

The Evolution of Camera Clubs and the Digital Revolution  
By Vinnie Kempf, April 2002

In trying to determine the future it is beneficial to look at the past for parallels and perspective. In attempting to see how camera clubs will change in the future I will look at the experience of the Ridgewood Camera Club of New Jersey over its sixty-five years existence, see how it changed and then present one view of how camera clubs may evolve as the digital revolution in photography progresses.

Sixty-five years ago, in 1937, when the club formed its members were manipulating and printing black and white images in a classic wet darkroom. This activity continued for twelve years until 1949 when the first color slide competition took place. In 1949 the "slide revolution" started and by 1968, some 19 years later, it had taken over entirely when print competitions were cancelled due to lack of participation. Some interest in prints re-surfaced in 1979 and print competitions were resumed. This print activity continued at a low level and at the end of the 2000/2001 competition season only four printers in a club of over one hundred members had participated in all print competitions.

Then reasonably priced desktop printers for home computers took hold and printing came back in vogue. This year, 2002, we had our first competition in which the number of prints exceeded the number of slides entered in one of our competitions! At that point the change in printing was very obvious. Members having abandoned the cumbersome manipulation and printing techniques of a wet darkroom were being seduced by those of a dry darkroom.

What we lost in the slide film revolution was the capability to reasonably manipulate our images outside of the camera. Manipulation is not a bad thing, darkroom printers have been doing it for ages. The evolution of the desktop computer, slide scanner, digital camera and desktop printer brought the techniques of darkroom manipulation back into our photographic lives. This new technology allowed manipulation without the drawbacks of wet darkrooms and with the advantages of increased control over the manipulation and printing techniques offered by digital devices. It is this revitalization of image manipulation outside the camera that I believe will reshape camera clubs in the years to come.

Camera clubs need not fear this digital revolution instead they need to embrace and nurture it as the next revolution. The digital revolution will be a revolution similar to the slide film revolution. That revolution was very good for camera clubs increasing membership by making photography easier and more popular. The techniques of our art form changed, not the artistic expression of our images. We could now photograph images on slide film, have them processed conveniently, enter them in competitions and share them with others. The new slide film obviously fit our life styles since it gained a strong foothold in camera clubs.

How will camera clubs change over the next years and what transitions will take place? I would like to propose one scenario of that transition and change. First it is the group of people that are already in camera clubs using digital techniques to manipulate and print their images that I believe will drive the change and be the group that will transition camera clubs through the next revolution. This group of people start today mostly with slide or print film, scan their images, manipulate them and then print them in their own digital darkroom. The only transition left for them in the digital revolution is to migrate to photographing digitally. At that point they will be fully digital and will commence abandoning film as the source of their images.

This group I also believe will drive the next evolution in how photographic competitions are conducted. Today this group uses print media as their final image output for display in a camera club or International Exhibition. In a large camera club, print competitions suffer a few drawbacks. The audience, farther from the print than the judge, cannot adequately see the print and audience interest wanes in the competition. Additionally print transport for non local competitions becomes a major limiting factor in member participation. The switch to projecting images digitally without print media will be the final step in the digital evolution of this group of image makers. The Electronic Imaging Division of PSA is leading this evolution and is conducting International Exhibitions in full digital form. Images are sent to the exhibition as digital files and they are judged using desktop or notebook computers with a digital projector as output. In fact the only physical transmission that takes place is the money involved. That will also change over the years.

This evolution in International Exhibitions will eventually migrate into the other divisions of PSA sponsored International Exhibitions and into the conduct of camera club competitions. Once this occurs the full-scale conversion to digital photography will commence in camera clubs. At some point a critical mass of camera club photographers will be reached and the use of film will start to significantly wane. This conversion is not right around the corner but one can see it coming. Looking back at the Ridgewood Camera Club experience it took some nineteen years for slide film to take over completely from wet darkrooms. Considering the increased rate of change in technology and society this evolution will take a shorter time than the slide film revolution. An estimate of ten years would probably be reasonable for this revolution.

Camera club members using slide film for competition and manipulating their slides are also a part of this revolution. Slide makers today however have one disadvantage over print makers in the digital revolution. The cost of the equipment required to convert a digital file to a slide is beyond the home market and will probably remain so. The cost of converting a digital file to a slide by a commercial lab is in the order of \$3.00 to \$10.00 a slide and requires a turn-around time in the order of a week. While slide competitors have been embracing digital manipulation as evidenced by the increase of Creative slides, the drawback of converting a digital image to a slide limits the adaptation of digital manipulation by this group. This will change as soon as camera club competitions commence using digital projectors to hold competitions. At that point slide competitors will commence a wholesale migration to full digital photography.

One last thought. It is incumbent upon camera clubs to adopt the new digital technology and not fear or resist it. The change will be slow enough for all to easily adapt. Organizations that refuse to change cease to exist because they are no longer relevant to the people they serve.