

# Celebrating a Vermont legend: 'Jack Rowell: Cultural Documentarian'

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*Jack Rowell (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)*

In 1973 or '74, Jack Rowell was outside one of his former high school teacher's houses in Randolph.

"I saw Charlie Young drive by in his garbage truck. I jumped in my car and chased him down and told him I wanted to take his picture. That's Charlie on the right," says Rowell, of a photograph of two men sitting on the back of a garbage truck, with big good-natured grins on their faces and an easy air as they take a break. "Composition is a natural thing for me. It's a damn good picture."



*Jack Rowell: "Man and Black Dog, Tunbridge Fair"*

The Braintree photographer has been taking superb pictures of Vermonters for over four decades, photographs that are beautifully composed and convey the dignity, depth and authenticity of his subjects — and also their spirit of fun.

"Jack Rowell: Cultural Documentarian" opened Thursday in the Third Floor Gallery at Studio Place Arts. The show spans four decades of Rowell's career and includes 35 photographs, almost all of Vermonters. Pageant winners, anglers, octogenarians, musicians, Tunbridge Fair-goers, and fellow Vermont legend Fred Tuttle are among Rowell's subjects.

"Rowell's show records the people we know in respectful, vivid detail and if there is a wistful reaction to the show, it is not because he has superimposed an artificial sense of romance on his subjects; rather it is because we long for the memory to record the details he has magnified through his practiced use of the lens," explained Sue Higby, executive director of SPA.

A master of light, Rowell brings together technical skill and his astute sense of his subjects. It's clear in his images that Rowell likes people — all kinds of people.



*Jack Rowell: "Miss Vermont Contestants at the LCI 2014. 33rd Annual LCI Father's Day Derby," presented by Yamaha Outboards. (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)*

"I look for people who are real, who are unpretentious. I hate pretentiousness," says Rowell, a fifth generation Vermonter with a gruff voice, imposing presence and absolutely wonderful way of putting people at ease.

Photography started early for Rowell. At 7 or 8, he recalls, his mother gave him a camera for Christmas. He loved drawing, but wasn't happy with his results.

"But the camera worked," he recalls, noting that he later got a Kodak Instamatic. "It had black and white film, but I couldn't afford to have it developed."

A new realm opened to Rowell in eighth grade when a science teacher who was a photography buff set up a darkroom at school in Randolph for extracurricular use. Rowell moved into 35mm photography in high school, and acted as school photographer for the White River Valley Herald. His association with the Herald continued through the 1970s.

At a young age, Rowell turned his lens to the Tunbridge Fair.



*Jack Rowell: "Kristina Stykos" (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)*

"The saying was that you couldn't get into the fair without a bottle of whiskey and another man's wife," says Rowell about that era, and he captured its moments and characters.

The Herald published a Tunbridge Fair book with Rowell's photographs in 1980. Now hard to find, he recalls that fair organizers "thought it was a little too edgy."

"Dough Boys," a photo of two young men at a fried dough stand and "Man with Black Dog" are both from the fair. "Man with Black Dog" is one of Rowell's all-time favorites. Sitting in front of a canvas tent, the man looks off to the side, the black dog draped across his lap and looking straight at the camera.

"I'm kind of a question authority guy, so working for myself was better," says Rowell about the trajectory of his career.



*Jack Rowell: "Iva" (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)*

That independent streak led to projects including "Man With a Plan," the 1990s Vermont classic film about Fred Tuttle's meteoric political career. Rowell ended up involved in almost all aspects of the film except editing and was credited as associate producer.

"Fred was tough to photograph, but I knew how to do it because I knew him. His father and my great grandfather were friends and used to play bridge together," Rowell explains.

"We'd call them 'Fred adventures,'" he says of filming with Tuttle in Washington D.C. and subsequent promotional trips including to Los Angeles for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. "Fred was the most recognizable person in New England at that time."

One of Rowell's iconic images of Fred Tuttle is in the show. It's a contagious smile.

Every one of Rowell's images tells a bit about the story and character of its subject. Two pretty pageant winners hold giant bass at a fishing derby, as one plants a kiss on the catch. An octogenarian in the Hale Street Gang, a Randolph writing group, hams it up for the camera. Marilyn Grice holds her rifle as she sits beneath hunting trophies,

dots on her rifle count out her deer: they also match the pattern of nail heads on her upholstered chair.

“Cultural Documentarian” is an apt title for Rowell and the breadth of his work.

## **Studio Place Arts**

*Studio Place Arts presents "Tell Me," through June 30, work by 19 local artists that explores language and communication (Main Floor Gallery); "Beyond Words," work by the Book Arts Guild of Vermont (Second Floor Gallery); "Jack Rowell: Cultural Documentarian," photographs from fifth generation Vermonter, (Third Floor Gallery), at SPA, 201 N. Main St., Barre. Hours are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; noon to 4 p.m. Saturday; call 802-479-7069, or go online to [www.studioplacearts.com](http://www.studioplacearts.com). Expanded hours for Open Studio Weekend are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, May 26; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday May 27. (Eleven SPA artists will open their studios during the weekend.)*