

Studio backbone

Nationally acclaimed photographer dies

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

Her husband — affectionately called the Hillbilly Snapshooter because of his pictures and poetry on life in the Tennessee hills — was the artist. She was the organizer.

"My dad had 600 pictures published in Life and published 20 books of poetry and pictures. But my mom was always the brains, keeping him organized — keeping us all organized," said Junebug Clark about his mother, Bernice, who died May 24 at age 72.

She and husband, Joe, formerly a Detroit-area photographer for Life and Look magazines, operated an internationally known professional photo studio for 40 years, most recently from their Farmington Hills home.

Joe's work — called both memorable and historic — has hung in the Smithsonian Institute of Art and has been published in Life, Look, National Geographic, Time and Newsweek. He is probably best known for the collection of rural photos used in Jack Daniels Whiskey ads.

Son Junebug — a Farmington resident and nationally known photographer in his own right — by age 7 had sold pictures to daily newspapers, appeared on TV talking about photography and spoken to a University of Missouri journalism class.

THE ELDER Clarks went into semi-retirement two years ago, when Bernice moved into a convalescent home.

"Dad devoted every ounce of strength to her," said Junebug, who left Sunday to be with his father, now 81, at his Cumberland Gap farm, where a garden produces poke salet and Tennessee beans.

"Theirs was a real love story."

The Clarks, Farmington Hills residents since 1959, crisscrossed the country photographing people. Their joys and tribulations were captured simply and directly. Other pictures captured farm life. Conventional assignments included a portrait of Henry Ford I.

In September 1980, the Clarks hit the promotional trail. For the next 18 months, they traveled across the United States and Europe, with Joe granting television, radio and newspaper interviews.

"Mom did a lot of setup and worked on the itinerary," Junebug said. "They had a map of their itinerary and it looked like someone had shotgunned it, what with all the stuck pins."

ONE OF 10 children raised in a log cabin, Joe was a carpenter from the hills of Cumberland Gap, Tenn., when he came to Detroit in the late 30s, lured by Henry Ford's offer of \$5 a day to work in his car factory.

"But Dad never did work there," Junebug said. "He ended up as a night watchman at Hudson's. At that time, they shot advertisements at night, which is how he first got interested in photography."

The changing point in Joe's life came in 1939 when fellow workers gave him a \$12 "folding box" camera just before a trip back home. They wanted visual proof of his tales about life in the hills.

The visual proof he brought back were snapshots of a hillbilly mountain funeral in a mlsy rain. The snapshots were sold to Life and used as a 14-picture spread. Within four years, Joe took up photography full time, although already nearing 40.

Meanwhile, with only a fifth-grade formal education, he was teaching himself to read and write through a correspondence course.

JOE DID his homework by writing letters full of homespun philosophy to The Detroit News.

Raised in Hamtramck during the Great Depression, Bernice saw her first job bring 90-hour work weeks with the Wayne County Welfare Department. Somewhere along the way, she contracted tuberculosis and was hospitalized at Mayberry Sanitarium.

When she spotted a provocative comment on women in The Detroit News letterbox, she answered it by telling the war, Joe Clark, he was pretty smart. He responded by calling on her at Mayberry. She was released about six months later. Within



Bernice, Junebug and Joe Clark, in a photo taken in 1978.

the year, she was married — to her "small order husband." It was 1948.

Even their honeymoon was camera ready. "An editor with National Geographic went with them down South to document a disappearing culture — blacksmiths, one-room schoolhouses," Junebug said.

EVEN BEFORE their marriage, Bernice had been an avid photographer. After their marriage, her commercial work appeared in several magazines and she had a penchant for photographing animals, Junebug said.

Her first break came when Friends magazine printed a spread of 3-year-old Junebug taking a bath in a backyard tub. It asked her to

shoot an accompanying cover picture in color.

Later, her husband, impressed with her skills, would send her on assignment.

But she preferred to manage Joe. As Junebug put it, "Mom was always a real positive force, keeping track of all his pictures, working with clients. She was just phenomenal."

A gallery in the Buggy Works, a Farmington Hills restaurant with an early American decor, contains 13 original signed prints of Joe Clark as well as accompanying poetry of life in the Tennessee hills.

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