

LIGHT:

The Photojournalism Of Don Rutledge

By Stanley Leary

ROSWELL, GA

IN 1955, DON RUTLEDGE FREQUENTLY wrote letters to the founder of the famous Black Star photo agency, Howard Chapnick. That was the year Rutledge graduated from seminary and started working in two worlds, combining missions and his pastoral work with photojournalism. He'd seen the bylines of Black Star photographers in magazines, and Rutledge wanted a photographic assignment from Chapnick. Black Star told Rutledge they wanted to see a portfolio before giving him an assignment. He didn't have a portfolio. But in each letter he gave Black Star one story idea after another.

Chapnick was soon frustrated by the guy who kept writing to him so often. Rutledge seemed to have some good ideas, but could he take a photograph? Chapnick wrote back, letting the young photographer know that they liked one of his ideas. They had contacted the parties in the proposal to see if they were interested. It would be a story for *Friends* magazine, the publication of the Chevrolet Company, the automaker.

Rutledge was so delighted with the response that he immediately contacted the subjects, shot the story, wrote the text, and sent a package of contact sheets and information to Black Star. Black Star was quite upset: "We haven't even talked to them yet, and you have already shot the story!" Someone at Black Star also told him of the many holes that they saw in the story, and how it would not work.

That was their second mistake. Rutledge contacted the subjects again and went back to the story, shooting to fill in the holes. This assignment was really first time he'd had anyone to critique his work or guide him. In the end, *Friends* magazine not only liked his work, but wanted to use Rutledge on more stories.

This unorthodox launch of a photographer's career was

SEEING A STORY. Don Rutledge editing his photographs for a story in *The Commission* magazine. "One of his strengths," the late Howard Chapnick said, "is that he is very observant of the world around him, not only in terms of the big stories, but the little stories, too."

Photograph by
Bill Bangham





SIX WEEKS, FAR NORTH. An Eskimo family living inside the Arctic Circle in 1967 was so happy to see the two volunteer workers who accompanied the photographer that everyone ignored Rutledge's "click-click-click." From an essay for *The Commission* magazine. **Photographs by Don Rutledge**

also the beginning of a close relationship between Rutledge and Chapnick at Black Star. Chapnick was considered the dean of photojournalism at the time and was highly regarded worldwide in the photography business. Chapnick said of Rutledge: "One of his great strengths is that he was very observant of the world around him, not only in terms of the big stories, but the little stories, too. He had this happy faculty of being responsive to visually translatable ideas which could be made into saleable entities. His strength over the years was his high sense of ethics and his religiosity, if you will. This carried through into his concern for mankind and the important issues. He tried to use photography to make people aware of the great problems in the world. He used it as a force for change; changing public perceptions and alerting the world to the problems that the world suffers like poverty and sickness."

From his unusual start, Rutledge went on to work as a photojournalist in 143 countries and all 50 states, shooting for Black Star as well as the Associated Press, *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *Stern* in Germany, *Paris-Match* in France, and numerous publications in Canada, South America, Europe, and Asia.

Rutledge is also well known for his documentary photography of John Howard Griffin as Griffin researched and wrote the landmark book, *Black Like Me*.

Even after he joined Black Star full time, Rutledge continued to combine his pastoral and mission work with

photojournalism. He stayed on as the pastor of the Maney Avenue Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, TN, until 1966 when he moved to Atlanta to join the staff of *Missions/USA* magazine for the Baptist church. Rutledge is now retired and living in Midlothian, VA.

"Photography ... forces us to see, to look beyond what the average person observes, to search where some people never think to look," Rutledge believes. "It even draws us back to the curiosity we experienced in our childhood. Children are filled with excitement about their surrounding world: Why is the sky blue? Why is one flower red and another yellow? How do the stars stay up in the sky? Why is the snow cold?"

"As the years go by that curious child matures into a normal adult with the attitude of 'who cares anymore about those childish questions and answers?' The 'seeing beyond what the average person sees' fills us constantly with excitement and allows us to keep the dreams of our youth."

Dan Beatty, photo quality coordinator for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, worked with Rutledge at *The Commission* where together they won many awards for the magazine.

"Don is the one person who has completely influenced the direction of the magazine," Beatty says. "Before Don came we knew that there was a certain way we wanted to present the missions material in the magazine. None of us had a firm grasp on what direction we should go to achieve



BLACK AND WHITE. Rutledge documented “Black Like Me” author John Howard Griffin, a white man who dyed himself black and then traveled through the segregated Southern states to witness and document America’s racism in the 20th century. Here Griffin is outside a theater in New Orleans.

our goals. Don really provided the direction for us to go. Don never expressed any strong feelings – in a critique type way — about the magazine. Just Don’s presence and constant example of someone who always strives for the best is what guided us along. He was constantly putting us into contact with different individuals in the field of photojournalism and layout and design. He felt these would be good influences on the magazine or influences that would help us along the road where we wanted to be with the publication.

“I would not be doing what I am doing, at the level I am doing it, if it hadn’t been for Don. He is an example of consistency and integrity in a field where that is not always a constant with the different people that I’ve met. He represented something that I wanted to achieve myself. He has been the biggest influence that I can think of on me personally and the different photographers that I have worked with along with Don.”

Based in Longmont, CO, Joanna Pinneo is one of the nation’s top magazine photographers today. She’s won third place in the Magazine Photographer of the Year competition and has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Her career started in the photo lab for *The Commission*, and today she shoots assignments for *National Geographic* and other major publications.

“Don spent hours with me, going over my contact sheets and helping me see which pictures were successful

and how others could be improved,” Pinneo says. “He worked with me on depth and layers and meanings. What to include and what not to include. He showed me how a millimeter can make the difference between a good photograph and a great photograph. It was just the kind of nurturing a young photographer needs to help figure out what’s important visually, as well as emotionally, when taking pictures.”

The foreword to Rutledge’s new book was written by Tom Kennedy, former director of photography for *National Geographic* who is now the managing editor for multimedia at Washingtonpost.com Interactive. Kennedy wrote: “Don’s photos sparkled with examples of human joy, tragedy, and daily life in between. ... Don’s photos convey the power of God’s handiwork and His presence in our world. ... I’m proud to have had him as a mentor on my life’s journey.”

Rutledge’s new book will be available after March 15 for \$26.95. The Baptist History and Heritage Society is the book’s sole distributor; for more information about buying a copy please contact Charles W. Deweese, their executive director and treasurer, at cdeweese@tnbaptist.org. ■

Leary, a photojournalist for more than two decades, worked for Rutledge for more than five years at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board in Richmond, VA.