

An interview with Anne Shiras, FBPA

The following interview took place between Anne Shiras and me, back when I was editor of this journal in 1987. The *Journal* had just begun a series of interviews with pioneer members of the association, and someone—Martin Scott, I believe—suggested Anne as a candidate. She was then living in a retirement community in Gibsonia, PA, and I lived in Pittsburgh, about 30 miles away, so I made a plan to drive out there. The visit was very pleasant. I had never met Anne, and found her to be a charming and good-humored host.

She had only recently moved to Gibsonia and was still accustoming herself to a smaller space. I remember being struck by the unfussy elegance of both her living quarters and her appearance; the photograph I took of her at the time shows me that I am remembering that accurately. At the time achieving a comparable effect in either dress or housekeeping seemed an unreachable goal for me, so her example was striking to me.

Anne, however, was uninterested in being made the focus of a published piece. As she wrote me later that year, "I think the members, especially the younger members, can only take so much nostalgia without becoming fed up, so I don't see why you are transcribing the visit to me into an article for the *Journal*. It seems to me you are preparing in what funeral directors call "advance of need."

She asked to be put "on the back-burner" and essentially asked me to wait for the time when an obituary was needed. Okay, Anne. I took you at your word; but now is indeed the time to share your story with a few more people.

Barbara Katzenberg, FBPA

BK: I guess coming here, I had sort of two ideas in mind—one was, I guess, to have a conversation of a little bit about

your experience getting started in the profession, what your original interests were?

AS: Well I was going in to the theater. I went to the Yale Drama School and took playwriting, and I had two years as a play reader in New York and a play in summer stock—it was great fun, but the Depression came along and the theater just was a very uncertain place to be. So, I came back here to the family hearth. Eastman Kodak then had retail stores which they haven't any more. There was a retail Eastman Kodak downtown and I used to take my motion picture films there to be developed. I was very interested in motion picture photography and I tried the time lapse of rapid growing and things like that. So, one of the clerks there said, you know doctors need photography very much. Why don't you find out if you couldn't do this work in the medical field? So, I looked into it and took a movie of a delivery of a baby just to see if I could survive in the operating room, and that seemed to go all right. So, I got a job with a doctor in the Department of Medicine, who needed a lot of lantern slides for a lecture on medical history he was giving, and he had wonderful old books—wonderful. But, I didn't know how you make lantern slides!

BK: Where was this? Was this at the University of Pittsburgh?

AS: Yes—Department of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Caldwell. So, I didn't know how to make lantern slides and he said I think it's very simple. You go down and you buy boxes of these glass plates and the directions for using them come right on the box. So, okay, I went down and bought 3" × 4" lantern slides but the directions did not show me how to do it. However a very nice doctor at the St. Francis Hospital had been making a lot of lantern slides and he gave me some preliminary

training and I made the slides for the lecture. Then I was in it, but I still didn't know one thing about it. Then I read about the BPA meeting in New Haven.

BK: Was that the first one?

AS: No, this was the second meeting—1932. I headed for New Haven and Louis Schmidt was so horrified that I had a job in medical photography and I didn't know one thing about it, that he invited me to the Rockefeller Institute for training in the summer. The Rockefeller didn't train people, but it took people who had jobs and let them visit. That was the technical difference. So I visited for two summers there and got a lot of help. And that was the start of the whole thing. The meeting and the journals helped me, too.

BK: Were there other people in Pittsburgh at that time doing this kind of work?

AS: It was just this doctor at the St. Francis that I know of but there was another doctor very interested in it and that was Dr. Davenport Hooker. I did some work for him. And then the pathologist at the University of Pittsburgh was very interested in photomicrography. He had one of those yea-big long cameras, you know, and he had been working with that.

BK: So, originally, you were working in the medical community using equipment that they had.

AS: Oh, yes. Yes.

BK: You didn't have equipment of your own, or you didn't purchase equipment of your own.

AS: No. Yes, sort of a view camera—an Eastman view camera turned up in one of the departments and they gave it to me and I tried to use it, but the lens was broken. I didn't have enough expe-

rience to know. I just couldn't focus the thing. Finally, I discovered that it was not a usable camera.

BK: So, you must have really been scrambling these first months before you had any training.

AS: Yes, you know it was ridiculous, but everything was so new in the whole idea of photography and what was mostly wanted at first in the Department of Medicine was copy work. They were assembling pictures of these very interesting books—so that was the start.

BK: How long did you work for the University of Pittsburgh? Was that your whole professional career?

AS: Oh, about 20 years. When Al Levin came back from the war where he was in the MAMAS, he settled in Pittsburgh for awhile, and he took over the department. There was a good deal of carrying equipment around, and I just found it very hard work.

BK: Yes. A lot for one person.

AS: Yes. And so he was sturdy and just out of the army, so he took over. I went into other things after that. But it was a great thing when I was doing it. Way at the beginning it was so interesting.

BK: That was the last time you worked in medical photography?

AS: Yes. I went on in the BPA. I went to the meetings and I was on some of the committees, and I was in the House for awhile, but I didn't do medical photography anymore. I did wildflower photography after that. I did a series for the New England Wildflower Association—of the flowers at Mount Washington. And that was a wonderful thing.

BK: Do you still have some of those photographs?

AS: No, I have no photographs of mine. They always got turned over.

BK: You didn't keep any of your pictures?

AS: No.

BK: Oh, dear. Well, I'd be interested to hear a little bit about your reminiscences—what you remember about the BPA in its early days.

AS: Well, what I chiefly remember is what a wonderful combination—Ralph Creer and Louis Schmidt were. You know Ralph did a very big thing when he started this because he was an unknown and he had no money to go on. So he went and talked to Mr. Schmidt about it and succeeded in enlisting his interest and those two together were really wonderful. Mr. Schmidt didn't want to start anything but when Ralph did it, he got very interested. But I don't think people give Ralph Creer credit—they now think that Mr. Schmidt was the one that really did all the work after it once got started. That is not so, but Ralph did move out to Chicago and was in the Veterans Administration there, and that took him out of the mainstream because most of the members were on the East Coast. He founded a Chicago Chapter and his liaison with the Army Medical Corps was invaluable to the BPA, because that is what got us into the war effort and then the Medical Administration—all those big departments resulted from it. And that upped the profession of photography considerably. So, he really did enormous things for the BPA.

BK: He was kind of a go-getter.

AS: Yes. Mr. Schmidt took the responsibility for the *Journal* though and that was a low, because we didn't have the money. You see, we started it because people in the commercial field said, oh, this is going to be great and you'll get a lot of advertising, our company is all ready to go with this. Well, they were, but there was the Depression and they just would not advertise and we didn't get the backing we thought we'd get. So, that made it awfully tough.

BK: And you had a very small membership at that time, didn't you?

AS: We started it with fewer than 50 members. Oh, Mr. Schmidt was horrified because he had worked on the Rockefeller Institute Journal and he knew journalism, and he said that this is not the thing to do, but Ralph Creer and Carl Clark did it. Carl Clark thought it was going to be a fine commercial venture!

BK: So, that was their idea. That was why they were so keen on having a Journal?

AS: Well, Carl Clarke did it—really as a business venture. He thought it would bring the BPA notoriety and him some money. But, it did just the opposite.

BK: It is kind of impressive, though, you know. I have all of the issues of the Journal in my office. When I explain to people that I'm the editor of a journal that's in its 55th volume, that really is very impressive, I think. It's not a minor amount of effort over the years that all that work actually got published.

AS: Of course the early years were wonderful because everybody knew everybody that came to the meetings. It was hard to go to the meetings. Your way was not paid by your institution and it cost money and our salary was so low at that time. So, it was a sacrifice. But they got a lot out of it and they met people who were doing the same thing and that was the godsend because there was no body of tradition of how things were done.

BK: So, you really needed those meetings to communicate and to learn about things.

AS: Oh, yes, and it gave you such a sense of there being somebody else out there, and somebody you could ask about it.

BK: When you were a working professional, which aspects of the work did you like the best?

AS: I liked the photomicrography. Ansco was bringing out a new color film and color was very young and they distributed film lavishly. And it was a beautiful process. I don't know what's happened to Ansco Color, but it was beautiful sheet film. And they sent it out to the BPA members and I do remember having a heavenly time with that. I loved photomicrography. That was it for me.

BK: You learned most of what you knew about photomicrography from the doctors you worked with?

AS: The pathologist—at the University of Pittsburgh—Dr. Cohen. He had done some photography and he had worked with a Dr. Haywood, who was at the Allegheny General Hospital, who was a very good photographer—doctor photographer—so, they were already pretty good.

BK: So, they helped train you.

AS: Oh, yes, they did.

BK: And what did they do with those pictures?

AS: Well, Dr. Cohen used a lot of the pictures in his reports—pathology reports—he illustrated his reports, and I think some of those were in the University until very recently. But I had a library—I ran a library of teaching slides and doctors would come and say they were going to lecture about something or other and I'd get out what we had on it.

BK: Most of which you had taken yourself or . . .

AS: Well, I had taken them all for a long time. Both Stella Zimmer and I were fortunate to have worked with Mr. Schmidt, though. She had a job and so she was eligible to visit. And she got her training there the year before I went and he enlisted people to work for the BPA. He was working so hard himself. So, I hadn't been at it a whole year when I was working like anything with Mr. Schmidt. And he got that kind of help from people, because he worked so hard himself. He was not a workaholic, and he said he didn't want to do it, and he grumbled like anything (laughter) and he would say "it beats the Dutch how you could go out and be having a nice vacation, and I'm sitting here doing all the work!"

BK: He complained, but he did it.

AS: He complained but he did it. And not only that but he got other people wanting to do it with him, you know. He was a wonderful friend. And so, that's what we were. We were his friends and we were very anxious to pitch in.

BK: I think about how the profession is for me, and I think that this field is really quite a nice field for women.

AS: It still is, isn't it?

BK: I think so, and it's interesting because there were some professions in the old days, like medicine and law that were difficult for women to get involved in. But it seems that that wasn't the case here.

AS: No. No, it wasn't. And that was largely Mr. Schmidt's doing. Stella Zimmer found Mr. Schmidt all on her

own. She inquired where she could get training and she wrote Mr. Schmidt and he said she could come down if she had a job, which she did.

BK: Why do you think he was so strong on that—that you had to have a job.

AS: They didn't want people coming to be trained. They were a research institution and they were not in the business of training people. But that's what they did nevertheless, right? They felt differently if they didn't have to help you find work—if they didn't have to turn into an employment agency you know. If you were already set, you were eligible.

BK: So he would just have one student at a time or . . .

AS: Oh, yes. He didn't have classes or anything. It was a good system.

BK: Did you ever have any hopes and dreams of returning to the stage?

AS: No, I liked medical photography.

BK: It seems so completely different.

AS: I had no aptitude for the stage. I was really just out for the ride. I did think I might be a playwright but I learned differently very quickly. No, I never wanted to go back. But two years in New York attached to the theater was a very nice thing to have had.

BK: Can you tell me something about the early BPA meetings?

AS: We were meeting in Chicago—this was 1935, and it was the third meeting that Ralph Creer had put on in five years. He put on three separate meetings, we were meeting that year at the Stevens Hotel and there was a sign on the bulletin board about the meeting and a doctor wandered up and began talking to Stella Zimmer who was working at the desk. Stella was always on the desk at the meetings because we didn't have much help then. So, she was always the first person that anybody who came met and so he said he'd like to look around. And he said he was going to do photography of nasal cilia—motion pictures. Was there anybody he ought to talk to? So, Stella ushered him into the meeting and she got hold of some people to talk to him. Well, he was with us for years. He was our toast master. He worked for us during the War and he helped us get materials.

The government was cutting down on photographic material. We didn't have the film we needed. He really helped us. His name was Arthur Proetz and he helped us get the fellowship started. He was just invaluable, and it's just because he liked the group. He just wandered in. And we did help him with cilia photography, and he did do very fine work in it.

BK: I think the BPA's going through a little bit of an identity crisis in a sense, because there are so many other groups now.

AS: Yes, and there's a group within BPA that wants to change it. And I can see that. And I don't know what the future is, do you?

BK: It's very hard to say. I think the association will always be there and there's a certain core of people that it serves, and I don't know whether to try to expand the border to include a lot of different groups is really the right way to go.

AS: Well, I don't think the word, communicators means anything. I hope they don't change their name to something about communicators.

BK: Biocommunicators.

AS: Because that doesn't mean pictures any more than it means words.

BK: The words are—coming up with a name that's right is not the easiest.

AS: No. The Biological Photographic Association is awkward and we've always known it. And there have been efforts to change it since the second year. But, we never could quite . . .

BK: Come up with something better.

AS: Better than anything else. And by now, it rolls off your tongue pretty easily because you've said it so many times. But it is awkward.

BK: Yes, that's a whole question of identity and having the right name and so forth. It certainly seems to cause a lot of discussion at annual meetings.

AS: Yes. Yes. Well, I think the House is being very interesting. They've got all kinds of ideas. Of course, I haven't been to a meeting for a good many years, but I do read everything I can find. I listen to some of the old members and they really want to change things a good

deal. I think they want the House to run it more than it has.

Of course, in the early days, the Board did everything because there weren't committees. They hadn't really started. The Board had to put on the meetings, and the Board had to make every decision. But the business was small and just keeping floating was the main one (laughter)—that took precedence over everything else.

BK: How about the Journal? Did they have difficulty getting papers and good quality papers?

AS: Yes. A great difficulty in getting them from the meeting to the *Journal*. The talks were often just delivered—some of them quite spontaneously. They never did get into the *Journal*. Yes, there was difficulty. But of course, in one way it was easier because everything was grist for the mill—people didn't know how to copy and they didn't know how to take even the most basic movie, necessarily. They wanted the fundamentals. And that's what we started with.

BK: Yes, that's interesting.

AS: There was some interesting research going on. Infrared was very big for a while. Is there much of this now?

BK: Not really, no.

AS: Another great subject that needed

going over was photomicrography, because they—those pictures were not turning out very well with the equipment we had. There wasn't enough contrast and they were very difficult to take with the equipment that was available then. Then, of course, I think there were more fundamental developments than there are now perhaps. And you see color sensitive film was just coming. That's what made medical photography possible, really, was panchromatic film. And that had just come along.

BK: With the black and white orthochromatic film—you couldn't get. . .

AS: Well, you couldn't take gross specimens because all of the red turned black and there was no detail in it at all. You couldn't take photographs in the operating room very well. They had been done, but . . .

BK: They weren't good pictures?

AS: No.

BK: So, you needed the panchromatic film.

AS: You needed the panchromatic film. Then, I think it was in '35 at that meeting in Chicago, we got our first look at a mini picture, taken on a Leica. We had a very wonderful member, who was president of the Leica Company in America—Zieler—Wolfgang Zieler. He

was a very amusing, good speaker. And he introduced the mini camera. Well, we could not see that that was going to be very useful (laughter)—but his little bitsy pictures were good. And they were quite convincing, and we were very much interested then to see his Leicas. But before we'd seen the photos we had no use for miniature photography. But all those things, you see, were there to be explored—and then, of course, color photography—that was a big development.

BK: Are you working on any projects now?

AS: Well, I'm working on bringing out a book that a friend wrote—just before he died—and I'd like to see it in publication. And so, his son and I are editing it and we're going to publish it. Well, we're going to print it ourselves—have it printed and get it out ourselves.

BK: What is this book about?

AS: It's a book that is not needed in the world. There are already too many of them. It's on Hamlet—a play on Hamlet. It's about the first quarto of Hamlet, which is very much disregarded as a real work. But this friend of my brother's and mine was convinced this was a better Hamlet than the one we have now. So, that's what this book says, and it isn't going to be popular at all. (Laughter) But it's a lot of fun.

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obituary**Anne Shiras, FBPA
1903–1994**

Anne Shiras; Photo by Barbara Katzenberg
at Anne's home in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania

Anne Shiras, who served as secretary of the BPA from 1932 to 1949 passed away in Pittsburgh on July 30, 1994 at the age of 91.

Anne graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1925 and Yale School of Drama in 1927. She received on-site training in Medical Photography with Louis Schmidt at Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (about 1930). Following her training with Mr. Schmidt, she served as photographer in the Department of Pathology at the McGee General Hospital for 18 years.

In addition to her long dedicated service as secretary of the BPA, she also served in many other capacities including Board of Directors, delegate from Western Pennsylvania and editorial board of the *Journal*. She also assisted in the planning of annual meetings and helped with the constitutional revision of voting procedures.

Anne contributed generously to the financial support of the organization. In most instances her gifts were anonymous, two of which should now be mentioned; she underwrote the publication of our 50-year history authored by Lou Gibson and in more recent years financed the Pioneer Lecture Series which has been a very successful program.

Her dedication and personal devotion to the development and welfare of the BPA was exemplary. Although she was in failing health for the past few years, her interest in BPA affairs continued and she asked to be kept informed of recent developments.

I knew Anne for more than sixty years, during which time we maintained a close personal friendship that never faltered. She always kept her perspective and sound judgement, and will be remembered for her warm and caring personality.

The BPA has lost a dedicated contributing member who will be greatly missed and I have lost a wonderful friend of long standing.

Ralph Creer, FBPA