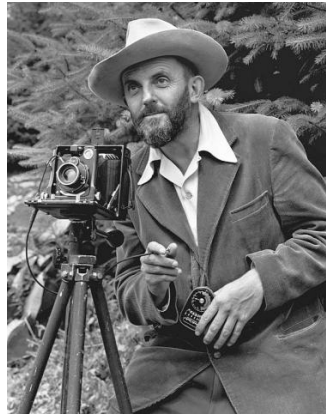




Ansel Adams wasn't born, so to speak, with a camera in his hands. In fact, it would be better—if we stick with that train of thought—to say that he was born with a keyboard in his hands.

Why is that? Because Adams gave up a promising career, as a pianist, to become a professional photographer.

It was “inevitable infection,” the great photographer says, which caused him to switch professions.

One thing common to both fields, though, is discipline. Discipline and patience. A pianist needs lots of discipline to learn the notes perfectly, to practice frequently and to perform flawlessly.

The same is true of photography. One needs discipline to learn the right techniques and patience to wait-for the “right shot.” As for perfection, in photography, Adams was once asked (in the BBC interview, featured at the bottom of this page):

Have you taken the perfect picture yet?

His answer:

No. The best picture is around the corner, like prosperity.

It's not surprising Adams gave that answer.

Although he was born into a prosperous family, in 1902, the financial panic of 1907 had wiped-out his parents' wealth. For the rest of his life, Charles Hitchcock Adams—Ansel's father—tried very hard to recoup what he had lost. To his son, it must have seemed “like prosperity” was always “around the corner.”

Born in San Francisco, Ansel—an only child—was just four when the Great Earthquake of 1906 shook the city. In his home, located amid the dunes of the Golden Gate, Ansel experienced a traumatic event when an unexpected after-shock violently threw him to the ground.

Sustaining a badly broken nose, which was visible for the rest of his life, Ansel recovered from his injury but his father never regained what he had lost in the financial panic. This loss of circumstance negatively impacted the family, especially Ansel's mother (Olive Bray Adams).

As an only child, with a visible facial impediment and a likely case of dyslexia, Ansel had difficulty in school. His parents allowed him to learn at home. William Turnage, writing for Oxford University Press' American National Biography, tells us how Ansel achieved eighth-grade equivalency status:

Natural shyness and a certain intensity of genius, coupled with the dramatically “earthquaked” nose, caused Adams to have problems fitting in at school. In later life he noted that he might have been diagnosed as hyperactive. There is also the distinct possibility that he may have suffered from dyslexia.

He was not successful in the various schools to which his parents sent him; consequently, his father and aunt tutored him at home. Ultimately, he managed to earn what he termed a “legitimizing diploma” from the Mrs. Kate M. Wilkins Private School — perhaps equivalent to having completed the eighth grade.

Among the many things Ansel learned from his father, with whom he had a close relationship, was a love of nature. The older Adams respected the ideals of Ralph Waldo Emerson who believed in living modestly and morally (with a particular emphasis on one's responsibilities to both mankind and nature).

At the age of twelve, Ansel taught himself to read music and play the piano. In addition, he spent time walking in his neighborhood, exploring the great vistas of the Golden Gate and its still-wild surrounding areas. During his walks he was accompanied by the [Kodak No. 1 Box Brownie camera](#) he'd received from his parents.

Joining the [Sierra Club](#), in 1919, Ansel spent four summers in [Yosemite Valley](#) where he was "keeper" of the Club's LeConte Memorial Lodge. He fell in love with a young woman, Virginia Best, whom he met during his time in Yosemite. Making music together—he, on the piano, and she, with a lovely contralto singing voice—they would ultimately marry and have two children (Michael and Anne).

Each summer, the Sierra Club sponsored a High-Trip, lasting a month, when around 200 members hiked to various beautiful places, often in the Sierra Nevada. Ansel photographed these trips and published his work in the Club's *Bulletin*.

In 1927, Adams met a man who would change his life. [Albert M. Bender](#), who'd [made a fortune](#) in the insurance business, was a patron of "the arts" and artists. [Turnage comments](#) on how the businessman helped the blossoming photographic-artist:

Literally the day after they met, Bender set in motion the preparation and publication of Adams' first portfolio, "Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras" [sic]. Bender's friendship, encouragement, and tactful financial support changed Adams's life dramatically. His creative energies and abilities as a photographer blossomed, and he began to have the confidence and wherewithal to pursue his dreams.

During that same year, Ansel also met photographer [Edward Weston](#). The two became friends and collaborators.

In 1933, Adams met the artist he admired more than any other, photographer [Alfred Stieglitz](#) (who was married to the famous artist [Georgia O'Keeffe](#)). Living in New York at the time, Stieglitz opened many doors for Ansel.

With his photography career moving forward, Adams realized he could support himself with his pictures instead of with his music. Although he didn't make the switch overnight, he ultimately walked away from a life at the piano to focus on a life with his cameras.

In love with America's wilderness areas, especially in the West, Ansel Adams began to photograph his country's national parks. Around eight years after his death, Abigail Foerstner wrote about his influence in the [Chicago Tribune's December 3, 1992 issue](#):

...[Ansel Adams] did for the national parks something comparable to what Homer's epics did for Odysseus.

Indeed!

We can see what Foerstner meant by viewing a few stunning photos which Adams took on behalf of the U.S. government. One of the most-famous is "The Tetons and the Snake River (1942)."



Others are:

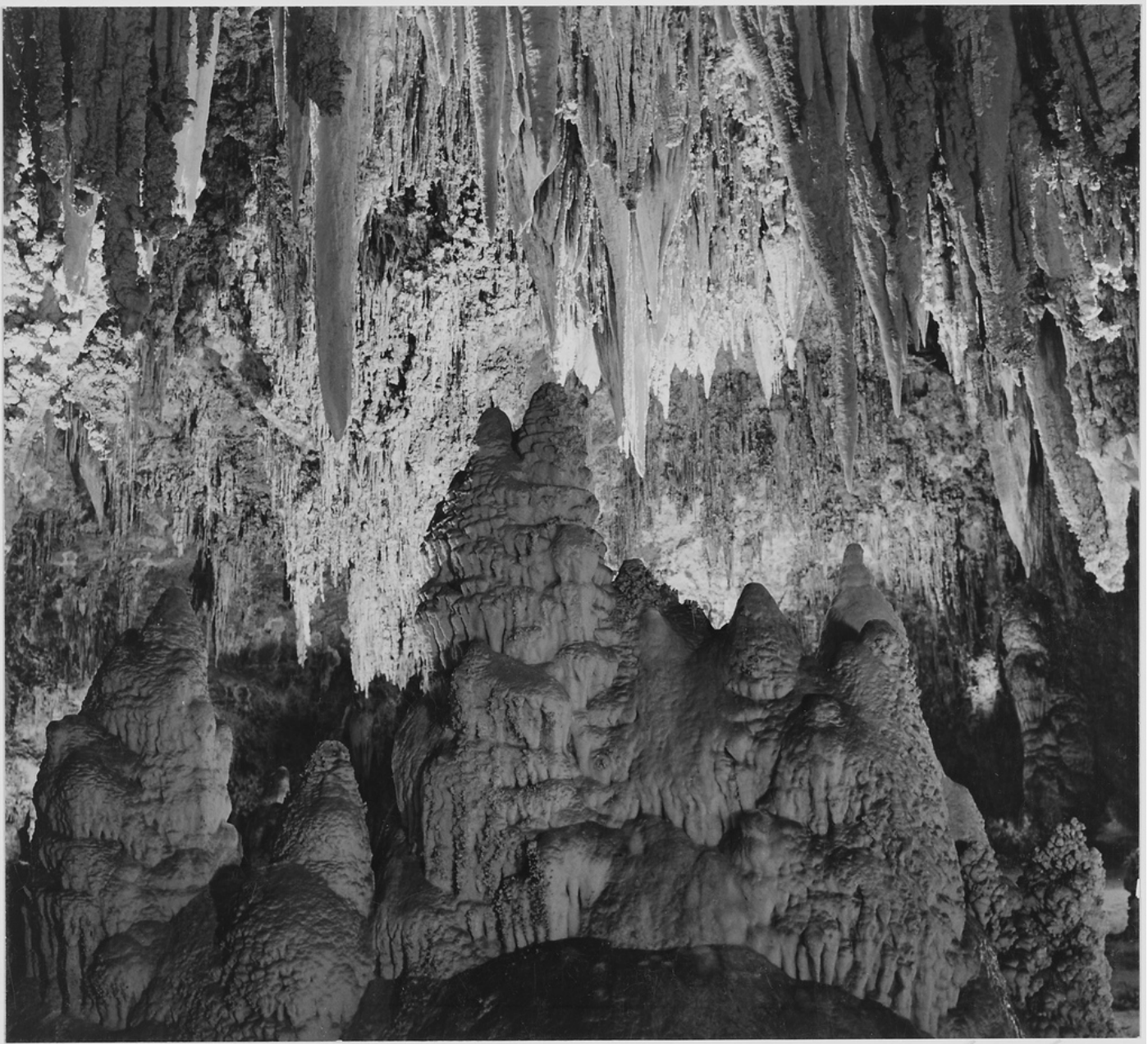
View of valley from mountain, "Canyon de Chelly" National Monument, Arizona (1941).



Trees with snow on branches, "Half Dome, Apple Orchard, Yosemite," California. April 1933.



"Formations along the wall of the Big Room, near Crystal Spring Home, Carlsbad Caverns National Park," New Mexico. (Circa 1941).



Because he was employed by the federal government, when he took these photos, the copyright for them belongs to the American people.

Ansel Easton Adams (1902-1984) remains one of America's best-known (and most-loved) photographers. Many of his pictures are black-and-white nature scenes (from America's national parks and monuments) and landscapes (depicting the American West).

Extremely troubled by the Japanese-American relocation, which the federal government ordered at the beginning of World War II, Adams took pictures of the Manzanar internment camp. Located at the foot of Mount Williamson, in the arid Owens Valley of eastern California, Manzanar remained open until the end of the war.

The image, at the top of this page, depicts a photo portrait of Adams, c. 1950, by J. Malcolm Greany. It initially appeared in 1950's *Yosemite Field School Yearbook*.

Why did Ansel Adams so frequently use black-and-white film for his photos? Because he didn't believe that he could control the outcome, in color, as much as he could control it in black-and-white:

He didn't believe that the color processes of his day could produce results to compare with the rich visual deliberation, the fine-grained luxuriance of his work in black and white.

To put it bluntly, he didn't think he could control the outcome with color, and for Adams control over the artistic process meant everything. (See an article by Richard Lacayo, "Ansel Adams: The Black-and-White Master, in Color," published in the October 28, 2009 issue of TIME Magazine.)

Adams had a *prodigious* ability to produce great art and to work *incredibly* long hours. In his short biography, Turnage says:

Adams's energy and capacity for work were simply colossal. He often labored for eighteen or more hours per day, for days and weeks on end. There were no vacations, no holidays, no Sundays in Ansel Adams's life. Frequently, after and intense period of work, he would return to San Francisco or Yosemite, promptly contract the "flu," and spend several days in bed.

What was Ansel Adams' special approach as he created his art?

He didn't simply record what was in front of him. He wanted to "visualize" the picture, in his mind, before he actually took the shot:

Seeing it in the mind's eye, what we call "visualization."

In other words ... he wanted to "see" the end result—as an internal event, inside himself—before he created the photograph with his camera and his various techniques. It never was just about "taking pictures" with Ansel. His work was about the creative process of finding (and beautifully capturing) wonderful scenes to share with others.

To paraphrase Adams:

I make the photo and give you the equivalent of what I saw and felt—sharing the reality of the moment, one step removed.

We can hear Adams talk about this "visualization" process in a video clip which is online, courtesy of his family. (Move the video forward, to 1:00, to pass-over the introductory material):

The great photographer—whose work is still in demand—died, in a Monterey hospital, from cardiovascular disease on the 22nd of April, 1984. The year before his death, he talked about his life as an artist in a program aired by the BBC. In it, he comments on some of his most-famous photographs:

Virginia Best Adams outlived her husband by 16 years. She died, at the age of 96, in 2000.

Click on the top image for a better view.

Credits:

Portrait image of Ansel Adams, described above, online courtesy U.S. National Park Service (NPS). PD

In-text images, online via U.S. Nation Archives:

"The Tetons and the Snake River (1942)."

View of valley from mountain, "Canyon de Chelly" National Monument, Arizona (1941).

Trees with snow on branches, "Half Dome, Apple Orchard, Yosemite," California. April 1933.

"Formations along the wall of the Big Room, near Crystal Spring Home, Carlsbad Caverns National Park," New Mexico. (Circa 1941)

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Ansel-Adams>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Ansel-Adams>

Media Stream



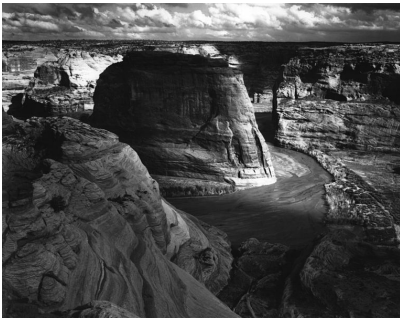
Ansel Adams - Grand Tetons and Snake River

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



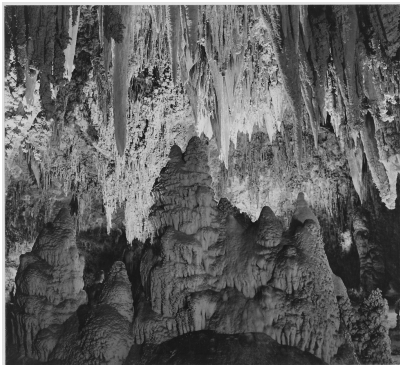
Ansel Adams - Apple Tree

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



Ansel Adams - Canyon de Chelly

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



Ansel Adams - Formations in New Mexico

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>

Ralph Waldo Emerson - Grieving Father

Ralph Waldo Emerson, long-respected as one of America's great thinkers, lost many loved ones throughout his life.

- His father died - of stomach cancer - two weeks after Emerson's eighth birthday.
- His first wife (Ellen Tucker Emerson) died of tuberculosis (TB) - at age twenty - less than eighteen months after their marriage.
- At 31, Emerson lost his brother - Edward - also to TB.
- When his oldest child - a son, called "Waldo" - became ill with scarlet fever, he died, suddenly, at the age of five.
- Shortly before his 59th birthday, Emerson lost his close friend Henry David Thoreau (who died at 44).

The day after "my little Waldo" died of scarlet fever, Emerson wrote these words in his journal:

*Sorrow makes us all children again,
destroys all differences of intellect.*

The wisest knows nothing.

Shortly before his 79th birthday, Ralph Waldo Emerson caught a severe cold. It led to his death on April 27, 1882. He is buried at the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts.

We can review most of his writings online, thanks to RWE.org (Ralph Waldo Emerson.org).

Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson - image number LC-DIG-pga-04133 - online courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ralph-Waldo-Emerson-Grieving-Father>



Ansel Adams

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ansel-Adams0>