

MOUNTAINS

Database aids study of George Masa photography



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Angelyn Whitmeyer might be the last person you would expect to contribute to ongoing research surrounding a Japanese photographer who found inspiration in the Great Smoky Mountains. And yet, the world is coming to know more about some sophisticated early images and an unlikely champion of Great Smoky Mountains National Park through Whitmeyer's new George Masa Photo Database.

As a kid growing up in Columbus, Ohio, Whitmeyer doesn't recall ever visiting Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Nor did she have a strong background in photography.

"Taking photographs was not something we did very often in my family," she says. "I distinctly remember my conservative use of film after receiving a small camera in 1970. Should I use black-and-white, or would color be better? Processing the film was another expense I had to consider."

Whitmeyer earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Kent State University and started her career teaching first and second grade in southeastern Ohio. She transitioned to computer programming, became a certified public accountant, and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1979. A photographer friend showed her how to process black-and-white photos in the darkroom, creating a negative and a print. She purchased a 35 mm camera to photograph scenes found along her travels to audit credit unions throughout North Carolina, remaining ever parsimonious in her use of film.

"When I moved to WNC in 2004, I was delighted with all the flowering native plants," she says. "With some hesitation, I decided to purchase a digital camera. Wow! I could take lots of photos and not worry about the cost of the film, developing, or making prints."

After several years of photographing native plants in all seasons, Whitmeyer created a website to assist people with plant identification. From there, she became interested in women photographers from the beginning of photography in 1839 through the 1950s and taught a series of courses on the topic at Asheville's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. The research piqued her interest in early photographers of Western North Carolina.



George Masa poses in field with three view cameras on tripods circa 1920-30.
PROVIDED BY THE HORACE KEPHART FAMILY COLLECTION, GSMA

"I came up with a list of potential photographers to research, then looked on the internet for books about the person and for photographic archives of their work," she says. "George Masa's name appeared on the initial list of photographers. The two sources of information about him were William A. Hart Jr.'s essay 'George Masa: The Best Mountaineer' and Paul Bonesteel's film 'The Mystery of George Masa.'"

Born in Japan, Masa came to the United States in 1906. His background and first nine years in the US have been shrouded in mystery, but those familiar with him know that he came to Asheville in 1915 to work at the Grove Park Inn. Photography eventually became Masa's vocation, but his avocation was hiking in the mountains of Western North Carolina — and in the Smokies in particular. Eventually, he would help bring attention to the Great Smoky Mountains as an ideal location for a new national park.

"He was an artist who composed and captured scenes of the Smokies with the same focus and intensity that is employed by master painters," says Bill Hart, whose writing inspired a renewed interest in Masa. "He was especially attentive to the effects of light and shadow as well as to cloud formations, often waiting hours for the ideal combination of light, shadow, and cloud effects."

Whitmeyer was particularly intrigued by some color postcards made from Ma-

sa's photographs at Chimney Rock and included in Hart's essay, but she soon found it impossible to purchase or share them with class participants. The lack of available prints for purchase, along with the fact that the postcards did not have any signed reference to Masa, reinforced what she'd learned from Hart's essay, Bonesteel's film, and notes on items found on Pack Library's special collections digital site — much of Masa's work, like that of many of the early women photographers, had been "lost" or destroyed.

Whitmeyer began to cross-reference the postcards with pages from the Pack Library site and prints in their collection. She studied Masa negatives at the Ewart M. Ball Collection at UNC Asheville's Ramsey Library special collections and made connections between them and the Pack information. Organizing this data and making detailed observations as she compared images, Whitmeyer decided to create a database of all the George Masa images she could find.

Announced in November, the database of 4,000 data points includes the Pack Library collection, which has digitized a substantial number of prints found by Jami Daniels in the Daniels Graphics Miller Printing Collection; the Ball Collection at Ramsey Library; the Highlands Historical Society collection; and the collections at Western Carolina University and Great Smoky Mountains

Association, which were donated by Libby Kephart Hargrave. Bill and Alice Hart graciously permitted access to their personal assemblage of Masa and Western North Carolina ephemera, allowing Whitmeyer to document subsequent uses of Masa's photos in publications such as brochures and booklets. The result is nearly 1,800 unique images and 2,200 subsequent uses of those photos in various publications from the 1920s until today.

"Angelyn's database is a labor of love — and dedication," said Janet McCue, who coauthored "Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography" (GSMA 2019) with the late George Ellison and is now collaborating with Bonesteel on a new biography of George Masa to be published by Great Smoky Mountains Association in fall 2024. "For a researcher, it's the best source for discovering which archive holds a copy of any particular Masa photo."

Bonesteel says Whitmeyer's database represents an immense tool for understanding the breadth of Masa's work. "His thousands of photos just exploded across the region after his death — with many gone forever — but her work dissecting Masa's records has allowed her to make sense of the chaos, categorizing and organizing the ones we have — and even the ones we don't."

The next in a short line of scholars before her, Whitmeyer has been bitten by the "Masa bug" and contributed skills she has honed throughout her life to do this very important work. Her 'accounting' has brought together the known Masa photos into one database and clarified the scope of lost images as well.

"No one has ever compiled all of this information into one source before," said McCue. "What's even better is that she's still discovering more."

Whitmeyer hopes people will "look in the attic, in the box in the closet, or in an old scrapbook and find those photographs taken by George Masa that the rest of us have yet to see." She welcomes anyone to get in touch about images that could be included in the database. Find out more by visiting GeorgeMasaPhotoDatabase.com and reach Whitmeyer at angelyn@georgemasaphotodata-base.com.

Frances Figart (rhymes with "tiger") is the editor of "Smokies Life" and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmas-soc.org.

Buncombe County has 1st flu-related death of season

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — Buncombe County had its first flu-related death of a resident for the 2023-24 flu season, the Buncombe County Health and Human Services announced in a news statement Dec. 12.

There have been eight adult influenza-associated deaths in North Carolina this season, plus one pediatric death in Western North Carolina in November, according to N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. The child flu-related death was the first in the state and second in the country for the 2023-24 season.

"It is with heavy hearts that we announce the first flu-related death in our Buncombe County community," county health director Dr. Ellis Matheson said in the release. "We take the seasonal flu seriously, recognizing its potential for severe illness and even fatality."

The county's health and human services received notification of the fatality on Dec. 11, and no further details will be disclosed "to safeguard the family's privacy," the release said.

According to the last influenza map released by the Centers for Disease Control on Dec. 8, North Carolina had a "high" flu activity, up from "moderate" in November.

The CDC recommends flu vaccination every year for everyone 6 months and older to prevent infection and to make the illness milder for those who catch it. Locations for flu vaccines and COVID-19 vaccines can be found online at www.vaccines.gov.

Certain groups are at higher risk for serious illness from flu, including children younger than 5, pregnant women, people over 65 and those with certain chronic medical conditions such as heart or lung disease, according to the CDC.

"Now is the time to get vaccinated, especially before participating in seasonal celebrations with friends and family,"

Matheson said. "Additional precautions include staying up-to-date on vaccinations, practicing good hand hygiene, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home if feeling unwell."

The Buncombe County Immunizations Clinic is located at 40 Coxe Ave. in downtown Asheville, offering two options for getting vaccines. Residents can call 828 250-5096 to make an appointment or visit during walk-in hours: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday between 8-11:30 a.m. and on Tuesday and Thursday between 1-4:30 p.m.

Additionally, the CDC recommends vaccines for RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, for infants and toddlers and for those over the age of 60. More information on RSV vaccines and prevention can be found at cdc.gov/rsv/about/prevention.html.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced the renewal of free COVID-19 tests for the 2023-24 winter season.

Test kits can be ordered at <https://>

special.usps.com/testkits. Those who are blind or have low-vision can order free test kits with enhanced accessibility at <https://special.usps.com/testkits/accessibility>.

For more information about North Carolina Health and Human Services efforts against the flu, visit <https://flu.ncdhhs.gov/index.htm>.

Flu symptoms to watch

These include:

- Fever
- Cough and/or sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Headaches and/or body aches
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea, which are most common among children

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Email her at rob-er@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober

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