

Working the Lights

Photography, Documentation, and Coast Guard Buoy Tenders

Historians, architects, photographers, and industrial archeologists working in the field often use photography as a means for recording and understanding our industrial and maritime heritage. If our photographic interpretations are successful, the medium of photography can be instrumental in expressing as well as gaining understanding of the importance and significance of these resources. The photographic tools used for these purposes usually range from 35 millimeter single lens reflex (SLR) cameras to heavy 5x7 studio cameras such as those used by HABS/HAER photographers. For work not destined for the HABS/HAER collection at the Library of Congress, the large majority of professionals in our field use either conventional SLRs or, because of their ease of use and vest pocket portability, point-and-shoot cameras.

The technology of cameras and film in the last decades has improved, while the everyday skills of those using these more sophisticated instruments has declined. Part of the blame can be assigned to both the sophistication of the SLRs and snapshot cameras equipped with highly capable automatic metering, built in flash, and relatively decent but slow lenses. Due to the minimal mental energy necessary to produce an image that is at least properly exposed and focused, many of us shoot more film and think less about what we are photographing with these cameras. Turning this decision making over to the camera casts a veil between the person taking the picture and the genuine understanding and perception of the subject matter at hand. It is important, therefore, not to rely excessively on the camera to do our seeing for us, as the camera will always absorb more than we see with our own eyes. Documenting with a plan of action will always yield the greatest result in the often limited time available.

Professionals using photography to study a variety of cultural resources should use photogra-

phy not as a tool to compress or lessen time in the field with the resources at hand, but rather as a means to decelerate and better absorb in some meaningful way our subject matter. The use of a large format 4x5 or 5x7 camera has a way of forcing this on the photographer. Each time the large format photographer sets up, he or she has to ask if this photograph is worth the five minutes or five hours necessary to create it. Although not all those working in the field have the inclination or constitution to conduct large format documentation, one can adopt a more deliberate large format approach in smaller formats and achieve more satisfying, useful, and publishable results. One way to go about making more deliberate photographs in the smaller formats is to use a tripod. Even most point-and-shoot cameras have sockets for tripods. In addition to slowing down the photographic process, use of the tripod will make it possible to shoot during much lower light levels than a hand-held camera will allow, with better results under a considerably expanded array of lighting conditions. The other positive effect of tripod use is to impose a more disciplined way of shooting, which benefits a photographer even when a tripod is not used. Whether using a tripod or not, try to be conscious of what is happening at the edge of the frame of all of your images.

Another simple question to ask oneself constantly in the picture making process is: "Why am I taking this picture?" There may be any number of answers to this question, which is a good sign. Asking this question will help avoid the mindlessness of a lot of photographs we are now seeing. This extra attention to a medium we have grown to take so much for granted will help answer another question: "So what?" By exercising greater care and attention to the way we make our images, we will be addressing that question by allowing the cultural resources we are seeking to preserve speak for themselves much more easily.

Before illustrating how this actual process might work in producing a set of photographs for the Historic American Engineering Record, I would like to encourage awareness of two major components of the picture-making process in documentary still photography. The first component is the craft and skill involved in the camera work. Extra care, whether with point-and-shoot or 8x10 will yield results that will not only provide more information in these images but will also help in the creation of more persuasive slides, measured drawings made from field photos, and general documentation. This extra focused attention might involve no more than a careful review of the camera's capabilities in the manufacturer's manual or it could mean taking a course in black and white printing, or it may mean carefully studying how the masters of the medium have historically framed their subjects.

The other equally important component of making useful images involves gaining as much knowledge as possible of the subject before getting in the field to shoot. On many occasions this is not possible and the field time taking the pictures often turns out to be an important investigative phase of our research. Nevertheless, research in advance of working in the field will sharpen your eyes on site. One should develop a strategy for each subject based on the time and budget to accomplish the photography. Be sure to allow some time to enjoy and absorb the area or subject before photographing so you can pace yourself to the time you have to work once you begin taking pictures. If photography is used to slow your visit rather than speed it up your comprehension of the resource can be immeasurably enhanced.

Working with a 5x7 view camera in the cramped spaces of a buoy tender definitely slows the speed of documentation. On the opposite page are a few photographs extracted from a series of around 50 images made of each of two Coast Guard buoy tenders, one in Mobile, Alabama, the other in New Orleans, Louisiana. We also studied two vessels moored at the Coast Guard Yard at Curtis Bay, Maryland, near Baltimore. The series of photographs of all four buoy tenders should illustrate the various adapta-

tions made over time to very similar vessels.

Three of the images on the following page are taken from the series studying *White Sumac*, of New Orleans. This vessel is scheduled to remain in commission for several years. It was thus fully outfitted for maintenance of close-in shore and coastal buoys and was occupied by a full crew at the time the photographs were made. Being able to document a vessel or technology in its viable as opposed to archeological state represented a rare opportunity for HAER. It was thus important to obtain as thorough a document as possible.

Each vessel required approximately 50 images to give a knowledgeable viewer an understanding of the shape, texture, and technology of a buoy tender. Average shooting time for each vessel was 2 1/2 or 3 days, usually commencing in the forward sections of the vessel and working backward to the rudder details in the stern, complemented by a full set of exterior views. The pace was necessarily slow, but this slowness helped me considerably in the long run by providing me the extra time necessary to adjust to the shoot's complexity.

The buoy tenders included here started out as yard freighters with the U. S. Navy during the latter part of World War II. They were converted to buoy tending duties in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Buoy tenders are a class of vessels in the Coast Guard black fleet charged with maintenance of close-in shore aids to navigation, such as buoys, channel markers, and lighthouses. They are also versatile enough to handle some search and rescue tasks usually connected with natural disasters such as hurricanes. Like many engineering subjects, their tasks are taken completely for granted until these disasters, natural or otherwise, interrupt their function. These ships are as utilitarian as tug boats, yet their function is all important to the maintenance of smooth maritime commerce and recreation. HAER's photographic documentation helps to explicate this significance.

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Photos on page 25 by the author.



White Pine conducting maintenance work on midbay lighthouse in Mobile Bay. Crew is removing ladder from lighthouse for repairs. White Pine crane and winch are in foreground. To avoid getting in the way of a very active crew, this shot had to be taken without a tripod. Bright light enabled stopping down for depth of field while maintaining a relatively fast shutter speed.



Two moored buoy tenders at the Coast Guard Yard at Curtis Bay in Maryland, White Holly on the left and White Sage on the right. The black hulls are a way for the Coast Guard to designate the functional and utilitarian nature of its fleet that tends to lighthouses, buoys, gongs, bells, whistles, and most all maritime navigational devices. Note the different hull construction built around the same shape but probably reflecting construction in different shipyards.

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Interior of hold #1 of White Sumac, showing maintenance and replacement parts for buoys and navigational devices. The river buoys in the center of the picture are made of foam, damage-resistant to direct hits from ships. Based in New Orleans, this ship is responsible for maintaining aids to navigation along rivers and estuaries of the Gulf Coast.



Left, buoy deck of White Sumac, with crane controls in foreground, doubtless the single most important piece of equipment on the vessel. Buoys are lifted on to deck and lashed with chains seen over the hold in middle ground. A lot of the maintenance activity that can be done while still at sea, such as scraping barnacles, is done on this deck. Serious repainting and recoating of buoys is done in a shop back at the yard. This photo was taken from the starboard side of the exterior bridge deck. Right, detail of #1 hold of White Sumac showing hull framing detail as well as storage of buoy lamps.