

PNR/PCR Conference
Medford, Oregon
May 2012



TAKING QUALITY RAILROAD PHOTOGRAPHS

Pat LaTorres

The purpose of this outline is to point you in the right direction for taking quality railroad photographs. I'm not going to tell you how to take the "Perfect Picture", just give you some clues as to a good starting point. In the final picture (pun intended!), each photographer determines what image he or she ends up with, the image comes from within one's own mind. If two people try to photograph the same subject, the results will vary just because no two people see something the same way. Having said that, there tend to be a few guidelines that seem to be common to all good photography. Some of these deal with the creative process, some deal with the "nuts & bolts" of the technical side – these guidelines are what will be covered here.

While quality photography by its very nature is not inexpensive, there are a number of ways to make it a bit less painful. I'll try to include several of these ideas in this outline. One of the major points I'll bring up right now, is that it's often more expensive to buy a cheaper item multiple times rather than to bite the bullet and spend a bit more money only one time. Also, take the time to do research prior to making a major purchase, to make sure that you buy what you're really looking for. Often, by making a rush purchase one ends up with an expensive item that really doesn't meet your needs. Time is relatively cheap, spend as much of it as you might need to keep from spending money later on.

1) WHAT MAKES A GOOD IMAGE? (An emotional view):

A) Would you hang it in your living room? Would you want to look at it every day? These two questions may be the most important guide. If you wouldn't want it in your "living space", you can probably do better.

B) Does it excite you, do you want to know more about the subject? A really good image will hit that deep emotional chord.

C) Does it stay in your mind? If it comes to mind each time you enter the room and you WANT to look at it repeatedly, you're on the right track to that special image.

D) Be brutally honest with yourself about the photo. A good photographer will generally be his/her harshest critic, because you don't have to defend your ego from that person.

Recommended Cameras

Durable Nikon
Technical but fragile – Canon

Camera Framing:

Use: FX or ZX

Zoom:

Use **optical zoom** not digital zoom

II) WHAT MAKES A GOOD IMAGE? (A technical view):

A) FOCUS!!! If there's no sharp point of focus in the photo the viewer's eyes have no place to rest, so their eyes (along with the rest of the person) will just move on. Too often a good photo is ruined just by being out of focus!

B) Composition, how all of the elements in the field of view combine to "trap" the viewer's eyes in the photo. If the eyes feel compelled to stay on the image, the viewer generally stays also. Photography is pretty much a form of illusion, the viewers know nothing more about what they're seeing than what the photographer presents.

- 1) The "Rule of Thirds"; know what it is, when to use it and when to ignore it.
- 2) Photographic "convention"; if you know it, then you'll know when you're going against it.
- 3) Use both natural and man made scenic features to help frame and/or accent your subject (i.e. tunnel portals, tree trunks and branches, rock formations, reflected images, buildings, other trains, etc.).
- 4) Use weather conditions as part of the image (sunlight position, rain, snow, darkness, fog, etc.).

C) Exposing the medium (whether film or digital);

- 1) Contrast (use of the "Zone System"), shadow with detail for B&W film, color saturation with color film and digital).

D) Subject matter; No matter how well composed, exposed or printed, a boring subject will still be boring!

- 1) Why are you taking the photo? Do you want modeling reference, historic information, artistic expression, humor, etc.? A perfect modeling reference shot can be a truly boring artistic photo, while that one great artistic photo may be lacking any important modeling details.

III) Hardware, the tools of the trade:

A) What type of camera do you want to use?

- 1) 35 mm SLR.
- 2) Digital SLR.
- 3) Medium format, 2 1/4.
- 4) Large format, 4 X 5 or 8 X 10.
- 5) Other?

B) Tripod; get one appropriate for the application.

- 1) Heavy enough for the camera(s) being used.
- 2) Mini-pod
- 3) Buy QUALITY!
- 4) Get a good remote release at the same time.

C) Mono pod: This will provide stability when using longer lenses, as well as a second hand camera mount (with a little work).

D) Optional lenses; buy the best you can afford, so you only have to buy it once! The smaller the f-stop number the "faster" the lens, the faster the lens the better (usually!).

1) Short zoom, 25 mm to 105mm.

2) Long zoom, 75 mm to 300 mm.

3) "Wide Angle", 15 mm.

4) "Long" lens, 500 mm plus.

5) Interchangability of lenses.

6) If using a digital "point and shoot" camera, optical zoom is preferred over digital zoom!

Optical Zoom Better
than Digital Zoom

E) Filters;

1) UV; the lens protector.

2) Polarizing; helps "pop" the sky among other features.

3) Contrast filters; especially for B&W.

4) Special effects; nice to use on occasion, but don't get trapped.

F) Carrying cases:

1) How much and what sort of gear are you packing?

2) What sort of shooting conditions?

3) What sort of travel?

4) Clothing as a "case"; photo vests, jackets with lots of pockets, "cargo" pants. The key here is that one can't have too many pockets!

*Bung
Protection*

G) Spares and general supplies;

1) Spare batteries; they WILL go bad at exactly the wrong moment!

2) Battery charger (when on multi-day trips).

3) "Gaffer's" tape; This is a straight fabric tape, NOT duct tape (which has a metallic coating), and comes in a variety of colors (I usually lean toward black as it's the least obvious when used on a photo set).

4) Lens cleaner; use at the end of each day, so the gear is ready to use the next time you pull it from the case.

5) Small screwdriver or multi-tool; Only because it's easier to carry than a roll-around tool box.

6) Flash light; essential for those night time shoots.

7) Scanner; it really helps to have an idea of where the trains are.

8) Altamont Press timetable, or similar railroad guide.

9) Binoculars; helpful when shooting in the high desert or wide open spaces.

10) A laptop computer loaded with your common photo software.

11) Extra memory cards (you wouldn't head out with only one roll of film!).

II) Slide viewer;

- 1) Hand held.
- 2) Desk-top.
- 3) Slide tray.
- 4) Light box.
- 5) Lupe.
- 6) Slide projector.
- 7) Slide Scanner (Enter the digital world).

IV) Creating the image:

A) Film;

- 1) Color or Black & White?
- 2) Chrome or Print; generally chrome (slide) film is better for quality reproduction.
- 3) Film speed; lower ASA equals finer grain (sharper photo image).
- 4) What brand to use? The eternal question!!! My advice on this one is to shoot a variety of brands and speeds and find the one that gives you the results you're happiest with. The big three are Kodak (the yellow God, but getting harder to find), Fuji (the young upstart), and Agfa (the quiet one, always waiting in the shadows). Each brand has their devotees, so take the time (remember time is basically free) and ask around to see what the photographers you like use and why.
- 5) Select the correct film for the application (i.e daylight, tungsten light, nighttime shots, various artificial lighting conditions, infrared, etc.).
- 6) Compact memory cards. These are no more than "Digital Film", buy the best!

B) KNOW your camera!!! No two cameras (even of the same make and model) are exactly the same. Take the time to learn the idiosyncrasies of each unit; which way to turn the lens to focus in or out, know all the controls by feel, etc. Be able to operate the camera pretty much automatically, without having to think about it.

C) Processing the film:

- 1) Select a good lab and stay with them, the fewer variables, the more consistent your photos will be. If the lab is part of a regular photo store, buy as much of your gear as you can from the same shop. The better they know you, the more likely they are to help you with that difficult or time sensitive project.
- 2) When shooting slides, do you want them mounted, or in strips?
- 3) Digital memory card reader. Except when on the road, try to avoid using the camera to download the memory card. But, ALWAYS try to use the camera that you'll be using to format the card.

D) Making the print itself;

- 1) A poor quality print of a good subject is often worse than a good print of a poor subject.

2) For contest prints, use a good photo lab, or spend the money to purchase a quality color printer. A good professional lab can also do show quality digital prints.

3) If the lab you're using to print your images is not the same lab that processes the film, use them exclusively for all of your prints. Again, there will be a consistency to the work (the fewer variables the better) and if they know you as a regular they will be more willing to help with that "rush" project.

4) Mount the print in such a way that the mounting doesn't detract from the print, which is supposed to be the point of focus. *Slide or Print*

5) Glossy, or matte finish? This is one where the photographer has to make the call based on what he or she feels most comfortable with.

6) Protect the slide or print during transport! If you damage the original slide or negative, you've lost it all (this applies to digital images as well). If you damage the print after you've gotten it mounted and ready for the show, you've got to start all over again – this is one instance where time may not be quite so free.

In conclusion, get out at every opportunity and shoot. Go out with friends, by yourself for a few hours, a day, or a weekend. This gives you one more opportunity to enjoy our hobby and spending time outdoors is seldom a bad thing. While on this subject, wear comfortable clothes. You may be out shooting for several hours in all kinds of weather conditions. Wear appropriate footwear, your feet will have to carry you wherever you go.

Try to enter only newer work (less than two years old) in photo contests, this will keep your outlook and your work fresh and new. If you aren't entered at a convention contest, volunteer to help judge. It's really amazing how much one can learn while involved in the judging (this also works with the model contests). Also, by judging you have the opportunity to help inject a bit of your artistic views into to system and help broaden the views and the artistic horizons of the contestants and the other judges.

Shoot early and shoot often!

Pat LaTorres
duhnerd@pacbell.net