



FROZEN IN TIME AND FILM

JOURNALISM ALUM DAVID MIDDLECAMP BRINGS NEW LIFE TO OLD MEMORIES



BY MATT LAZIER



PHOTOGRAPHER **DAVID MIDDLECAMP (JOUR '85)** walked into one of his newspaper's storage closets to find an old picture and had an epiphany when he saw the dozens of yellow boxes of negatives – images of county news stretching back more than five decades.

"It seemed like such a waste," he said. "These were people's careers just sitting on the shelves, not being used."

There were stories in those old boxes, he thought – history lessons about San Luis Obispo County's past that could also give readers perspective on the present.

So to help people remember the past, Middlecamp looked to the future. On Nov. 13, 2007, he launched a thrice-weekly blog, "Photos from the Vault" on SanLuisObispo.com, the Web site of his longtime paper, The Tribune in San Luis Obispo.

Middlecamp scans in photos and old front pages, telling the stories behind some images and asking readers for help when information on others is scarce.

Some entries give a simple glimpse back in time. His first post showed Monterey Street in 1963, beside a 2007 shot to show the changes. He's featured scenic images from around the county; local visits by prominent celebrities and politicians; holiday parades and major projects, such as work on the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

Other entries highlight current events from a historical perspective – such as photos from the opening of San Luis Obispo's Mervyn's store in 1983, just as it was preparing to close in late 2008 – or reminders to readers of anniversaries of major local events – such as the 100-year storm that brought record rainfall and floods to the county in 1969.

He uses his own memory and knowledge of community history to find some photos. Others he stumbles across while combing the archives. And he gets help from Sharon and Bill Morem, longtime residents and The Tribune's librarian and columnist, respectively, and Danny Thorogood, the paper's Web developer.

Cal Poly, so closely tied to the history of San Luis Obispo County, has been featured several times, with a look at enrollment on campus in 1965, late '60s political protests by students, and a feature on nuclear energy equipment being used on campus 45 years ago.

In a little less than a year, the blog has established a core readership, many of whom interact with Middlecamp and each other with comments postings – debating details of images and relating how the pictures touch the stories of their own lives.

Readers log on from all over the United States. And a feature Thorogood recently added that translates the blog into almost three dozen languages is bringing in readers from around the globe.

"This blog draws an interesting type of reader," Middlecamp said, "someone who is computer savvy and understands blogging but who is also interested in the past."

That description applies just as readily to Middlecamp.

"Nothing happens in a vacuum," he said. "I have always been interested in how we got where we are, why things are the way they are."

He is particularly fascinated with SLO County's history. He was born here but moved with his parents when he was an infant. He visited his grandparents here frequently and returned after high school to become a third-generation Cal Poly student. He followed his father and grandfather, who both earned agriculture degrees, and several uncles. His grandfather, Lionel Middlecamp, went on to be the Cal Poly farm manager for 30 years, retiring in 1975. An agricultural scholarship is named for him.

For the past 23 years, David Middlecamp has documented San Luis Obispo County news in the pages of The Tribune. Now, he can add historian to his title.

With an established readership and a growing reach beyond SLO County, Middlecamp is thinking of the future of "Photos from the Vault."

He's trading links with similar blogs on other newspapers' sites, including the Los Angeles Times and Houston Chronicle, and spreading the word about his blog through postings on other Web sites. And he'd like to find a way for the blog itself to generate revenue for the paper – which could then, in turn, expand the blog, he said.

"When I started this, I thought I would put up a photo and write a couple sentences, and 20 people would read it and it would last about a year," he said. "But I put up one photo in the first couple months that didn't have enough information with it, and people started arguing over the history. I hadn't given them enough information.

"I went into the archives and found the information and gave it to them. And that was when I realized this thing could have some legs." □

To view David Middlecamp's "Photos from the Vault" blog, log on to <http://sloblogs.tribunenews.com/slovault>