

Jack the Photographer

During his entire adult life, Dad was obsessed with taking pictures and videos of people. These were made with the most inexpensive cameras available, and with a Super-8 movie camera without sound. Often these were pictures of his family, but he was such a friendly, outgoing person that he also took pictures and videos of people he happened to meet. As I look now through the collection of hundreds of images that resulted from this obsession, I can't help but notice how many of them feature young, attractive women that no one else in the family knows, but that is just part of who Dad was. My favorite from this collection, though, is the one of the two Jehovah's Witnesses who were obviously invited into the backyard of the house in Florida to have their picture taken in front of the orange trees. That must have been quite a conversation as they tried to out-evangelize each other.



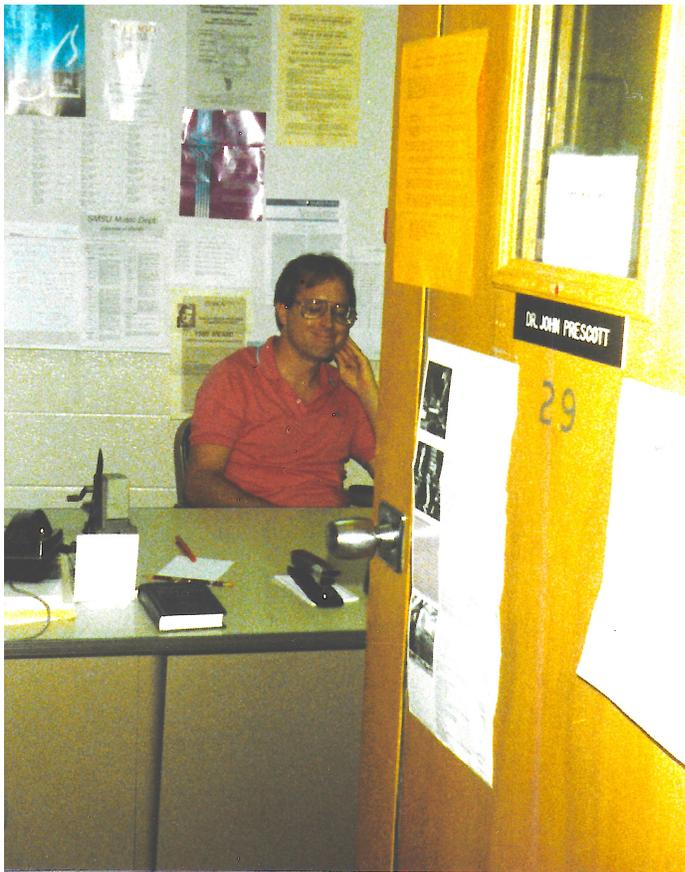
Pictures in which at least one person is scowling make up a significant part of the collection of Prescott family photos. This is because it didn't seem to be possible to sit down to a meal without Dad stopping everything to take a posed picture—candid shots were just not acceptable to him. This practice grew annoying to the rest of his family, and that emotion would be expressed clearly in the resulting photo. Still, though, he persisted in doing this.



One of Dad's many jobs was driving tourists around Ft. Lauderdale on the Voyager Sightseeing Train. Using a microphone, he would talk to the passengers about the history of the city and native plants such as the Gumbo-limbo tree (also known as the Tourist Tree because of the naturally peeling bark). He would also sing some of his songs to them including "Ft. Lauderdale" and "September Song." He took the picture below on Easter Sunday, 1972 of a tour group from Australia that came off an 1800-passenger cruise ship. Only Jack would think to photograph a train full of customers he was supposed to be driving around.



In the Spring of 1988, Mom and Dad travelled from Ft. Lauderdale to Springfield, Missouri for a visit. In the Fall of 1986, I had been fortunate enough to be hired as an Assistant Professor and Music Theory Coordinator at Southwest Missouri State University (later Missouri State), and my parents wanted to see where I worked. My office in those early years was nothing more than a double-sized practice room in the basement of Ellis Hall, but they wanted to see it. More specifically, Dad wanted to take a picture of me sitting behind my desk as if I were preparing for class, and so we went there. The resulting picture shows me with a pained expression on my face, and I remember hoping at the time that none of my students would come by and see me participating in this activity, and I did all I could to hurry us along so that wouldn't happen. But now that both of my parents are gone, and I am myself a parent, I do wish I had not rushed them, because I see now that this represented, to them, the realization of all their hopes and dreams for their son. I think I should have allowed them to linger in that moment a little longer.



Near the end of his life, Jack was severely debilitated by Alzheimer's and Dementia, and his ability to communicate was highly restricted. His attempts to make words would result in syllables that made no sense, and would alternate between speech and song, but there was no clarity in either. He would watch television most of the time at this point, and I was watching

with him one evening when a commercial for a video camera came on the screen. Suddenly, the coherent phrase, “Is that a Japanese camera?” came out of his mouth, astonishing everyone within earshot. I responded to this question in an effort to initiate a short conversation, but the interchange did not materialize, and he quickly sank back into his world. His love of photography had brought him back to us for just a brief moment.

What photography meant to Jack was the opportunity to document the process of people living their lives. It didn’t matter to him whether he knew them or not. Knowing what I now know about bi-polar disorder, I can see that whenever he was in a manic state, he was inspired to create an ever-evolving film and slide show of his life experiences with almost everyone he met. This creative urge is illustrated by a short segment of film he made in the Fall of 1971 in which I was playing trumpet with the combined high school and middle school band on a float in a homecoming parade (it was a small band at that time, and all 36 of us could fit on the float). The first step, though, for Dad, was to film me walking with my instrument from our house to the car. When I told him that my trumpet was already at school, he insisted that that I substitute another instrument for this important sequence, and all that was available was a three-stringed mountain dulcimer, so that is what ended up in the movie. Looking at that film now, there is a strange lack of continuity at that point, and I’m wearing a look that says, “this is a really dumb idea,” but that was a teenager’s reaction. When my older self looks back at that film, it is gratifying to know that my father could feel satisfaction in documenting a phase in my life that he found significant. And as it turned out, being involved with marching and concert bands was crucial to my development as a musician—an important building block toward a career. Perhaps Dad sensed that all along.