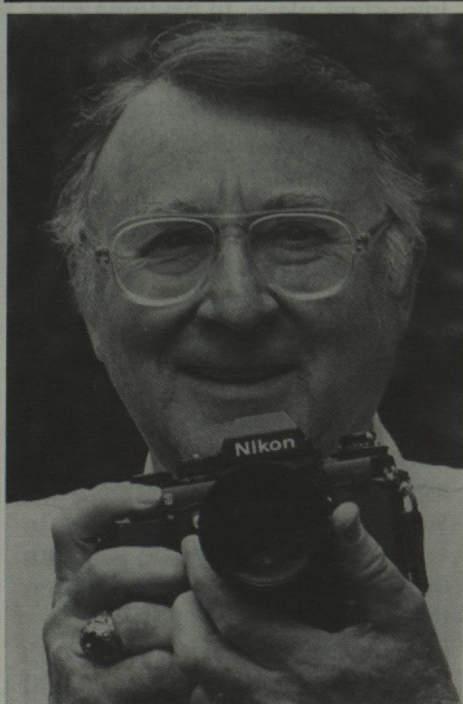


CHARLIE COX AND HIS CAMERA

by Mildred Arnold



CHARLES HOWARD COX, better known as “*Charlie*,” retired August 31 after pictorializing SIUE history more than 25 years. On a first-name basis with more students and alumni than anyone ever employed at the Edwardsville campus, this veteran photographer once feared his days at SIUE were numbered.

It was October 1965, shortly before Halloween. Charlie and a University “friend” decided it would be fun to sneak a pumpkin on top of “The Walking Man” which stands in Lovejoy Library, take a picture and send it out to the newspapers. Now every student graduated from SIUE since the

campus was opened at Edwardsville knows Rodin’s famous piece of sculpture—at least by sight.

“The more we thought about the idea of taking a picture of the eight-foot bronze statue, the more we liked it,” Charlie recalls. “I checked it out with my boss at Edwardsville, the late ▶

Ed Hasse. I even consulted Bill Lyons at Carbondale. Bill was head of University News Services for both campuses. Ed and Bill thought my friend and I had a great idea. The wire services were sure to pick it up, and SIUE would receive publicity coast to coast."

But they hadn't reckoned with members of the Architectural Arts Committee, assigned to select art objects to enhance the new campus at Edwardsville. Some of them were sorely affronted and said under no circumstances should this expensive work of the French sculptor, Auguste Rodin (1849-1917), be desecrated. The SIUE statue is one of 12 castings permitted by Rodin's will, and it had been purchased at a cost of \$29,000--a tidy some in those days.

Undaunted, Charlie and his friend, who helped perpetrate this prank by adding a pair of boxer shorts to the statue, continued with their plans. A picture was taken and circulated by News Services. It did, indeed, receive national exposure. In time, members of the Architectural Arts Committee who had objected began to see humor in the prank and all was forgiven. For several years it was a Halloween tradition.

Charlie Cox not only survived this incident, he went on to become a legend in his time. No one is better liked or known on campus than Charlie--and his camera.

Putting a pumpkin on "The Walking Man" wasn't the first mischievous incident in Charlie's life. His playful ways go back to when he was a youngster. "My folks wanted me to play the piano," he recalled, grinning. I practiced at my aunt's house with my cousin. He and I were supposed to do this 30 minutes every day, but we'd practice five minutes, then move the clock on the piano up 25 minutes. We



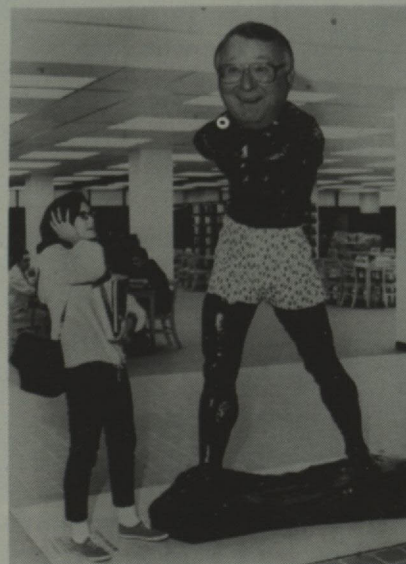
This controversial picture was taken by Charles Cox in October 1965, shortly before Halloween.

didn't think anyone was keeping track, but I'm sure my aunt was. My father later bought my sister and me a piano. She liked it. I didn't. That's probably why I never became a pianist. I didn't practice well."

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Charlie was six when his family moved back to his father's hometown, Louisville, Illinois. When he was in grade school, Charlie learned to play the cornet. "I played in a little town band in Louisville," he recalls. "We sounded like a German band. The director was the town dentist who played b-flat clarinet and directed the band with the clarinet in his mouth. On Saturday nights we gave a concert on the court house lawn. That concert was the big event of the week. All the

farm folks came into town. It was the county seat, with a population of 800." Charlie liked the cornet better than the piano. ▶

Charlie, we couldn't resist.



He played in the marching band when he was a student at the University of Illinois.

Charlie was 13 when he acquired his first camera. An active Boy Scout, he used to join his troupe at the UI football games on Saturday. One day in Champaign he wandered into a drug store and spotted a camera for sale for 50 cents. "It was probably a toy camera and I didn't know it," he admits, "but I bought it. Fifty cents was a lot of money in those days. I probably earned it selling blackberries door to door at 10 cents a half gallon. I couldn't find any film to fit the camera but I took it home, proud as could be. It was then I began taking pictures with my mind."

Taking pictures with his mind is still Charlie's philosophy. "You can see something in your mind and it registers," he explained to me last summer while talking about his impending retirement. "I've tried to get my student workers to follow that philosophy. It's a way of being conscious of what's around you. Right now, Mildred, I see light on you which would make a good picture. Unconsciously, I'm taking your picture in my mind."

One of Charlie's early favorite subjects was cats. "We lived at the edge of town and had a lot of cats, a cow and some chickens. People who came to town on Saturday nights had to pass the corner where we lived. When they had cats they wanted to get rid of, our corner was a convenient place to drop them off. On Sunday mornings we always had extra cats." Chuckling, he recalled putting them on an old nail keg "upstairs in our house where I had a playroom. I would get out my camera and pretend to take pictures. I'd make lights out of old gallon buckets and put light bulbs and sockets in them and light the cats and take their

pictures--but I never had any film."

After a couple of years, Charlie's folks realized their son had a real interest in photography so they bought him a camera, one that worked. Then he began taking "real" pictures.

The fact that Charlie Cox sees beauty in the ordinary was substantiated several years ago when he and his wife, Jennie, were eating in a Chinese restaurant. His fortune cookie that night read, "You see beauty in the ordinary."

"Things others pass by, I find interesting," he says. "To me simple things are best--barns, plows, barbed wire, old fence posts, old farm machinery, even weeds. The less you have in a picture, the more people can relate to it."

Charlie calculates he's always "had a knack for writing. When I was growing up nothing pleased me more than lying on a couch, reading a book. I just read and read and read. From reading, I guess I developed an interest in journalism. We had a weekly newspaper in Louisville which accepted stories from anybody.

"I was in high school when I remembered reading that a jail had been built in Louisville, the county seat of Clay County, for \$34 and a barrel of whiskey. So I wrote a little feature story about that and took it down to the newspaper office. To my surprise, it appeared, unchanged, on the front page of the Clay County Republican, with my name under the story."

Even during his Army service in World War II, Charlie found time to read. He read "a great many technical books about radio and broadcasting." When he reentered the UI after Army duty, he enrolled in journalism, with emphasis on broadcasting. "After a course or two, I realized my real interest was in print journalism, so I

concentrated on that. My ambition was to own a weekly newspaper."

After receiving his bachelor's degree in journalism at UI in 1949, Charlie went to work at the Newton (IL) Press. For \$2400 a year he was a reporter, advertising salesman, photographer and radio news writer and even a radio announcer.

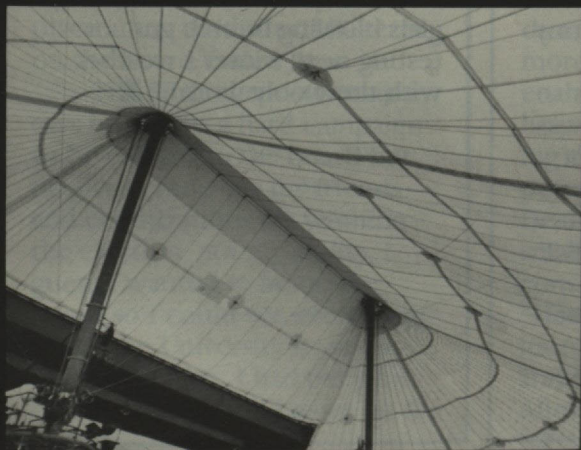
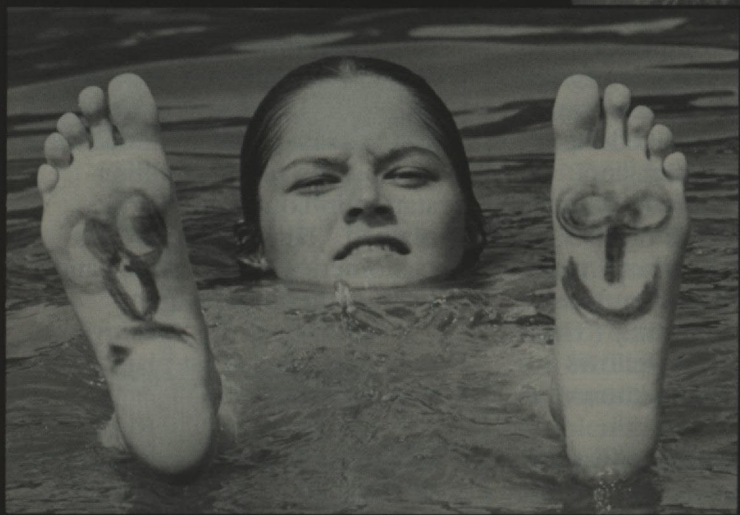
After a year and a half at the twice-weekly paper, he resigned and he and Jennie, whom he had met at UI, bought the Altamont News, a weekly newspaper serving a population of 1700. His dream come true?

"Two years after our paper qualified for and was accepted for membership in Audit Bureau of Circulation," Charlie noted. "Jennie and I worked hard and long hours to make the News a newspaper which folks in the community welcomed into their homes." The long hours and hard work paid off. In the following years, the paper won several awards in its circulation class.

In the seven and a half years Charlie and Jennie published their weekly paper they never found time to take a vacation. "It was 1958 when we decided we'd had enough. Our equipment was getting old and the building leaked. Our two boys, Greg and Doug, had grown up in the newspaper shop. It was time for a change."

Charlie and Jennie sold their paper and moved to Lebanon where Charlie went to work for McKendree College. He and Webb Garrison, president of McKendree, became acquainted when Charlie was president of the Southern Illinois Editorial Association (SIEA). When Garrison learned Charlie and Jennie were giving up their weekly newspaper, he said to Charlie, "If you would like to take a risk and not get paid very much, why don't you come over ▶

Some
Charlie ♦ Cox



F·A·V·O·R·I·T·E·S

to Lebanon and help me set up a public relations program at McKendree and see if we can't put a little life in the school."

This was an important job because McKendree administrators and trustees were thinking seriously of closing the Methodist college, founded in 1827. Charlie must have helped. The school is still going and there is no talk these days of its closing.

Through the years, Charlie had kept in close touch with the late Bill Lyons, mentioned previously as SIU's News Services director. About three years after Charlie joined McKendree College, Bill called him and suggested he (Charlie) take a day off and look over the SIU operations in southwestern Illinois, where two residence centers had been set up in 1957 --one in Alton, one in East St. Louis. Also, plans were flourishing for a spanking new SIU campus at Edwardsville. Bill Lyons hinted there might be something there for his writer-photographer friend.

Charlie joined the SIUE staff January 15, 1961, as writer-photographer. He recalls his first day on the job. "I drove the 35 miles from Lebanon in my Volkswagon in a snow storm. All day it snowed and snowed and snowed."

Photographing SIUE history 25 years has been fun, according to Charlie. If anyone has ever seen him frown on the job, stand up and be counted. "I've had the best job on campus," he says, "except I'm sure a lot of people think I didn't work at all."

"It isn't easy to single out the most interesting or happiest assignment I've had at SIUE," he continued. "If there is, it probably has to do with MRF (Mississippi River Festival) from 1969 through the 1970s. I still receive calls asking for photographs from those days when MRF gained nation-wide atten-

tion for SIUE. A book should be written about those days. MRF captured a period of history which will never be repeated. I wish it could be!"

Charlie recalls "The Who," a rock group from England which drew the biggest crowd--33,000--to the outdoor festival site. The affable photographer says he didn't realize how famous the group was. A writer from one of the St. Louis papers looked backstage before the performance and saw members of "The Who" enjoying their wine. He wanted some; he liked the brand. Charlie told him, "no problem; I'll get some for you. It wasn't that easy. They didn't want to share, even when I told them a reporter friend outside wanted some. To me they (The Who) were just some fellows drinking wine. I didn't know they were world-famous."

Charlie remembers "warm and friendly" Harry Chapin and Doc Severnson, "friendly and gracious." He remembers Henry Mancini, Mitch Miller and the King Family. "The King Family was interesting. Mitch Miller was down to earth, friendly and a good story teller. Mancini was so popular, he performed at SIUE several times."

The only regret Charlie Cox has is turning down the invitation of SIUE's world-renowned pianist, Ruth Slenczynska, and her husband, James Kerr, to come to their home for a party for Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler. Fiedler had directed the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in a concert at the MRF that night and Ruth was featured at the piano. "That was one of the biggest mistakes of my life, not accepting that invitation," Charlie recalled, wistfully. Ruth and Jim are SIUE professors.

Another exciting time for Charlie Cox was "when the buildings on this campus were being planned. It was great to

see and record in film all the talent President Delyte Morris brought to this area to help design this unique campus."

One of Charlie's perennial photos was of a pretty girl checking the coming winter's weather with a wooly worm. Also, he liked to shoot pictures of girls blowing bubble gum. Giving bubble gum to coeds was a long-time custom of his. He bought gum by the box (360) from his barber. His camera bag was never without it. He attributes this idea to his grandfather. "My grandfather was the first person to own a filling station in Louisville," he explained. "He liked to give his customers' children stick candy. I substituted bubble gum."

What does this sensitive, well-respected artist plan to do when he retires?

"Jennie and I like to travel," he responded. "We'll do a great deal of that. We don't plan long trips, just short ones more often so we won't get too tired. We have one son in Louisiana and another in California. We'll visit them. I like the four seasons," he continued, "so Jennie and I don't plan to move from Edwardsville--at least not for some time. We find home is the best place after all."

Charlie Cox won't be idle; you can bet on that. And he won't give up taking pictures. There will be old barns, barbed wire fences, farm equipment, weeds, and other simple things. There may even be a few pretty girls blowing bubble gum or testing next winter's weather with the wooly worm." ■

Alumnus

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AT EDWARDSVILLE

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Children enrolled in SIUE's Early Childhood Center like to curl up in the bubble windows on the front of the new building, which was officially opened and dedicated April 25, 1986.

Cover photo by Linda Gass

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