Wanderlust Drives Travel Photography Exhibition at FJJMA

NORMAN, OKLA. – Author John Steinbeck, in his 1962 book Travels with Charley: In Search of America, said Americans were defined by “a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any here … nearly every American hungers to move.” Wanderlust: Travel and American Photography examines the role American highways and interstates have played in the migratory desires of the American people. The new exhibition opens at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Friday, June 4, with a special public opening reception at 7 p.m.

The opening reception is preceded by a guest lecture at 6 p.m. by Eugene B. Adkins Curator Mark White. Both are free and open to museum association members and the public. The exhibition runs through Sept. 12.

“Since the early 20th century, travel has been an important part of the American experience, especially the sightseeing trips synonymous with summer vacations,” said White. “The photographs in this exhibition explore on various levels the links between travel and American identity.”

In the early 20th century, most existing U.S. roads had been constructed along old game, market and pioneer trails. Thanks to the Lincoln Highway Association in 1913 and the 1925 Federal Aid Highway Act, more than 200 auto trails were
created, standardized and designated, such as Route 1 from Fort Kent, Maine to Key West, Fla. or Route 66, from Chicago to Los Angeles.


In 1954, Abbott arrived in Florida in August, where she took numerous photographs of the various tourist destinations. She was appalled by the commercialism, especially in Daytona Beach, but felt that photographs such as *Daytona Beach, Daytona, Florida* (1954) accurately expressed the interests of the American people. After a brief stay, she left for Fort Kent, Maine, and took numerous photographs along the way, including the ubiquitous antique shops that bordered the highway.

Two years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower enhanced the highway infrastructure with the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways to facilitate commerce and travel, as well as an efficient military response in case of a national emergency. The expansion of the highways and interstates increased tourism substantially. Roadside became a site of chance occurrences, unexpected narratives and what French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called “things which are continually vanishing.” It was with this in mind that Victor Landweber compiled the 1981 portfolio, *American Roads*. Containing the work of 21 photographers, *American Roads* is an exploration of both the highways and their culture.

Both *American Roads* and Abbott’s Route 1 series suggest a desire to leave home, explore and discover the unfamiliar, but travel can also be a return and rediscovery of the past. This was the initial motivation behind Dennis Stock’s *James Dean: A Memorial Portfolio*, originally shot in 1955 but printed later. The pair visited Dean’s hometown of Fairmount, Ind. and to New York City, where the latter had studied at the Actors Studio and performed on Broadway.

The photo essay of Dean’s homecoming was intended, Stock explained, “to reveal the environments that affected and shaped the unique character of James Byron Dean.” The two visited the farm of Dean’s uncle, Marcus Winslow, where the actor had grown up, and where he posed proudly yet somewhat awkwardly with one of the hogs. Ironically, he also posed in a coffin seven months before he was buried in Fairmount, following his fatal car accident in Cholame, Calif.

But Dean had realized “that he could never really go home again,” and they left for New York City and the premiere of *East of Eden*. Stock created memorable
images of Dean wandering the city alone, most notably in Times Square on a rainy day. The portfolio helped create Dean’s public identity as the quintessential loner, a role for which he would become famous to posterity.

For Dean, travel was a means of escape from both the present and the past. Although Dean’s wanderlust was informed by desires different from those of Abbott, the photographers of American Roads, or even those of Steinbeck, a restlessness and hunger to move urged him to take to the road. Travel, for whatever reason, has become a prominent characteristic of American life, and, as Steinbeck believed, is fundamental to the identity of the nation.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus.

Admission to the museum is free to all OU students with a current student ID and all museum association members, $5 for adults, $4 for seniors, $3 for children 6 to 17 years of age, $2 for OU faculty/staff, and free for children 5 and under. The museum is closed on Mondays and admission is free on Tuesdays. The museum’s Web site is www.ou.edu/fjjma. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938.

Construction on a new wing is under way, but the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is open and fully functional with exhibitions and programming throughout the entire construction process.

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PHOTO CUTLINE


Credit line:

Michael Becotte (U.S., b. 1945)
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 13 7/8 in.
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