



GEORGE SILK INTERVIEW
LIFE TURNS 50
LIFE STORIES

George Silk, Photographer, Life Magazine
August 19, 1986
Total Running Time: 34 minutes and 40 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

George Silk

Photographer, Life Magazine

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INTERVIEWER:

If you could pinpoint highlights of your career, 3 or 4 highlights of your career, what would they be?

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GEORGE SILK:

To to ask me, what are the highlights of my career? Is difficult question, I think, to answer because, because the, I mean, first of all, I can say, I will say, without question, that I'm always amazed that, when you press the trigger on a shutter and, and, you develop the film, that a picture's there. That's what got me interested in photography in the first place. When this happened. And. And I was just, naive enough, I suppose, not to let it go past me. It intrigued me. And, and I became interested in and and producing pictures, and I'm still.



But I'm still amazed, that, what comes up in that film and, to ask me about one of the highlights of my career. I can only say that, of course, working for life magazine was, was, was a very fortunate thing for me. We work well together, and, I aimed at when I from the time I saw the first life magazine in Cairo in 1940, I said, that's where I should be. They I'm, I think like they think and I just couldn't. In fact, I couldn't believe it when I saw the magazine and I couldn't put it down. I couldn't put it down for 2 or 3 days. And I decided then and there that, I, that's where I should go. And so my aim centered on doing that.

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INTERVIEWER:

What was life doing then?

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GEORGE SILK:

It was showing pictures of comedians, taken in Finland and, and, and and I think that story, set me off because he was doing exactly what I would have done, I think. And, I mean, I recognized myself, I recognized my own name as against what other photographers were doing, at that time, including the photographers in the Middle East, which was, I think, a picture of the general, and the, and, and people shaking hands and, and and, and, you know, the sort of the newspaper, the what was then the newspaper picture, the hometown picture with names underneath.

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INTERVIEWER:



And if you could describe what type of photography life was doing that caught your eye.

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GEORGE SILK:

It was life. I picked up life magazine, and here's my dad's pictures of, of the Finnish soldiers dying in the snow. And, and he had managed to get up the front there and, and was a, a real pioneer in this documentary type photography where you didn't photograph generals, particularly. You photographed people and you photographed what they were doing, and you didn't you didn't photograph what you thought they should be doing. You photographed what they did, and you became a photojournalist instantly. You instantly, you, had, as you know, instantly this got through to your skull. You had become a photojournalist without knowing it. And it wasn't even at that wasn't even a term in those days. And when I picked up, I was doing this in the Middle East, but I was working for the Australian Ministry of Information, and they didn't they didn't want that sort of a picture. They wanted pictures that they could send to hometown newspapers of three soldiers in a row in the same town, with their names underneath, shaking hands or something like that. And and I'd never worked for a newspaper, and in fact, I'd never worked commercially as a photographer. I'd sort of, got myself into this job with, one way and another. But I was not really a professional photographer, but I had I was given the job because the Prime Minister of Australia listened to what I had to say, which was what I'm telling you about what I saw in life magazine. I wanted to document the fact I'd looked at Flaherty's documentary movies. Man of Aran and, Nanook of the North and the wonderful guy from Canada who was doing the same thing. McLaughlin I



think his name was. And I had become very involved in with a few friends and looking at these movies and feeling that this was the way photography had to go away from the salon look and, and, and so, when I saw a life magazine, there it was. And it just startled the hell out of me. And I didn't cease trying to get there to become get on that staff. And so, and it was a matter of, a year and a, less than a year and a half a. I was. I was a lot. Yes. Yeah. So about a year and a half and I was working for them. And that took a little bit of doing from the middle of the Middle East somewhere when I was working for the Australians. But. That was the most fortunate thing that happened to me in my life because we, as you can have seen from any pictures you see of mine, we really worked with each other very, very well. And with their is not just the result in the magazine, the people that worked for life. We all understood each other. It was a it was a wonderful feeling of camaraderie.

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INTERVIEWER:

Now the, did life create the photo essay? Was this what you.

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GEORGE SILK:

Oh, oh, I, as far as I know, they did. Yeah. I think well, I mean, you know, there's the you if you start really researching something down to its very end, you'll find that nobody ever invented anything. And that something's that what you're doing is improving and, and, and maybe creating a new form and, I mean, Picasso didn't invent painting. He invented new forms of painting, new looks and painting, and that's what life it. And I mean, there was picture post, there was, other magazines along with Whole Life, but they tended to.



Picture post or the, they tended to cover the Empire more with illustrations, pictures being used as illustrations rather than the photo essay that life developed.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let's talk about your role as a war photographer for life magazine. What was it that was driving you to take these pictures? It's like another question.

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GEORGE SILK:

No, no, I mean, why did, why did. You really asking me why I enjoyed being in the taking pictures during the war, which I did. And. I think I know the answers to that. I'm not sure they're correct. I was not a commercial photographer before the war started. I was working in a photographic shop selling cameras and. But I had become very involved using these cameras when I went skiing or yacht racing or fishing or something. I don't come with me to take pictures and and I became pretty damn good photographer. So when the war started in 1939, I was in I'm in New Zealand. So the war started for us in September 1939, and I gave three months to, to join up. We were drafted everywhere during the age of 18 and 45, and I was 21. And. And I wrestled with this problem, wrestled and wrestled with it. And I figured that, I'd been asked a before to join the Air Force and with the idea of being a fighter pilot, because I was a top skier. And then I was asked to to go in the Navy with the idea of being a major torpedo boat skipper, because I was a skipper of a sailboat. And that's the sort of people I wanted, you know, and I really came after it. And this scared the hell out of me, because I figured that I



really wasn't, that I'd be a coward. And which is what I've discovered since, is what every practically every young man faced with the same question feels when the draft cut card comes along and passes out with being scared that you'd be a coward, and to get out and get away from being a coward, I figured if I could be a photographer, I could, I wouldn't have to, you know, go to the front like this. Well, of course, the opposite happened, because the moment that I succeeded in becoming a photographer and, and, because of because of the pictures I had taken in New Zealand that, that were pretty dynamic pictures. I didn't have any of them left. They're all gone. But they were dynamic pictures. And, because I was using small cameras and people were still using nothing but 4 or 5 and ten cameras. So I brought a whole new point of view of New Zealand to anybody that looked at my pictures. And so when I explained this, you know, when I went to Australia and explained this in Canberra to the, to the ministers that, that, that I really wanted to photograph the troops of what they went through. And, you know, I literally said, you know, maybe, help to stop Wars, which is, the ultimate crusader. And at 21, you'd better have a crusade or you're never going to get anywhere. I mean, I let's put it this way. I say that everybody should have at least one crusade in their life. And that was mine. The war became my crusade. I didn't intend to be, up the front, I didn't, I was I took that job to try and get out of being in the fighting. I finished, I began more fighting, and then as much fighting as the soldiers, because I was in the war for 1939 till it finished in 45. And I covered an awful lot of combat.

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INTERVIEWER:



And Margaret Bourke White said that you were one of the two best, war photographers that there ever was. Is that. Was there a competition among live photographers out there?

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GEORGE SILK:

Oh, yes, there certainly was competition. And seeing your I mean, seeing your stuff on the pages of the magazine, just, you know, the ego was enormous. I mean, you know, I was a little boy from New Zealand at the same my. And I wanted to be a photographer. I seriously wanted to be a photographer. I just didn't go into the war. Not wanting to be a photographer, I might have misstated that, what I wanted to be was a photographer anyhow, and I then I made use of that to get into to become a photographer and to see your stuff suddenly used in and, with your byline on it in this magazine. Certainly spurred, spurred you on, spurred me on. And it spurred me on, undoubtedly to do things, to match my camera and, and, and, which I think I did and, and, and he knows it and he knows that he, it was his pictures that, that brought me here in the first place. And we we've always been very good friends. When he was released from from the Japanese by the Japanese, pardon me. And came back on the grips home to New York in 42. He arrived here just a few days after I arrived here from Australia, and, I was not back to the Middle East in Australia when life hired me. And, and so we met at the Time-Life office when he, they brought him to the Time-Life and Shelley, and we met for the first time. And, and we've been very close friends, of course, ever since.

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INTERVIEWER:



Was life some photography during World War two? Did it have did did life have an editorial purpose with World War Two?

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GEORGE SILK:

Did life have an editorial purpose and. Well, for for. Oh, sure. I would like to help win the war. No question. We all did. I mean, the pictures, I mean, I mean. Life was not. And, of the OWI, which was to, to a great extent to comfort people at home, life was there to tell the truth. And, and, and and it sure lose a lot of things and, like the first dead and things like that shook loose a lot of things that would never got past censorship if it had been, merely trying to placate the public and, and comfort the mothers. It it showed the truth. And this is why the photographers were not afraid to work. Because I knew that that if I that that when they when they ventured in and, you know, into into great difficulty the child got shot at and, and, even hurt, that if they came out of there with the truth, it would get used. What I said and this is a lot of confidence, the magazines had a lot of confidence in us. Helped our egos. Helped us produce, drove us on.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let's talk about the wonderful issue or essay that you did on, the, the, Wilderness Challenge. And photography of of nature and things like that. And, I mean, this was an issue this essay that I write, won the award. That right?

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GEORGE SILK:

Yeah. That was that that that was part of the part of the award.

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INTERVIEWER:

Yeah. What was it about animals or nature that life magazine wanted to show? Why were they covering it? As simple as that.

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GEORGE SILK:

Well, I mean, that issue was. The issue was to be about. Outdoors, North America. It was a Christmas issue, a double issue. And it was to be about the outdoors and the outdoors. And within that issue, someone said, well, you know, we've got to have the, the animals. And, and so, I was asked if I would like to attempt I have, people generally thought it was impossible to do it in the time frame that was left, which was less than two months to produce it. And there was I had a wonderful woman in the nature department who set me up with contacts all over the country, and I took off just a couple days later, and, and, and these wonderful contacts that she had made enabled me to bring me to these positions where I could make contact and then do my thing.

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INTERVIEWER:

The life. The life like to to cover animal stories.

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GEORGE SILK:

Oh, I think so, yes. Everybody loves animals, don't they? And animals were animals were. But this was a specific thing on North American animals to go with the with the North American outdoors, you see. And, and. And while we have them in there, one picture has a fish in it. And. And you might say, well, that's not an animal, but, I mean, being a fisherman, I couldn't possibly let the story of the outdoors grow without being a rainbow trout in this is where rainbow trout come from. There all over the world, being shipped all over the world is shipped to my native country of New Zealand, where I caught them when I was a small boy and, huge ones this big. And, and so I just felt that trout had to be and, and so with that, I came up with that idea myself entirely of, of getting a trout under the water. And at first I just tried to get a view above the water and like the Tetons, but it didn't work. It wasn't enough, and it didn't work and it didn't work. And I finally discovered that, that I found a place where I discovered it was just full of deer and, and so I set up my this set up and succeeded. It took me three weeks, but to get that picture and took the three weeks out of my two months and doing the story, just getting that one picture. But, as you can see, it's probably worth it.

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INTERVIEWER:

The UN on the, on that note, let's talk about innovations. Phil Cunard had said that you were, a true innovator when it came to photography. Let's let's talk about that.

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GEORGE SILK:



Well, I mean, and indeed I did innovate and the, the, the picture of the trout and deer was a so in order to photograph, in order to make that work, I had to get a camera under the water and, and but if I just taken a camera under the water and photographed the trout, I wouldn't have had any great picture. That was nothing new. And so it it thinking about it, working out and making the sketches and airplanes, I came up with the idea of above and below the water. And so I became, I mean, and and it worked and, and, and you asked me, you might ask me, well, your, your picture show, you were an innovator. Why were you an innovator? My answer be very simply that I was bored to tears, were taking what was considered the regular pictures, the regular stuff that the average photographer would take. And if and I just, I just, I managed somehow to jump out of that. Jump out of that and, and start innovating. And the moment it happened the first time was when I put a camera, when I put a panoramic camera on my ski, and I suddenly discovered a whole new world of photography. And I managed to get one exposure on that camera before I broke the ski or broke the camera or something, rather, and doing this in Sun Valley. But I sent the film off and, and it came back with only one exposure on it. But that set that just busted wide open everything for me. Forget viewfinders, forget what Kodak says. Don't worry about the sun being over your shoulder when you're taking a picture. Every package used to have that in a young man. And fur from the time that I can remember until only a few years ago, the sun has to be over your shoulder when you take a picture. Well, I just throw out all inhibitions, all cliches. In that one picture that I took cleared me completely, clear the decks, and I was able to go on and do some quite remarkable things. So I just put a camera in the middle of the football field. And, it so happened that I knew Pete. Pete, what's his name?



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INTERVIEWER:
Rozelle.

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GEORGE SILK:
A Pete. I'd met Pete Rozelle, had gone down to the Olympics, Australia. And and he was appointed I when I came back to the, to the as commissioner and and and Marshall Smith, who was head of the sports department and I figured out this idea, and so we called up Pete Rozelle and took him to lunch, I think, and said, hey, you know, this will be a hell of a picture. We can if you let us do it. And he said, do it. Well, you couldn't do it today.

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INTERVIEWER:
And what did you do?

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GEORGE SILK:
Oh, we'll put a put a panoramic camera on a, I put on a piece of plywood the size of this big piece of plywood, a panoramic camera with the radio control to shoot off like once. One photograph and, and a kick off time, I rushed out in the field and put it 18in away from the ball. It was to be kicked at about a 45 degree angle, or less than that 30 degree angle. He could just run by it. The guy. And then I went back and when I blew the whistle, I then, you know, I press the radio as he was about to kick it and, and then the, linesman from the other side came across and picked it up and brought it the camera to me.



You know, I had one exposure and, you know, that's what I, I mean, now, will you understand what I said earlier about I'm always amazed when there's something on that film. It's a miracle. You know, I this was a this was this was literally weeks of work to get on that field and do this. I had one exposure and it made the double page, but double page foldout cover for the magazine. I did the same thing at the Kentucky Derby. I took them into Marshall and I. Not just me. I mean, please understand. If I say me, it means us. Generally speaking, it was me for the trout and the deer. But generally we had this wonderful group thing where, you know, people say, well, you can't work in a group. I say, balls. We, we worked successfully together. And, and Marshall said, well, look, now you put the camera on the.

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INTERVIEWER:

The America's Cup. Let's talk about the America's Cup and, and how and your approach to to sailing and photographing sailing. What did you do differently?

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GEORGE SILK:

I was a sailor when I was in New Zealand. I grew up in the South, an 18 footer and And so I was. You know, fascinated by the sport I was by. You know, I was the skipper of my boat. And when the, when the j boats in in 1930, in the late 30s, when Ranger beat the, the and the when when Ranger one during the last of the j boat races off Newport, I was, couldn't get enough pictures or reading. I couldn't read enough about them. I was very interested. So I when the, when the, they brought the America's Cup back in with 12m in 1958, it



was, just automatic that I was now in the, in the sports department was just automatic that I now, you know, become involved and, and the managing editor said, well, you know, we've seen. Like he had said earlier about skiing when I wanted to go to Sun Valley and do a story on skiing, he said, oh, you just want to go and spend a lot of money and ski. He said, you can't take any different skiing. Pictures can't be done. They're taking the same pictures now. They were in the 30s and they start taking the same pictures. When I went out there and and I told you how I took one picture, it was different and it set me off and I'll you train of thought, he said the same thing about the America's Cup. And he said, you're running a few. You, few of you dam Corinthians who, have the slightest bit of interest in it. And, and I said, no, I said, that's not true. I said the, I'll take it pictures that people out in Iowa will write letters about to you. And he said, impossible. It was all selling pictures of the same. Roosevelt's been taking sailing pictures. Roosevelt's father has been taking them young Rosenfeld now taking them and so on. And, and they were all the same. And I said, Ed, I'm going to go to Newport. He said, if you feel that way about your neck, you go. And, and so I went and sure enough, the first letter that came in was from Iowa, from a schoolteacher, as a matter of fact, that the letter came in and said, and said not only the pictures, but the writing. It was, I was a had become a thing for her class of, of compact, descriptive writing. She thought it was good. And so I had it. So the event, you know, so I was doing all right.

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INTERVIEWER:

But the photographs, what did you do differently? How did you approach the boat?



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GEORGE SILK:

How did I how did I approach photographing 12m? I guess that I, that, that I approached them, like I did most of the other outdoor stories that I did. I approached them as though I was, skippering that boat, or I was on those skis, or I was on that surfboard. And, I was the, probably the ultimate Walter Mitty, because I got myself. So, so part of the scene, I became part of the scene and was and was given was given, in the America's Cup. I was given, permission. I mean, I would they didn't give permission. They welcomed me aboard any time I wanted to come. And I even crewed on the boat a couple of. I'm not during races, but if they're short of a crew and practicing, they'd say, hey, come with us today. And I'd go and just crew with them one time. Camera. And because I needed help and. And you're going to stand that, the ABC wasn't up there or anybody else. I was there by myself. And at the time of the actual races, then, you know, maybe one team would come up and, and take a few rolls of film, but, there was never those were in the days when life was, as in its heyday. And to be a life photographer, you were given a lot of access. And the reason, of course, was you got tremendous, you were seen in the magazine and in such a tremendous way. And so, and so. Instead of having to go up there and produce, you know, in three days, some pictures of the America's Cup. I went up there for the summer and like, I went to Sun Valley and and I came back when I finished and, you know, it was I was up there, I rented a cottage and I was there all summer. My family came up some of the time and, and and enabled me to. To. You know, literally think it through and you've got to understand. You could go to Newport for two weeks and never see a boat because of the fog. When I say I was there all summer, you got to



understand that not out every day, the the the. You could go up there for a month and not come back with any pictures. Where did you.

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INTERVIEWER:

Where did you put the camera? That was different. It was unique.

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GEORGE SILK:

On the 12m. Well, I mean, I didn't put the camera. I held the camera in most cases, but I wasn't looking through it very, very often. I was I just had the sense of, that boat so much in the sense of what I wanted. And the opening picture and the opening picture of the bow of Easton, which is a beautiful varnished boat for a varnished wooden boat. To get that picture. I suddenly had the idea that I had to have a picture of Easton to go in my story. In that story that, that they used. And she had had much trouble, and I couldn't get her out there to. She wouldn't go out. She couldn't go out. And one weekend they called me up and said, hey, we're going to go out this weekend from Newport. Come on up. And so I went up and they went out. And that only got out just as far as the, the, the entrance to the bay at Newport and the mast, the step came loose, which is one of the in having trouble with. And so I was now up against a deadline for for the story. I had to have a picture of, you know that weekend and, and so I just simply closed my eyes and thought, what can I do? What can I do? What can I do that will be good, that will be different. And I thought and I so I walked up the bow and I look at the got the bow and look I looked back and then nothing. And then I looked down and saw the waves breaking and I rushed back. I only had a few minutes to do it



because they turn around. We're heading back to the dock. That'd be back in 3 or 4 minutes, and I grabbed a tripod and put my motorized Nikon on it with a 21 millimeter lens, and with an extension cable on it to release the motor and lay down on the bow and just held it over the bow, not being able to see it, and shot and rode the camera up and down the waves like this, you see, rode it up and down and and shot the whole road off and then came back and I get back in this cabin. What the hell are you doing, George? And I said, I don't know. And once again, I'm amazed that something came out and it came and was the picture on the story double page. And this is. This sort of. This sort of. This is the way you have to operate to produce good pictures, and you have to be fast on your feet and and sometimes quick in the mind, as in this case, if I hadn't got that picture, that story wouldn't have run, because there were, for the story was about the four and the four boats that were fighting to be the defender against the British, the Australians, pardon me. And we couldn't have done a story on three of them. And and it had to close on Wednesday, about Wednesday of the next week. And the boat wasn't operating. So.

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INTERVIEWER:

Was was going.

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GEORGE SILK:

Through. Being with. Being with the boat. The boat that long when I had to produce it all came together. If I hadn't been up there for three days or three weeks, it wouldn't come together like that.

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INTERVIEWER:

And life let you stay that long?

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GEORGE SILK:

Nobody asked me questions. I could have stayed twice as long if I wanted to.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the. When you heard that life was finally closing. Finishing.

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GEORGE SILK:

I was, I was in Nepal with my wife when, I got word that that life was, was going to fold, and I got a teletype from. From the picture editor that said, sorry, George, but the, the board has decided to fold the magazine and it was signed. Regards. And so I sent back a message immediately. I was just, I was at the hotel door on the way out on a track and with all my gear, two taxicabs full of gear. And I sent pack a message immediately, that said, your message of the eight badly garbled, please send half \$1 million for further expenses. And of course, I never heard anything more. Yeah, and neither did I expect to.

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INTERVIEWER:



Final thoughts on On Life magazine. How has life magazine affected your career? What is it allowed you to do?

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GEORGE SILK:

Well, I mean, I am, I say that life magazine was. It was absolutely the. Perfect place for me. I was there 30 years, which seems like a long time to be anywhere, I suppose. But, it probably was exactly right for me. One of the few people that was exactly right for. And and I realized somewhere along the line, but not in the beginning, and not even in the middle towards the end, that what had been happening really was that that, and being for me, not for everybody. For me, being on the staff of life magazine was like having a extremely well paid scholarship to photography and, but in property, as long as I wanted it. And, and towards the end of the time that I was there, I regretted I hadn't made more use. I wish I'd had that thought earlier. I think I would have approached things maybe a little calmer than I did, and produced better, better essays, more thoughtful pictures, more thoughtful essays, and gone on a lot gone on further than I went. And, and so I don't know what more you could say about the place you worked for. My only regret is that now I'm retired and I own a 30 foot racing sloop. Is that I didn't name it Henry. And I hope you can guess why.

END TC: 00:34:40:00