

HORIZON NEWS #69

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

“No matter how many times people are warned, they still seem to think taking photos on railroad tracks is a good idea. It’s not. It’s dangerous and stupid and could lead to someone getting killed....No photo is worth risking lives for.”

Shutterbug magazine

The Five Dumbest Things I’ve Ever Done: Episode 2

Steve Gottlieb

Cut Bank, MT: The End of the Line?

“I can’t tell if these tracks are active or not,” I said to my assistant as I crouched down during a snowstorm to take a close look at the steel rails. “One thing’s for sure: in Cut Bank, Montana, we don’t have to worry about passenger trains—if a train does come, it’ll be a freight train...they move so slowly we’ll have plenty of time to get the car off the tracks.”

The vantage point I wanted was the center of the tracks. I needed to shoot from inside our car to keep snowflakes from getting close to the lens and creating those ugly white blobs. It was late afternoon and there wasn’t much light. I was shooting ISO 100 film—that’s what most pros used back then—so a very slow shutter speed was needed. That meant the engine had to be off to eliminate car vibration.

I was concerned about the danger posed by any oncoming train, especially with visibility so limited. In my most authoritative tone, I said to my assistant: “While I’m shooting, watch out the other window. *Don’t take your eyes off the tracks!* If you see a train, SCREAM.”

I snapped off several shots, then turned my head toward her to say things looked good in my viewfinder. Yikes! She wasn’t looking out her window...she was looking out mine! (That shouldn’t have surprised me. While assistants should serve as an extra set of eyes—which means looking at what the photographer is *not* looking at—most tend to look where I’m looking.) Sure enough, a train was barreling out of the swirling snow, less than 400 feet away. It didn’t sound its horn; visibility was so poor I doubt it saw us. Even a freight train can cover 400 feet in a very short time. If I had turned my head three seconds later, or if I had fumbled with the car keys, I wouldn’t be around to tell this story. > > >

Searching through my old files to find this picture, I found only three slides. For a moment, I was puzzled—in a situation like this I'd generally take at least a dozen shots. Then it hit me: three shots was all I took. At least I had sense enough not to get back on the tracks to shoot more.

Was this shot—is any shot?—so important it's worth risking your life?

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