

HORIZON NEWS #69

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

“No matter how many times people are warned, they still seem to think taking photos on railroad tracks is a good idea. It’s not. It’s dangerous and stupid and could lead to someone getting killed....No photo is worth risking lives for.”

Shutterbug magazine

The Five Dumbest Things I’ve Ever Done: Part 1

Steve Gottlieb

Reading the words quoted above in a recent issue of *Shutterbug* triggered memories—memories of two dangerous, stupid things I did taking pictures of railroad tracks. That, in turn, got me thinking about other things I have done as a *photographer* that demonstrated colossally bad judgment ...so bad that, in the blink of an eye, my life might have horribly changed, or even ended. Although these incidents—five in all—took place long ago, each remains vivid in my mind.

Photographers commonly take risks. Without risk-taking, the world would be deprived of some of its most significant images. But photographers should always balance the risks against the potential rewards. What these five events have in common was that the risks were not justified. In some cases, the picture wasn’t sufficiently important. In other cases, I could have found alternative approaches that eliminated the risk. In one incident (below), I magnified a risk for no good reason. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve become more aware that even a brief lapse in judgment can have devastating consequences. I’ve learned to exercise more thought and restraint. My alarm bell for danger goes off sooner and louder now than it once did. I hope that relating these experiences, which I offer up in five separate installments, will serve as cautionary tales.

I. Bravado Run Amok

When working on my book, *Abandoned America*, I was thrilled to discover long-defunct railroad tracks which extended over a small bridge at a creek crossing. I was certain that a book-worthy shot was right in front of me. Out I went onto the bridge to find my shot.

Those who’ve attended my workshops often hear me say, “Don’t pick up the camera too fast.” Once the camera comes up to your eye, it has the effect of narrowing the creative options that are available. That’s why I sometimes leave my camera bag beyond my reach while I prowl around my subject; that maximizes my capacity to peruse what’s in front of me—to look and explore, to think and feel. If and when I find a shot I want to take, then I get my bag. In this case, my assistant held my bag while I walked out onto the bridge. I found a perspec-

tive I liked and asked him to bring me my cameras. He refused. “The railroad ties don’t look stable.” I could easily have walked over and gotten them myself, but I felt my assistant was overly cautious; I wanted to push him past his comfort zone. And I wanted to push myself; I am always working to overcome my fear of heights. To challenge and shame him, and in a boastful tone, I shouted, “Don’t be a wuss. The bridge is safe. Just watch.” Without really thinking, I crouched down, then jumped up as high as I could above the railroad tie in the middle of the bridge. When I came down, the railroad tie broke loose, crashing into the rock-filled creek ten feet below...with me right behind it. If my head had hit a tie going down, or if I had fallen onto the rocks in the creek, I hate to think what injury I would have sustained...and we were at least a hundred miles from the nearest hospital. Miraculously, my body slipped through the gap between two ties and I was somehow able to grab onto a tie with one arm on my way down. I dangled there for a moment, then pulled myself back up onto the bridge, bruised and terrified, but otherwise unharmed.

I grabbed this shot as a remembrance of the event—note the missing tie in the middle of the bridge—and then beat a retreat from the scene. I was too shaken to attempt the shot I had envisioned. I hate shots that got away. It was a totally unnecessary outcome.

[More Installments to Follow]

