



Dynamic Range

Photographs by Bill Tennessee

January 19–May 12, 2024



HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

Dynamic Range Photographs by Bill Tennesen



Bill Tennesen was born in 1934 and grew up on North 39th Street in Milwaukee. He is a 1956 graduate of Marquette University's College of Business Administration. Tennesen is a self-taught photographer who began contributing photos to the *Milwaukee Community Journal*, Wisconsin's largest African American newspaper, in 1981. Professionally Tennesen worked as an appraiser. He was president of Fidelity Appraisal Company for more than forty years.

Dynamic Range was curated by Lynne Shumow (Haggerty Museum Curator for Academic Engagement) in collaboration with Dr. Robert Smith (Marquette University Harry G. John Professor of History and Director of the Center for Urban Research, Teaching and Outreach—CURTO) and Mia Phifer (Education and Research Coordinator at America's Black Holocaust Museum). Additional assistance was provided by

Kate Rose, Caroline Bielski, Sebastien Brown, Sophia Furman, Logan Glembin, Niktalia Jules, and Adamali De La Cruz.

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All photographs in the exhibition were shot and printed by Bill Tennesen, unless otherwise noted.

All photographs in the exhibition are silver nitrate prints, unless otherwise noted.

All photographs in the exhibition are from the collection of the artist.

An Interview with Bill Tennesen

The following interview was conducted by Kate Rose on October 5, 2023, at the home of Bill Tennesen.

KR: WHEN DID YOU GET YOUR FIRST CAMERA, AND WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR FIRST FORAYS INTO PHOTOGRAPHY?

BT: My first camera was a Kodak film sized 116 box camera that belonged to my mother. I might still have some original negatives and several rolls of film from that camera. I put a darkroom in the basement of my parents' home when I was about thirteen years old. I was, at the time, rather influenced by fine art photography, although I wouldn't have known any fine art photographers by name. I can remember going to take a picture of a bridge in McGovern Park, which is right off of Silver Spring Drive. I remember thinking that if I just pointed the camera at the right angle at this bridge, I could take a fine art photograph.

KR: SKIPPING AHEAD, YOU ATTENDED MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE MARQUETTE?

BT: There was a choice between UW-Madison and Marquette, but my father's side of the family was Catholic, and he preferred I go to a Catholic

university. I remember that it was a financial struggle for my father to send me to Marquette. If I recall correctly, the University of Wisconsin-Madison cost \$12 to attend and Marquette cost \$165. I'm not sure if that was per semester or per year.

KR: WHAT WAS YOUR MAJOR AT MARQUETTE?

BT: Business Administration. I believe the major was called Real Estate and Insurance at that time.

KR: I UNDERSTAND YOU OWNED YOUR OWN BUSINESS, AND THAT WAS WHAT ALLOWED YOU TO TAKE OFF THE TIME YOU NEEDED TO DO PHOTOGRAPHY. IS THAT CORRECT?

BT: I began working for the Fidelity Appraisal Company in 1960. After about twenty years the owner wanted to step back and offered to sell the business to my business partner, Tom, and me. We paid for the purchase over a ten-year period and continued to operate the company until about fifteen years ago, when we both decided to retire. Due to the nature of the business, it did not require both Tom and me to be there every day from nine to five. This allowed us time for other activities, such as travel and photography.

KR: WAS THE MILWAUKEE COMMUNITY JOURNAL THE FIRST NEWSPAPER OR JOURNAL THAT YOU PHOTOGRAPHED FOR?

BT: I recall going in with some spot news photos to the *Milwaukee Journal*, and they would buy them for a very nominal price, \$10 or \$15 or something. I had no formal association with other newspapers prior to my work with the *Milwaukee Community Journal*.

KR: HOW DID YOU GET CONNECTED WITH THEM?

BT: My connection to the *Milwaukee Community Journal* began around the time of the [Ernest] Lacy inquest in the early 1980s. I was taking pictures for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee and the YWCA. Of course, those groups loved to get publicity, so I would take pictures of their activities and then take those photos to the *Milwaukee Community Journal* with a little narrative to try to get them published in the paper. After I provided photos of the Lacy inquest and other events, their sports editor, Cal Patterson, asked me to photograph the Milwaukee Bucks basketball games. He was a big fan of the Bucks. That's how I got started photographing basketball. Cal also ran the cooking department. They had quite a cooking department, including an event every other year called "Men Who Cook." I remember photographing the chefs, which was a little more unusual in those days than it might be now. During that time, I also photographed Packer football games, politicians, entertainers, and celebrities who visited Milwaukee, and many other events for the paper.

KR: ARE YOU STILL WORKING FOR THE MILWAUKEE COMMUNITY JOURNAL?

BT: My name is still on the masthead at the *Milwaukee Community Journal*, and I am very proud of that. Their main photographer for many years was Harry Kemp, who also photographed for the *Milwaukee Courier*, another central city newspaper. Harry died in 2011, and his sister Yvonne is now the paper's lead photographer, with contributions from other photographers, including me.

KR: EVERYTHING WE HAVE IN THE HAGGERTY'S SHOW WAS SHOT ON FILM AND DEVELOPED BY YOU, BUT NOW WHEN YOU WORK IT'S MOSTLY DIGITAL, CORRECT?

BT: Yes, that's why you won't find any hard prints after a certain date. I can't tell you the exact date, but it's going to be in the 2000s when I started shooting with digital cameras.

KR: WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO TALK A BIT ABOUT YOUR DARKROOM PROCESS?

BT: I'm still set up with the darkroom, but I have not made any prints in about five years. It's a storeroom right now, but I could set it up again in half a day—all the plumbing is still there, the sinks and enlargers and so on. The process of developing film is what makes a photographer produce a photograph; it's just as important as picking the subject or aiming the camera. That said, I wouldn't give up digital for anything right now. It's so simple for me. I have

my computer set up with various automatic light balancing tools, and I can put the digital file in, and in a matter of five minutes I can produce a reasonably good copy that will look good in the paper. In the darkroom, I might work for half an hour to get one print just the way I want it.

KR: SO, WOULD YOU SAY THAT SOME OF THE JOY IN PHOTOGRAPHY FOR YOU IS THE SKILL IT TAKES ON THE DEVELOPING END?

BT: I've always thought so. Yes, I have a lot more understanding and respect for a photographer that does the whole thing, from clicking the shutter to producing the finished print.

KR: THERE IS A PHOTOGRAPH THAT WAS AN IMMEDIATE FAVORITE WHEN WE WERE LOOKING THROUGH YOUR WORK, DATED 1985, OF A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS GATHERED AROUND A BOOM BOX. DO YOU HAVE ANY RECOLLECTION OF THAT MOMENT, WHO THOSE PEOPLE WERE, OR WHAT WAS GOING ON?

BT: Oh, yes. I remember. I did not pose that photograph or round them up. They posed for me and asked me to take their picture. It was at a Juneteenth Day celebration. I took two pictures, and that one turned out.

KR: SPEAKING OF THE JUNETEENTH DAY CELEBRATIONS, YOU'RE A WHITE PHOTOGRAPHER WORKING FOR A BLACK NEWSPAPER, GOING INTO EVENTS LIKE JUNETEENTH DAY WHERE YOU COULD

BE SEEN AS AN OUTSIDER. WAS THAT EVER AN ISSUE?

BT: Never thought about it. I have been treated so nicely by everybody that I've ever worked with.

KR: TAKING A STEP BACK, YOU GOT YOUR START WITH THE BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS. ARE THERE ANY MEMORIES THAT STAND OUT TO YOU?

BT: That I used to love. They had so many activities, and fortunately a lot of them were on the weekends or at night, because everything was short notice. They would call and say: "We've got to get pictures of this." "We've got to get pictures of that." "Somebody has offered to give us a \$25,000 check." "Can you get here and take a picture of them presenting a check?" But the best was at the camp. Camp Whitcomb/Mason—that's the Boys & Girls Clubs camp on Lake Keesus, west of Milwaukee. I think it's still part of the Boys & Girls Clubs. I used to love going out there and photographing the kids. These are kids who are not experienced in lake and outdoor activities, so this was a great experience for them and something I looked forward to every summer.

KR: WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT THE ERNEST LACY INQUEST AND DEMONSTRATIONS. CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT IT WAS LIKE PHOTOGRAPHING THIS INFAMOUS PART OF MILWAUKEE HISTORY?

BT: Apparently, I was thrown out of the courtroom on at least three occasions, but I only recall one. There is a letter that the editor of the *Milwaukee*

Community Journal wrote to Judge Cannon with copies to the district attorney and several other people in regard to the episode. I remember that the *Milwaukee Community Journal* did not have another photographer in the courtroom, but I'm not certain why. I guess it might be because they asked for credentials and didn't get them. In those days it wasn't cut and dry as to whether you could photograph in the courtroom. I didn't ask for permission, I just went in and started taking pictures. That's when the judge stopped the inquest and took me back into his chambers and mused a long time as to whether I should be allowed to be there. He questioned me extensively. An inquest is a pretty solemn thing, and this was a biggie because there was a lot of community animosity in both ways. When they stopped the inquest in front of a televised audience and the judge made me go back in his chambers, that made an impression. The judge was quite serious. This wasn't a joking matter. I didn't know if he was going to lock me up or what.

KR: OUTSIDE OF THAT, DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER MEMORIES OF THE INQUEST OR TRIAL, OR OF THE PROTESTS, WHICH YOU ALSO PHOTOGRAPHED?

BT: Oh, sure. I have a photograph at the Milwaukee Art Museum from one of the Lacy protests. It's of Police Chief Harold Breier, when he made the famous statement, "I can go anyplace I want in the City of Milwaukee at any time." He was surrounded by about twenty heavily armed police when he made the statement. And then there's a picture of Wisconsin Avenue with a solid line of police on both sides of the road. When you overlay that with "I can go

anyplace I want, anytime I want," . . . well, yeah, you can when you're accompanied by twenty cops with rifles and shotguns. The other thing that sticks in my mind is when Harold Breier was called to testify. He was very, very dogmatic that he wasn't going to tell anything to anybody that would do the other side any good. I remember him coming out of the courtroom and looking over at me and saying, "Now, do you know anything you didn't know before?"

KR: I WANTED TO ASK YOU A QUESTION ABOUT A SPECIFIC PHOTO IN THE EXHIBITION. THERE IS A CHILD RUNNING IN FRONT OF THE HELPING HAND PRAYER SERVICE. I WAS CURIOUS IF THAT WAS STAGED?

BT: Oh no. I never staged anything. I just take a picture when I see something that I think will make a good picture. I've photographed a lot of storefront churches and central city churches. I don't know if it's a majority of them or not, but I have many of them.

KR: WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE STOREFRONTS THAT CAPTURES YOUR ATTENTION AND MAKES YOU WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH THEM?

BT: That's probably the influence of some of the old art photographers. There is something about scenes that are pretty routine at the time they were taken, but because of the passage of time have become really interesting.

KR: MOVING ON TO SPORTS, TELL ME ABOUT BASKETBALL. YOU'VE DONE A LOT OF PHOTOGRAPHY OF BUCKS GAMES AND OF MARQUETTE BASKETBALL.

BT: Basketball is the greatest sport in the world for photography, as far as I'm concerned. They feed us well before the game. We always have a nice meal in the media room. You go out and sit down—you have a nice, comfortable seat. They now allow backrests—they didn't in the early years, but we're now allowed to sit on a backrest, so it's quite comfortable. And the action comes to you every twenty seconds. If you miss it, don't worry, they'll be right back. They'll be doing something just as spectacular again. It's the ideal sport. You don't get rained on. It's sixty-five or seventy degrees all the time. Your equipment doesn't get knocked around. It's fun.

KR: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT MARQUETTE GAMES IN PARTICULAR?

BT: I've gotten to meet and know so many wonderful people over the years: Players and coaches and band directors. I just got my credentials from Marquette, by the way, to shoot this year's games. I'm looking forward to it.

KR: DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE MARQUETTE PLAYER TO PHOTOGRAPH, OR A FAVORITE MARQUETTE PLAYER IN GENERAL?

BT: Anyone that does a spectacular play in front of me, that's my favorite player. I want a guy that goes up to the basket and slams the ball through, knocking everybody else out of the way. That's my favorite player, always.

KR: YOU'RE A SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHY FAN.

BT: Sports photography fan. Now you're talking.

KR: IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

BT: I've met so many interesting people through my work with the *Milwaukee Community Journal*. Going to weddings of people in the community and being invited to be part of things. It's been wonderful.



