

Don Ultang poses with the bulky press camera he used to take stunning aerial photos of Iowa for the *Des Moines Register*, 1946–1958. In this essay, Ultang's daughter Joanne recounts her growing-up years tagging along with her father in the new world of photojournalism.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

From the Other Side of the Lens

by Joanne Ultang

The life and work of Don Ultang—my father—shaped my childhood and ultimately came to be a defining force in my adult life as well. As I was growing up, our family and life seemed “normal,” because I knew nothing else. In fact, from the vantage point of adulthood, I came to see it as an environment of privilege, though by this I do not mean monetary privilege; we lived modestly in a standard Arts and Crafts bungalow in a beautiful but uneventful part of Des Moines. Instead, I mean the advantages coming from growing up surrounded by some of the best and the brightest talents of my father’s generation, that legendary and so-called Greatest Generation.

Intelligent and educated, my father and mother set,

by example, an unstated but omnipresent household and family culture to match. In our home, bookshelves were crammed with books; an imposing volume of *The Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* was regularly consulted at meals to settle bets on words; my parents’ friends, dropping by to visit, discussed current events or finer points of the law. And always, and uniquely, there were my father’s photographs—expanding our personal horizons, making our surname widely recognized, and providing a rich visual environment—with some of them enlarged, framed, and hung as artwork on our walls while others were carefully preserved in family photo albums.

But ours were not destined to be any ordinary fam-

ily photo albums. For they were primarily a series of what I would call photographic “studies,” images usually captured with a more than sentimental purpose, using a large format camera and film that delivered exquisite detail, even when enlarged. These images were developed and printed by my father as he did all his own darkroom work then. This produced a collection of mostly 8”x10” (some 5”x7”) prints, the notable exceptions being unique sizes for Christmas cards, as my parents sent out family photo cards long before pre-cut photo-holder cards became commonplace.

Sometimes my father took photos of us simply to perform focused technical studies such as testing out lighting conditions or a new type of film. One summer evening I was drafted to hold a candle in our front yard while my father took pictures in the fading light of the day. At other times, our random childhood activities might grab his attention, and then his eye, famous for capturing people in spontaneous settings—as illustrated in some of the slice-of-life photos selected for this issue—would focus on one of us.

One afternoon, I donned a bandanna, pretending to be a cowboy, momentarily abandoning all care for my appearance. Knowing that I had only one remaining upper front tooth, my father, camera in hand, made numerous unsuccessful attempts to trigger a smile in me, now a very reluctant subject as I suddenly became self-conscious about those huge gaps in my teeth (and the remnants of a mosquito bite on my forehead). And after a number of his attempts, I was finally unable to contain my laughter any longer. The photographic result was honored by a prestigious award and later even headlined the nationally syndicated “Earl Wilson on Broadway” column.

The timing of my father’s interest in photojournalism could not have been more perfect. And what a time that was: A time when virtually everyone received the news in written words and still images printed on paper, courtesy of their daily newspaper. A time when these same readers eagerly anticipated more in-depth coverage along with more studied, even heroic, still images, courtesy of their newspaper’s Sunday edition as well as the great weekly magazines such as *Life* and *Look*. A time when the writing and still images had to be not only timely but also of a caliber that was compelling and enduring. And a time when Iowa readers were well served in this matter by a sort of Algonquin Round Table on the prairie. For the writers and photographers assembled by the *Des Moines Register* were fascinating and remarkably talented individuals. And while the public now, as then, is understandably impressed by my father’s Pulitzer Prize, as a youngster

I thought it was just part of the norm—and with good cause as other *Register* staff members won Pulitzers as well.

Although more than a half century has passed, I can still recall the compelling appeal to me of the physical and social milieu of my father’s work at the *Register*. My father had the great honor of being the only photographer to be included in the invitation-only *Register* bridge club comprising a handful of writers and their wives. On a rotating basis, my parents hosted the bridge parties at our home. The learned and always lively conversation was a magnet for me, and whenever possible, after my bedtime I would sneak downstairs to enjoy this great treat. It was many years later when I mentioned this to my father that I heard his explanation: that, as a rule, reporters are, indeed, unusually interesting people due to their innate curiosity.

I was the youngest of three children (all girls), the most like my father in looks, temperament, and curiosity, and the least interested in “girl things,” such as Blue Birds. All this gave me the desire and opportunity to tag along with my father when allowed—into his special, magical world.

In the evening if my father had to drive downtown to the *Register*’s office, I would jump at the chance to accompany him. I always stopped to peek into the ground-level windows where men were setting metal type and operating the huge printing presses. Every time we walked into the downstairs lobby, I was thrilled to encounter the enormous globe on display. Just a short elevator ride up, and we were in the domain of the photographers, who were as graciously at-

Jervas Baldwin, Register staff photographer and family friend, captured Don Ultang’s daughter Joanne (the author) engaged in drawing her father’s airplane during a routine evening stop at the Register’s photography department.



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SHS (DES MOINES)

The Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, at Locust and Eighth in the 1940s. The vertical sign of "500,000" refers to the circulation of the Sunday paper. The presses operated in the smaller building on the left.

tentive to me as the reporters were. A bonus was finding one of my favorite photographers, such as Jervas Baldwin, there to talk to me while I waited for my father.

If I was left to my own devices, my activity of choice was to wander alone through the darkroom suite. Each time was a new adventure in navigating this pitch-black labyrinth, and as soon as I was well into the first room, I was convinced I was forever lost. But soon enough, an acrid odor and distinctive gurgling sound of the chemical in the big tank told me I was in the developing room. When my wandering brought me to the inviting smell of a warm iron on linen, I knew I had arrived where the prints were finished. Comforted by

these familiar smells and sounds of the drying room, I was now confident that I would make it out safely once again. And that soon my father would find me and take me home.

Accompanying my father to the airport was another tag-along adventure I relished. Our visits could be for any number of reasons. Following the weather was like breathing for my father, and sometimes we would go to the top of the Des Moines airport to talk to workers there—especially the staff in the Weather Bureau (as it was then called). On one lucky visit, a bureau staff member even permitted me to officially release the weather balloon for the evening.

Or we might stop by Howard Gregory's Des Moines Flying Service, where the *Register's* plane was hangared, so that my father could speak to Bob Garmon, his primary airplane mechanic. Picture the laconic conversations between astronauts Yeager and Ridley in *The Right Stuff* and you have the essence of the bond between my father and Bob—not much chatter, but an immense level of trust.

Sometimes a trip to the Des Moines airport resulted in a plane ride with my father. Growing up in this plane, I was never afraid to fly in it. In fact, as a little girl I actually enjoyed the stomach-dropping bumps from turbulent air, sometimes imploring, "Do that again, please." Enchanted by the clouds, I was convinced that these giant cotton puffballs offered an ideal landing pad, should I be permitted to jump out of

the airplane. My father patiently, and repeatedly, explained their vaporous nature—like fog, he said. This induced me to ask him to fly through one so I could see inside. As he was usually flying VFR (by "visual flight rules"), he consistently declined, and it was not until I flew on commercial flights some years later that I finally experienced the disappointing reality of seeing "inside" the clouds.

Often as not my father's front-seat passenger was one of any number of adults from that fascinating pool of mid-20th-century journalism greats. One such passenger, familiar to me as well as to many Iowans, was longtime friend and political writer Clark Mol-

lenhoff. Assigned by the *Register* in 1950 to the Washington Bureau, Clark quickly established himself as a major presence on the political scene. Our visits with Clark and his wife Georgia were greatly relished. Both were lively conversationalists, always entertaining us with compelling stories from exotic places or inside the corridors of political power. Their adventures included surviving government uprisings (hiding in hotel bathtubs and high-speed escapes to the airport through streets filled with gunfire) as African countries struggled to change from colonies to independent nations.

On one return visit to Iowa, the Mollenhoffs joined my parents and others at our home in a game of bridge. With my new autograph book in hand, I approached Clark and Georgia to sign my book. Clark simply wrote: "Stay out of the rackets!"—a directive well beyond me at the time. Much later I came to understand that this was an ironic but pointed reference to his 1950s investigative reporting on corruption in organized labor and organized crime, for which he won a Pulitzer in 1958.

Usually my father's passengers were *Register* news reporters or sportswriters traveling with him to jointly cover a specific story or event in Iowa or out of state. Reporter Walt Shotwell frequently accompanied him; once they traveled together as far as Kayenta, Arizona, to cover the search for two Des Moines Explorer Scouts lost in the desert. Another frequent passenger was the

late and most remarkable *Register* writer and Iowa historian George Mills. Reflecting the high-spirited nature of this band of distinguished journalists, George used to call my father and say, "Get the plane ready—we're going to start some trouble."

Passengers on the plane were in excellent hands due to my father's extensive experience as a primary flight instructor during World War II, essentially teaching the fundamentals of aerial acrobatics to an endless supply of novice navy pilots. After the war ended, his mastery of the risks in flying a small plane turned out to be invaluable—for his special brand of photojournalism required some unusual flying to get the commanding images he desired. But this skill also gave him some notoriety among the reporters, who on more than one occasion were terrorized or even made airsick from steep turns and air turbulence bumps, all in a day's work for such assignments.

One afternoon my father stopped by our home, and finding me there alone, invited me to go along with him to the airport. Grabbing a pilot's snack of graham crackers, we headed out on what to me was the ultimate tag-along adventure: an aerial photo assignment. I can still hear him, while preparing to taxi and take off, using the toneless shorthand between pilot and control tower, always identifying himself as "4291 Bravo," despite the fact that everyone

in the tower knew exactly who he was. A small plane requires only minimal runway to gain airspeed, and soon we were airborne, our destination the isolated site of a train wreck. With the approval of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, the window on the pilot's side of the plane had been modified to be removable, so that the pilot himself could take photos, one of several trail-blazing innovations that shaped my father's photojournalistic career.

Once my father's discerning eye had spotted the train wreck below and rapidly sized up the subject, terrain, and lighting, a series of moves followed that required the visualization talent of an Italian Renaissance painter and the

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Lively conversation ensued at the bridge parties of *Register* writers, their wives, and Don and Veda Ultang. March 23, 1952 (Don Ultang's birthday) was the group's "After the Tax Party." Their raggedy attire in these photos presumably reflected the anticipated hike in federal income taxes that year. From left: Reporter George Mills, in suspenders and long Johns. Veda Ultang (in checked dress, sagging slip, and bare feet) watches as Carl Gartner prepares to bid. Right: Don Ultang, in ripped shirt and bowtie.



Sharing a lifelong love for new visual experiences, Don Ultang and his daughter Joanne (the author) pause during a late 1990s visit to the Chiricahua Mountains in Arizona.

smooth, rapid execution of a gold-medal Olympic diver. With the window out and the heavy Speed Graphic press camera in his right hand, my father circled back over the target—the sight of it momentarily blocked by the plane—until just the right moment. After he banked the plane so steeply it was nearly on its side, the twisted train popped into view. In one continuous, precise movement, he leaned through the empty window frame, tripped the shutter once, and then leveled the plane and quickly re-established an appropriate altitude.

Continuing the motion, he removed and replaced the 4" x 5" cut sheet film holder, and then circled back and retraced those same steps, motions, and risks. Meanwhile, he was flying rapidly at a very low altitude, making sure that he did not stall the plane or fly into a rise in the terrain. As with the Olympic diver, the chances for a perfect performance were limited to one or two efforts. But the consequence of a small error could be far greater.

This elegant pilot-photographer juggling act was the standard procedure behind my father's superb aerial photographs, and yet the extraordinary thing to me was his ability to mentally compose the image—defining the angle and position needed and committing all to a kind of "4-D" visual and kinesthetic template in

his head—and then executing it under a variety of demanding conditions.

In those days, there was very little that could be done in the darkroom to modify a photograph, so each unique composition was necessarily done "on the fly," both figuratively and literally. Now, as then, I am in awe when I compare my father's particular skill to those of other great names in outdoor photography—Ansel Adams comes to mind—who typically had the luxury of scouting and composing dramatic scenery and of waiting for days for the correct lighting. For me, the genius of my father as a pre-eminent photojournalist of his day, and even now, was this consistent on-the-fly ability to capture images of great artistic composition, lighting, and dramatic or emotional appeal—under rugged conditions and with no control over the subject matter.

I am delighted that *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* has chosen to publish this rare and historically significant portfolio of my father's color work from that classic period, the time the late Ken MacDonald (the *Register's* outstanding managing editor and an early and long-time supporter of my father) once so aptly described as "the glory days of American newspapers." My father's decision to donate his *Register*-era photojournalism collection to the State Historical Society of Iowa was fortuitous, for there could be no better advocates for perpetuating his legacy than Mary Bennett, curator of the Don Ultang Collection and whom my father came to regard as a dear friend, and Jamie Beranek, whom we can thank for the painstaking selection of images and the thoughtful accompanying text in this issue. Knowing my father as I did, I am sure he would be touched and delighted by the result of their efforts. ❖

The author professes zero interest in piloting an airplane and says that while her photo composition skills are actually pretty good, her primary relationship with cameras has been to quickly lose or break them. By design, she has lived and worked in the visually rich cities of Boston, New York City, and Santa Fe. Currently residing in Chicago, she admits to taking the occasional decent photo of Lake Michigan, from the extreme comfort of her living room, with her compact digital camera with Leica lens, when she can find it.

“A CAMERA THE SIZE OF A BASKETBALL” is how Don Ultang described his Speed Graphic (sitting here on his equipment case). Large-format cameras were still standard equipment for press photographers in the mid-20th century. Each film holder, like the ones in the lower left, held two 4”x5” negatives, one on each side. Indoor shots required a large flash gun and a ready supply of flash bulbs.

In the foreground is Ultang’s 35mm Leica, a far more versatile camera, and his light meter.

“Ultang wasn’t the first flying photographer, nor the first to exchange that marvelous old weapon, the Speed Graphic, for an unobtrusive 35 millimeter, nor the first to try to make color photos a daily part of the daily paper,” wrote James Flansburg, of the *Des Moines Register*, in 1991. “But he was an important leader and innovator in all those endeavors, and he gave each of them his own unique twist. That’s accomplishment.”

—The Editor



PHOTO BY CHARLES SCOTT; EQUIPMENT FROM ULTANG COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)



ULTANG COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Don Ultang, the *Des Moines Register's* pilot-photographer, poses here with the creative tools that made his career: his cameras and the four-person Beech Bonanza, the *Good News XI*. This photo, taken at the Des Moines airport in 1958, was from an advertising campaign designed to highlight the roles of the aircraft and Ultang in the *Register's* news and sports coverage for Iowa. A slightly different version of the ad ran in *The New Yorker*.