

A Question for *National Geographic* Staff Photographer

William Albert Allard

by Heidi Ernst

Illustration by Sean McCabe

One of only three staff photographers at *National Geographic*, William Albert Allard is an American icon. He has journeyed to more than 25 countries to shoot 30-plus stories (and write eight of them) for the legendary magazine, sometimes sending home more than 1,000 rolls of film. But Allard is best known for the intimate photographs he captured during assignments that focused on symbols of America: cowboys, minor-league baseball players, William Faulkner's Mississippi, and blues musicians among them. All are featured in his retrospective book *Portraits of America*, just out in paperback. We caught up with Allard by phone as he was driving home to the Blue Ridge Mountains from *National Geographic's* Washington, D.C., headquarters.

READYMADE: Hi, Bill. How did you get that f*%ing awesome job?

BA: I was finishing my journalism and photography degree at the University of Minnesota and was in D.C. on a job-seeking trip. Someone had told me to look up Yoichi Okamoto, head of photography for the U.S. Information Agency, who later became the first official White House photographer. First I got the classic overweight, cigar-smoking bureaucrat, who almost put me to sleep. But I got to Okamoto, and he looked at my portfolio and called Bob Gilka, director of photography for *National Geographic*, and asked him if he wanted to see good people photographs. So two days after getting my degree, I went to D.C. for the summer. The *Geographic* offered me a contract after that, then a staff position within a year. I got restless in the '60s and wanted to cover things I didn't think the magazine would deal with—Vietnam and the racial situation in the South—so I freelanced for a few years. But the *Geographic* is the only game in town now for great photojournalism, so I came back on staff in 1996.

RM: How was freelancing?

BA: I did it two different times. One year I had to cash in an insurance policy to exist. I had some good commercial work—one that I call a commission from Polaroid, to just go somewhere with their cameras, and they'd give me an exhibit—but I missed dealing with reality.

RM: The first time you were on staff was one of the absolute heydays of *National*

Geographic. What was your initial assignment like?

BA: Back then, there were no budgets, no time limits; [you] just went on assignment until you thought you were done. Now you're very lucky to get six weeks. Gilka told me to cover a Pennsylvania Dutch festival and see if I could get pictures of the Amish. What he didn't tell me was that they had sent a staff photographer earlier and a manuscript was already written. The first guy went to the bishop, who told him photography was basically forbidden. In Pennsylvania, I found some young people in a bar, started socializing, and found out the father of one of them owned a rock quarry and did some business with some Amish people. So I started meeting the Amish, almost going farm to farm, saying who I represented and why I wanted to do it. I finally got through to a man about my age also with a couple of kids, and hung around him. I spent about two months in the summer, went back in the fall, and it put me on the map [when it was published in August 1965]. It really struck a favorable chord with readers; there were some intimacies they weren't used to seeing.

RM: You're still known as a great photographer of people. What's the best assignment you've ever gotten?

BA: I can probably say "The Blues" ["Traveling the Blues Highway," *National Geographic*, April 1999] is my favorite story, even more than all the years I played cowboy. Music is the driving force in my life. If I wasn't doing photography, I'd maybe be a background musician. It's important to let

VITAL STATS

OCCUPATION	Photographer and writer
LOCATION	Charlottesville, Virginia
AGE	70
FIRST JOB	<i>National Geographic</i> photographic intern
BEST JOB	<i>National Geographic</i> staff photographer
GREATEST PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE	Every time I go out on the street
SALARY DURING 20s	When I first left the staff, when I was almost 30, the director of photography said he'd pay me \$17,000 if I stayed.

subjects get to know me as well as I get to know the subjects, to try to be part of the environment. The one thing the *Geographic* has always offered the serious photographer is time, and that's priceless, being able to go in the same bar five times [for "The Blues"] and make a really good picture that fourth or fifth time that you couldn't the first time.

RM: What was your least favorite assignment?

BA: I'm a wanderer and I like mountains, so maybe the Virgin Islands. I found that kind of boring. And Costa Rica: beautiful women, but the country was kind of boring.

RM: What are you shooting next?

BA: New York's garment district. It isn't a very interesting neighborhood on the outside, but there are beautiful women, and the fabrics—I realize why painters are drawn to fabrics, how they hold light and form, the way they drape. I've made it a point to maintain a track record and a respect so that if I'm doing something I really want to do, the magazine will be better for it too. I'm 70 fucking years old and still love it. 🍷