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Life in photography launched at age 14

Curtis Grippe
Special for The Republic
Jul. 25, 2003 12:00 AM

Few 79-year-olds could tell you what they got for a present on their 14th birthday.

Willis Peterson can tell you. He got a box camera.

With that gift, Peterson began a career in nature and wildlife photography that has spanned 65 years. "The Glory of Nature's Form," an exhibit featuring the photography of Willis Peterson, will open Tuesday at the West Valley Art Museum in Surprise.

Peterson's family moved to Colorado from Minnesota when he was 6 years old. He always loved wildlife, and by the time he was 14 he had a miniature zoo in his back yard.

"I had squirrels, rabbits, skunks, even a badger," he said. "I tried to catch a fox, but that was a little too difficult."

The camera was given to him with the hopes of getting him to change his hobby from collecting wild animals to photography. Instead, the residents of his zoo became his first models.

"I really took to it right away. It was like magic," he said. "I had everything right there. The camera was the most primitive of cameras, so I was forced to develop a little bit of skill right from the beginning."

Skill wasn't the only thing young Peterson was forced to develop.

"We had a drugstore that developed film, but it was too expensive," he said. "My mom told me that I had to learn to develop my own."

Peterson was particularly inspired by what he called the "Brown Section" of the *Denver Post*, a two-page section devoted to sepia-toned photographs of Colorado wildlife and their habitat.

"They were photographs done by really good photographers," he said. "I could see how they used light and arranged form. I didn't think about it then, but I just saw what looked good and I went out and did the same thing."

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In 1943, Peterson moved to Arizona, becoming one of the first photojournalists for the *The Arizona Republic*. While working for *The Republic*, Peterson became acquainted with the chancellor at Glendale Community College.

"He asked me to start up a photography curriculum," Peterson said. "In order to do that I needed a master's degree, so I went back to school for a couple of years and got my master's."

Peterson taught at GCC for the next 18 years. When asked which has been more rewarding, taking pictures or teaching others to, Peterson found it hard to distinguish between the two.

"When you see students blossom, it's like creating an image yourself. They are one in the same to me," he said. "I had a marvelous time teaching. We used to go out on location around Arizona, and the students would follow me around and take pictures that we would discuss later in class. Those were some of my favorite moments. Who could ask for a better life than that?"

Although the majority of Peterson's work has been done in the Western mountains and deserts between Mexico and Alaska, he also has two exhibits featuring photographs from East Africa and Egypt and has done assignments in Sri Lanka and Europe.

Peterson's West Valley Art Museum exhibit contains more than 100 photos. About half are animals and the other half photos of their natural surroundings. The name, "Glory of Nature's Form," reflects Peterson's feelings about the origin of our planet and the creatures with which we share it.

"I'm not a particularly religious person," he said, "but there has got to be some kind of supreme being guiding things. It's not just happenstance. There is definitely a glory to it."

"The Glory of Nature's Form - The Nature Photography of Willis Peterson" will be on display from Tuesday through September at the West Valley Art Museum, 17420 N. Avenue of the Arts, Surprise.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is \$5 for adults and \$2 for students. Children ages 5 and under and museum members are free. For information, call (623) 972-0635 or visit www.wvam.org.

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