



Adventures of a **Naturist Photographer**

photos by Michael J. Cooney

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“**WANT YOUR JOB**” is a comment I hear at almost every photo workshop I’ve done over the years. What could be more exciting than traveling the country taking pictures of naked people? And yes, I will admit that there are times when I feel I live a truly remarkable life. After all, several times a year I get to fly to some wonderful location, meet people who I only know from the Internet, and tell them not only to get naked but also to jump off cliffs repeatedly, plunge into icy cold water and look happy about it, or go for a hike with me in some desert backcountry with rattlesnakes, just to get the shot I’m looking for. Now with 25 *N* magazine covers to my credit, the push to create “I wish I were there” images only intensifies.

The reality is that while I have a wonderful career shooting naturist photos, there is no way I could live on, or even eat off, my photo sales. My travels are most often added on to my regular business

trips, which as a TV commercial producer and education trade publisher fortunately takes me to cities that are reasonably close to top naturist sites. In a good year my naturist photo earnings might equal my out of pocket travel costs with, perhaps, enough left over for some new photo equipment. Now that I have gone digital and no longer have massive film bills, the situation has improved a bit. The real reward is having the opportunity to meet some wonderfully diverse and interesting people, at beautiful locations, and creating images that touch and inspire naturists.

I started my career as a professional photographer and videographer in 1975. I was a TV news stringer, which meant I only got paid when my film ran on the local news. Being young, single, and hungry, fires at 3:00 AM were a specialty and it took years for me not to compulsively chase every emergency siren I heard. I got paid \$15 a story, which actually helped

along with the GI bill to put me through a graduate MBA program. In my best month, February 1977, I had 23 stories air, the station got an award for local news coverage based on my efforts, and I got fired, having wiped out the stringer budget for the year.

What I learned from my TV news experience was, first, that this was no way to make a living, and more importantly to shoot fast, get it right the first time, and take measured risks, when necessary, to get the shot. I learned that “real” news photographers, full of adrenalin, will do things that their common sense would never permit if they didn’t have a camera in hand.

Pressure Under Fire

IN 1991, LEE BAXANDALL asked me to produce the first general naturist recruitment and orientation video. Having produced broadcast TV commercials for years,

I assembled my favorite video crew who were quite open to a nude beach video experience. The script called for several on-camera spokespersons with the primary one being female. I knew from my commercial production experience that being able to “walk, talk, and sound natural” while delivering a prepared script was not a common talent, and to do so nude would take a very special person. Thus I invited Jerri, a young woman who had done countless commercial roles for me and could deal with most any situation. Plus she had been to nude beaches and thus had no problem doing this assignment nude. It should be noted that Jerri is blond, beautiful, and had a recent breast augmentation that was a tribute to the surgeon’s skills. As a result, men immediately fell “in love” with her while naturist women resented her on principle alone. Thus our day of shooting at Mazo Beach was a very charged experience as a crowd of onlookers followed us about the beach.

The peak moment came as we were shooting one of the longer on-camera narratives alongside the river. Behind us and to the sides had gathered every single man on the beach. To my left in the river were several canoes full of very drunk college boys who on seeing Jerri were celebrating their adolescent dreams of being part of what they perceived to be a “Playboy” shoot had finally come true. Thus using air horns and water balloons propelled by slingshots, they did their best to be part of the action. Jerri wasn’t distracted a bit and continued to deliver her lines with her normal confidence, until off to my right a nude drunk on crutches, yes, on crutches, fell into our scene saying, “I just want her autograph.” That stopped everything. As soon as I was able to remove him I heard a small group of women who were watching all of this comment, “Just goes to prove it.” Naively I asked, “Goes to prove what?” The answer: “All men are assholes.” I really wanted to argue, but the evidence at that moment was overwhelming.

We finished the video which served its purpose well even though, or maybe because, it generated both intense criticism

from some naturists regarding Jerri not being a proper representative of the naturist lifestyle, and the fact that Jerri developed a national fan club of middle-aged men who kept hoping she would visit a beach near them.

As for Jerri, after working years to put herself through college she earned her degree, got a management job, and no longer had the time or need to supplement her income by modeling. She became active in a Christian church where she met and married the man of her dreams, and thus we can assume she is living happily ever after.

Cold in Hawaii

HIGH ABOVE Makahiku Falls down the road from Hana on the wonderful island of Maui is a canyon that feels like it is the entrance to middle earth. I first discovered it in 1984, but it was fourteen years later before I could return with fellow naturists for a photo shoot. Reaching the canyon required swimming upstream in some very cold mountain water.

Now you already know that I don’t like cold water! I don’t willingly get into cold water, yet for three Naturist Life International photo seminars I led, I would find myself naked in the early morning, with camera in hand, plunging into yet another beautiful Vermont stream. I was always taught, as a director, never ask an actor or model to do something that I wasn’t prepared to do myself, so it’s always been a case of “follow me.” Cold water, however, was only one of my problems in Hawaii.

With my waterproof camera around my neck, I swam into the Maui canyon with my hosts Karen and Georgiana only to discover that when you are up a canyon, naked and wet, there is no way get the water off your lens. This is enough to make even the most dedicated naturist have “textile fantasies.” Luck was with me and my thumb served the purpose of clearing the lens sufficiently to get the publishable shot I had been wanting for fourteen years.



LEE BAXANDALL and Michael at the end of a joint presentation at TANR 1991.

Undercover Naturist

FOR A FEW HOURS on Saturday, September 7, 2002, you might say I went over to the dark side, or at least it may have appeared that way to Mazo Beach naturists.

I have been attempting to capture Reverend Ralph Ovadal and his followers on film and videotape for the last three



pleasantly explained that they had a big event planned for the end of the season for which he'd give me advance notice.

True to his word, on September 5 Ovadal called to let me know that they had a large demonstration planned for Saturday. We agreed to meet for an interview prior to the 1:00 PM demonstration time. While not asking for confidentiality, he did suggest that if word of their demonstration got out there would be far fewer nudists at the beach that day.

I went into professional journalist mode and decided to let things play out as they would without notifying the beach users of the WCU's intent. Friends of Mazo Beach and Badger Naturist leadership already had a heads-up regarding my contacts with Ovadal and that he could be expected to be at the beach.

For my naturist undercover role I wore a long-sleeved shirt and long pants to the beach for the first time in my life, and invited my budding journalist daughter Jessica to join me in covering the story. Jessica pitched the story to her college paper and had a good deal of fun with the editorial board's question: "Your father does what?"

I was feeling quite pleased with myself for my undercover scoop and especially having gotten Ovadal on tape. That is until

the next day. On Monday, TNS received word that the beach community was up in arms over an alleged conspiracy between myself and Ovadal to stage a big event so I could tape it for CNN and get Ovadal on national television. Despite the fact that I had given advance heads-up to the leadership of the beach user group, all seemed to be ready to hang me for joining forces with the enemy to stage a media event. The facts simply didn't support the conclusion created by the beach rumor mill, but facts are often quite boring when compared to a good conspiracy theory.

The resulting video and stills have been used by both *N* and *NAC* to show the Ovadal group for what it is—a surly, belligerent, uninformed cadre of louts—and thus has served the naturist cause well. CNN lost interest in the story and never followed up with me.

A Barely Necessary Shot

ON THE BARE NECESSITIES cruises I learned that getting the shot is one thing, but looking cool doing it really gets you extra credit from those watching. With a storm chasing us across the Caribbean, my fellow photographer Robb Maag and I climbed the ship's radar mast to get the first of what has become a Bare Necessities

years. Ever since they first made their appearance at Mazo, I have wanted to get them on film. They are the most visible and organized opposition group that naturists faced at the time. As I travel the country, people on beaches, east and west, would always ask about them and the current status of Mazo Beach. I believe it is vitally important that we understand who they are and how they operate, and that we put a face on the opposition. Only through understanding and equally effective organization can we maintain our rights.

Thus when CNN called to see if I had footage of the Christian protesters at Mazo Beach, I called the Wisconsin Christians United office and requested an interview identifying myself as a freelance videographer for CNN. Ovadal called me back and



CLIMBING UP A LADDER aboard a swaying ship can be dangerous business, but certainly worth it to get the shot on the Bare Necessities cruise in 1995.

tradition of doing a large group photo on the deck.

As with cold water, you've got to know that I'm not fond of heights, especially while climbing a ladder, and especially when the ladder is blowing about in a storm, on a swaying ship. Still, give me a camera and no problem; I'm off to the top for the shot.

Given the near storm conditions and the rocking of the ship, the ship's staff were clearly not happy with our request. Outfitted in safety harness and assigned two very large seamen to hold us in place, Rob and I were given two minutes to get the shot. The resulting photo was published widely in naturist publications and in Bare Necessities advertising, and the "that a boys" from the fellow passengers were priceless.

Witness Protection

THE LAST THING YOU WANT to happen as a naturist photographer is for your models, even with signed releases, to call you later and tell you they changed their minds. Especially if their change of heart means that you will lose your coverage of a remote or distant location. Thus I shot part of a story of Mexican naturist sites spending most of a day shooting the port of Cozumel with the only person I could find to volunteer that day, a woman who exhibited some rather strong narcissistic tendencies. There are days when if it weren't for narcissists I'd have no one to photograph. While I might not want to live with them, I'm grateful to have them on photo shoots.

So three weeks later I get a call from the woman who tells me, "I forgot that I'm in the witness protection program. Are you going to publish my photos?" Once I regained the ability to speak I exclaimed, "You FORGOT you're in the federal witness protection program?"

Well it turned out after further probing that it wasn't a "federal" program but rather the Oklahoma program, a state she had moved from some years ago. Thus after convincing her that Oklahoma wise guys probably don't read *N* magazine, all was well and we were able to publish her photos.



THE WORLD'S LARGEST nude frisbee toss at the Eastern Naturist Gathering, 1997.

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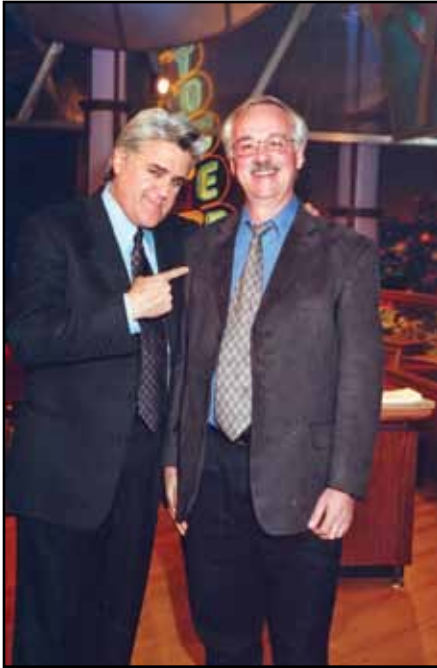
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"KEEP SENDING THOSE NUDE VIDEOS," the sum total of Michael's twenty-two seconds of face time with Jay Leno, 2001.

This prompted her to ask hopefully, "Will I be on the cover?" No cover shot for her, but you have to love those who love themselves that much.

The Great Nude Frisbee Toss

I HAD NO DOUBT CNN would love it! I could just hear the promo spot: "Next up, hundreds gather for the World's Largest Nude Frisbee Toss!" I convinced my colleagues at TNS that this event was a "must" for the Eastern Naturist Gathering. It was sure to make a great feature story, I thought, as I prepared to create as much video and photography as possible to have on hand when the media calls began.

The moment came to toss out the first Frisbee. Unfortunately a little more than 100 people participated, far short of the 500 or more I'd anticipated. "A little over 100" isn't the range of numbers that generally sets Guinness World Records. But since it appears that no one previously has attempted to set a nude Frisbee toss record, we'll claim the title until someone tells us differently!

With a camera crew ready to record the event, we were set to toss. In my producer's mind I pictured a great circle, people gleefully filling the sky with photogenic white discs. I didn't anticipate that after the first toss the great circle would implode, morphing into a pit of chaos. Frisbees and people were everywhere, and in no particular order, rendering them virtually impossible to photograph.

After several failed attempts to reinvent the circle formation, I fell back to the classic straight line battle formations of the American Revolution. This worked a little better for getting Frisbees lofted, but was not aesthetically pleasing. To get "the perfect shot" now obsessed me. I regrouped the troops once more. With my trusting wife Donna at my side operating the video camera and me working my Nikon still camera, I trusted the assemblage to turn now and toss their discs towards us.

I was pleased at first. The sky filled with Frisbees, yielding shots I had longed

for. These were noble, gentle folk; they took great effort not to hit us photographers. I was touched by their show of group care.

Then the first Frisbee struck us and instantly we sensed the mood shift. Bloodthirsty naked Frisbee wielders advanced upon us! Donna took one hard hit. She dropped the video camera, covering herself in a fetal position on the ground. Her hand was hurt and so was her pride.



HIGH UP SADDLE Mountain, Sherry in a brief "unarmed" moment, 2003.

With my roll of film finished (yes, I got the shot first) I covered her body with mine to protect her and to prove I still had the makings of a hero. Despite my flashing the classic '60s peace sign, a whipped-up grinning mob now advanced, pelting us. Some kind soul extracted Donna. A healing circle was formed restoring order and peace. My quick protective action may very well have saved my marriage, although Donna claims she won't trust me on a shoot again.

As for CNN, they said they'd get back to me, but never did. Later, however, a producer from the *Jay Leno Show* called looking for nude footage they could use. They loved the nude Frisbee toss and at last count it has aired seven times. And yes, I did get "well paid" for the footage, with a lifetime supply of *Tonight Show* T-shirts and coffee mugs, VIP seating at the show when I was in LA on business, and an 18-second photo op with Jay.

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Donna was no where to be seen when we restaged the nude Frisbee toss at the 2007 Eastern Gathering. This time around I set the camera on a tripod and ran. For some reason the footage didn't have the same "impact."

Armed, Naked, and Dangerous

WHENEVER I VISIT Arizona's El Dorado Hot Springs I always do a shoot at nearby Saddle Mountain, inviting visitors at the springs to join me. On this particular visit I invited Laura, who was working at the springs, and Sherry, a long-term guest, to join me. Sherry is a professional industrial wall covering installer who works and lives out of her restored Mack truck that pulls a long cargo van. The rig serves as her living space and storage for her tools and toys, which include an ATV nested in the back of her small pickup truck that in turn fits into the van. She also carries enough weaponry to start a small revolution.

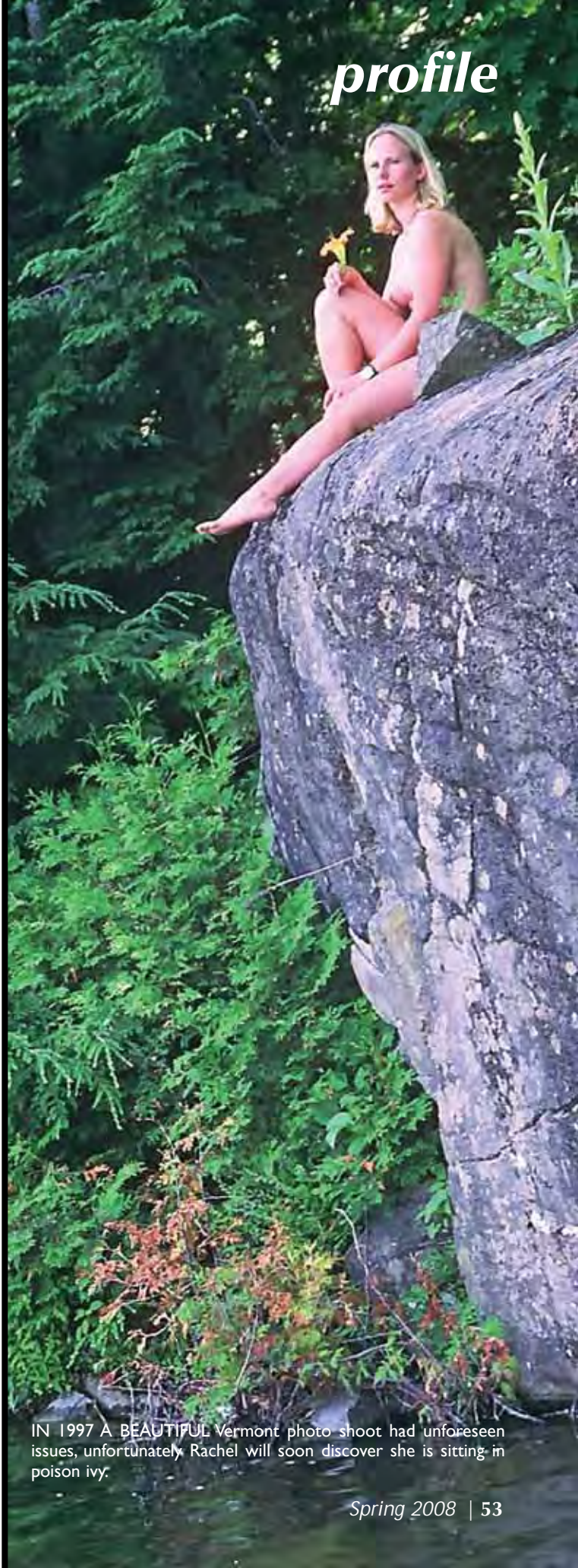
So as we made our plans for an early morning shoot, I suggested that a photo assistant would be helpful to carry my gear up and down the rock formations. No problem they told me, they would find me one.

Early the next morning I found myself high up on Saddle Mountain with Laura on one side. She was serene, calm, and one with nature as she sat looking over the valley. On my other was Sherry, armed with her Czechoslovakian assault rifle with bayonet, shooting up the desert below. Behind me, was my photo assistant, one very hung-over cowboy who the ladies had picked up at the local bar with the line, "You aren't going to 'get lucky,' but you are going to help on a nude photo shoot." Actually he was a good assistant, scampering over the rocks with ease, even though most of his attention was focused on trying to remember just where he left his pickup truck.

Two Kinds of Mexican Storm

THE ONLY WAY TO GET a beach shot of your models at a resort and not include any unwilling guest is to get up very early. Thus at Mexico's Hidden Beach Resort I found myself, just after sunrise, high up the ladder I requested the day before, looking down on my volunteer models who were populating the beach for the perfect shot. Resort management requested that I not shoot before they arrived, but there was this huge black cloud that filled the sky making it clear that we had only a five-minute window of sunlight.

Having already explained to the one couple on the beach who were not my models that they would not be in the shot, I proceeded to shoot for the cover of *N* 26.3. Then the sky darkened and all hell broke loose. When finally the resort public relations manager—a woman of strong German heritage—arrived, she "explained" to me at great length that "rules" were more important than light. The next day I was treated to a second



IN 1997 A BEAUTIFUL Vermont photo shoot had unforeseen issues, unfortunately Rachel will soon discover she is sitting in poison ivy.

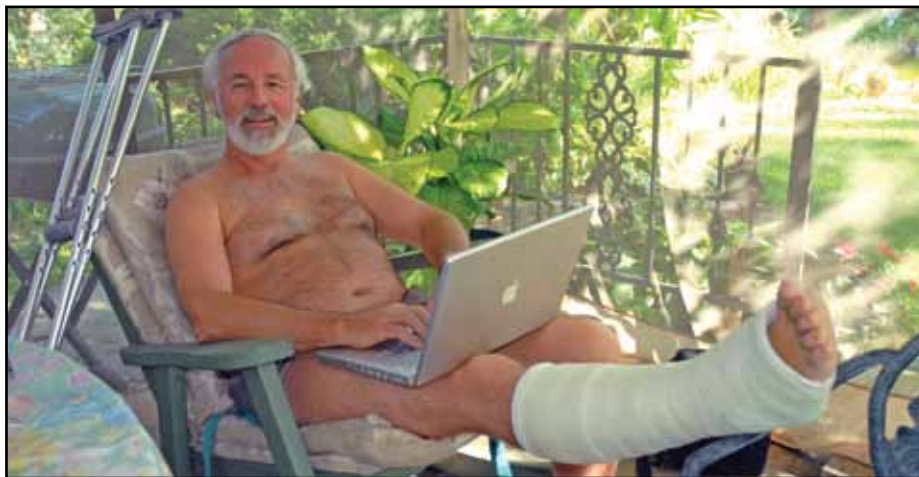
encounter when I was informed that the “nice couple” on the beach were claiming that their privacy was violated and their week ruined and hence would like a full refund please. Thus with both the public relations manager and the resort manager over my shoulder, we reviewed every shot from the morning beach shoot. And yes, in several frames we could—if we blew the shot up to the max—see the couple’s feet. With those “offending” frames deleted the couple didn’t get their free week and I was able to sell the management the notion that a cover shot in *N* would more than make up for their aggravation. Thus peace returned to paradise.

Model Love

OVER THE CENTURIES many great artists have fallen in love with their muse, a fact that I learned all too well when leading a naturist photo workshop in Vermont. Our paid model for the day, Rachel, was the absolute ideal of freshness and innocence. This was her first real social nude experience and here she was with seven naked men heavily armed with cameras.

The photo shoot went well and everyone got the shot of their dreams. It was only after Rachel left that I discovered that to a man they were seriously smitten with her. As their leader, I called a meeting over beer and pizza to discuss the state of their enrapture. As the discussion progressed I got brutally frank with the youngest and only unmarried member of the group, and told him directly, “You’re 37 and she’s 22, you live 800 miles away, and she doesn’t even know your name, so why do you think you have even a shot at a relationship?” While the reality that none of them were young men anymore may have been painful, they had great photos to help keep the memory of the day alive.

As for me, practicing my director’s creed of never asking a model to do something I wouldn’t do myself, I happily demonstrated how I wanted Rachel to sit on a rock surrounded by vegetation, but I did so without checking out the plant I was sitting on. Thus for the next week or so I had



IF YOU BREAK your leg write a story, Michael at home recounting his leg breaking adventures, 2007.

the delightful experience of a poison ivy rash on my butt, which back home made me a legend among my video crews who told everyone they knew about the “naked producer who sat on poison ivy.” I didn’t call Rachel to see if she was having a similar experience.

Broke a Leg, but Got the Shot

IT WAS A GLORIOUS late summer day, bright sun, blue sky, white clouds, and a calm lake. Everything I wanted for my long-planned shoot at Point Creek Preserve on Lake Michigan (see story this issue).

My model couple Karen and Uwe were as delighted with the place as I. Having shot our first sequence on top of the bluff, I scouted ahead with my normal high energy for the next perfect spot only to step in an animal hole hidden in the tall grass. As soon as I heard the clear crackling sounds, I knew my life was about to change.

Given that the swelling was considerable, I did the only “rational” naturist thing, and went skinny-dipping in Lake Michigan. “The cold would be good for the swelling,” my companions rationalized. Fortunately the injury wasn’t particularly painful; it was just a “little break,” and the adrenaline of the photography carried me through the rest of the shoot, the hike back

to the car, and the drive to the emergency room.

More than Photos

THE GREAT REWARD of naturist photography is the ability to drop into people’s lives and see them not only through the lens, but also to experience who they are in that moment.

Working with volunteer models I search for the moment when boundaries dissolve and deep contact is made. The images tell the story. With luck, in each sequence of photos there is one photo that immediately draws the eye and touches the heart. The best naturist photos show clearly that beauty is not limited to the genetically gifted, thin, or young. Beauty is really about the opening of the heart and an opportunity to embrace the world in a natural state.

And finally, it takes a special spouse to understand and support her husband as he shoots naked people, lots of naked people. Which is why it is very fortunate that I met my wife Donna at the Eastern Naturist Gathering, with one of the first things we did together being a photo shoot. Thus it has become both part of family humor and reality when I tell her before leaving on a trip, “Good-bye dear, I’ve got to go shoot naked women now.”

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