge.

By actually competing, you learn to choose your own best work for entry in competition. This helps you to analyze the strong and weak features of your work. Be careful that you don't make images just to please a judge. There is no point in making images that do not please you. Form your own perspective on what makes a good picture. This will help you produce consistently good work. If you are an observer rather than a competitor, try making judgments yourself and see how close your thoughts match those of the judge.

What should members expect from a judge?

It is quite proper to expect a judge to be an effective teacher, not simply to make correct choices. Rarely will members agree among themselves on what pictures should be chosen. We prefer to view the job of the judge as one requiring informative comments, sometimes almost a lecture, which articulates what the judge thinks makes an acceptable, or even an artistic image.

It is more important, in our view, that club members go home on competition night with a new perspective, and, therefore, a more open mind, than with pockets full of ribbons. Ribbons are nice, but ribbons don't always help you become a better photographer. In fact, if the judge's comments are off base, ribbons may help reduce the quality of your photography by rewarding bad habits and careless composition.

Images which win in competitions are often those which have an immediate impact. This occurs because the judge only gets a short time to look at each picture. Subtle features may go unappreciated or even unnoticed. It is often the case that the pictures we are happiest to have hanging on our wall are those with subtle nuances.

No two photographers have exactly the same photographic vision. Everyone brings to photography preferences and prejudices. The best judges reveal, at the outset, the criteria upon which judgments will be based so that club members may evaluate the

comments on each print and slide.

Don't feel upset if you don't win any ribbons. It may be more educational to enter some images on which you believe the judge's comments would provide the most help, for example, images made using a new technique.

What should members expect from workshops?

Workshops are typically designed to teach new skills and techniques. In this sense workshops may, in a strong camera club and with a skilled leader, provide the best of all club learning experiences, especially if the workshop provides "hands-on" opportunities to practice what you have learned during the instructional part of the program. Remember that learning is not a passive process.

Your time is valuable and you want to select the best workshops in which to participate. The best advice we can offer is to take workshops from the best photographers. Seek recommendations from fellow club members. The topic is not as important as the ability of the leader. A good leader will make you interested in the topic and open your eyes.

Workshops are usually limited in their enrollment, so enroll early. Because the numbers are small, workshops provide a good context in which to get to know other club members. They also provide an excellent opportunity for you to submit your work for critique by the instructor.

What should members expect from field trips?

Field trips are great fun because, properly organized, they are as much social events as learning experiences. They provide great opportunities to get to know other club members and, just as important, they help long-established members get to know you. If you want to be known within your camera club, field trips are always a fun way to accomplish this.

Field trips also offer you a chance to take advantage of new photo-opportunities. But you may be so busy socializing that you won't have the concentration necessary for good photography. As a result, it is not unusual for club members to return to the same location to photograph some more, particularly if the area is not too far from home.

Field trips are different from other club events. An important aspect of field trips is the opportunity to learn how different photographers approach the same subject. Also, one has an opportunity to examine equipment used by other photographers in the field. This may serve as a helpful guide prior to investing in new equipment.

Since you may be in the field with more experienced photographers, this may be an opportunity to ask for specific advice. Field trips provide an opportunity to practice what you have learned. It is especially important for the participants to get together after the trip to see the variety of images made by others. Take advantage of every opportunity to

broaden your photographic vision.

Should you attend events at other clubs?

Even though you have joined a camera club, you may find it advantageous to visit other clubs when they have events which appeal to your special interests. You should not have to pay to attend an event or two at another club. The authors have benefited greatly by such visits and we have made many good friends in the process. Because of the variety among camera clubs, some photographers opt to join several.

What is the future of camera clubs?

The quality of a club can be no greater than the strength of the members' commitment to make their club as good as it can possibly be. We cannot stress strongly enough that members must participate and give back to the club. Camera clubs do wither if they are not supported.

The failure of any camera club would be our loss because they are the best way for us to gain access to many of the photographic resources in the area. Camera clubs draw from the finest photographers around for programs, competition judges, workshops, sometimes field trips, etc. There is no other way to access so much. The stronger your club, the better your access will be to these resources.

The field of photography is changing rapidly, especially with the availability of digital technology. Our lives seem to change, too. Demands on our time make it harder and harder to reserve part of our lives for our photographic passions.

The answer for some has been to limit themselves in their pictorial endeavors. We could see the day when clubs become over-specialized. The future may bring more and more clubs devoted to special interests. We may have digital imaging clubs, black and white printing clubs, nature photography clubs, etc. We should avoid the temptation toward over-specialization.

We believe that creativity is enhanced more by a breadth of knowledge and skills than by over-specialization. Camera clubs will survive, but they will need cooperation among the clubs for members with special interests. Suppose there are ten camera clubs in a given geographic area. There might be only a few black and white printers in each club. With appropriate cooperation, a workshop could operate for the benefit of everyone interested in black and white printing. Workshop members then return to their original clubs and help their fellow members learn to appreciate the fine points of their craft. Everyone benefits.

Digital imaging is another area ripe for inter-club cooperation. Those interested in digital work are often very creative and they can certainly help members of traditional clubs stay at the cutting edge of technology. We believe that together we can flourish, but

separately we will surely stagnate. Whether it is chemical-based photography or electronic imaging, the principles of composition and visual design are the same.

There are sometimes tensions within organizations, and camera clubs are no exception. The current issue is what to do with digital images. Should they compete directly with traditional forms of photography? Or should digital images be considered photography at all? Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this booklet, but they are issues that each club must address.

Camera clubs should be, first and foremost, visual design clubs. To achieve that goal we urge clubs to be inclusive rather than exclusive, and to nurture all crafts related to photography. The benefits of breadth should be obvious.

A Final Word

The future of camera clubs is bright, provided members work together to make it so. We hope that this booklet gives you a better idea how camera clubs function and how to get the most from them. Follow some of our suggestions and see if it doesn't make your membership a lot more educational and fun. Camera clubs can help you improve your photography. Perhaps you can help improve your camera club as well.