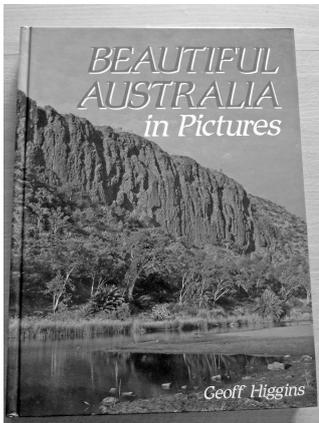


Geoff Higgins - Professional Photographer

Rosemary Phillis



I have known Geoff for years and we have shared many happy hours of conversation. I was aware that he was a professional photographer but it wasn't until I saw a book of photos by Geoff Higgins in a bookshop that I realised how professional his career was.

Geoff was in the first intake of students at Riverstone High School in 1962. As the High School celebrates its 50th anniversary this year it seemed a good time to find out more about Geoff and his story.

I was born in 1949 in Riverstone and grew up in the town. I attended Riverstone High School and was in the first intake in 1962. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but like many young fellows, my main aim was to get out of school and make and spend some money.

I had always been interested in photography. When I was in fifth class in primary school my mother said she would buy me a camera if I did well at school. I came second and she bought me a camera. I don't recall what sort of camera it was, perhaps a Box Brownie, but I thought it was the bees knees. What Mum didn't realise was that the real cost was in having the films processed!

In the late 1950s early 1960s I wanted to upgrade the camera, so I got a weekend job on a blue ice cream truck with Bob from St Marys. He drove around the area selling paddle pops, soft drinks and basic items such as sugar. Bob had regular clients in the out-lying areas of Schofields and Marsden Park who didn't have cars. It was a convenient way for them to buy essentials plus, of course, the ice cream. I was the 'gopher' and I'd meet Bob up on the Catholic Church hill at around 9.30 in the morning and work until about 8.00 at night for the princely sum of \$2 (plus all the ice cream I could eat). I worked for Bob for a couple of years and it was a good experience as he made me think outside the square.

I saved enough money to buy an SLR camera. I was only interested in photography and spent hours taking photos. We had a bird aviary in the yard at home which contained a variety of birds such as zebra finches. I would sit there all day waiting for a bird to land in a particular spot so that I could take that particular photo. When it comes to photography I have always had great patience.

I generally used black and white film and started developing the photos myself in the bathroom at home. As I got into photography, Dad helped me convert a shed in the backyard into a darkroom. (The shed was either going to be a darkroom or a home for the ferrets, luckily the darkroom won.) I think the shed actually started out as a cubby house for the daughter of the Vaughans who lived there before us.

Photography was a hobby. After leaving school I got a job in a bank in the City. They were long days, getting up at six to catch the steam train around seven and not getting back until six o'clock on

a normal day. I changed banks and was working at Riverstone before transferring to a larger branch at Blacktown.

It was while I was catching the train to work at Blacktown that I got to know Rhonda Howes through a mutual friend, Mary Rumery. Rhonda and I married in late 1971 and over the next few years we bought and paid off our house in Riverstone Road. By that time I'd left the bank and joined the fire brigade. The shift work of the brigade allowed me to work up to three jobs at a time to earn more money.

I had always wanted to travel and take photos. In early 1974 we leased our house, bought a caravan and hit the road to travel Australia. Our intention was to enjoy ourselves and getting jobs along the way, which was how it worked out.

It was while we were at Lake Eyre that, through a chance meeting, I started on my way to becoming a professional photographer. We bumped into a fellow who told us that he was writing a book on Australian rivers. When I mentioned that I was taking some photos on our trip, he suggested that while I travelled I should take photos of rivers, which could illustrate the book and that we could go fifty: fifty in it once it was published.

I didn't think much more of the idea and continued on the journey taking numerous photographs of a variety of subjects including rivers. My main passion was taking photos of wildlife.

After fifteen months on the road, we had only just arrived back home in early 1975, when I got a call from the fellow I'd met at Lake Eyre. A week later we met with his publisher who, on seeing my photos, decided to publish the book. The fellow honoured his promise on a handshake that we would go fifty: fifty.

Until that point in my life I had only had one photo published and that was in the Women's Weekly. The publisher asked if I had any more photos. Naively I asked him how much I had to pay him to publish my photos. He said "we pay you to use your photos". I sent a batch of photos to him and from what they used, in the following three months, I made more money than in the rest of my life.

We stayed home long enough to have our first child, Daniel. When he was three months old we headed off again. We had bought a brand new four wheel drive Land Rover to replace our old Holden and caravan and slept in the back. Daniel's spot was the space behind the wheel arch in the back. No safety restrictions back then.

Our daughter Sarah came along seven years later and we did a few more trips, but bought a caravan to make it easier. As the children grew, Rhonda stayed home, and I did the trips away with a mate and mad keen amateur photographer, John Skarratt. We would be away for three to four months at a time. I don't know how many kilometres I've travelled over the years. I've put 400,000 kilometres on my current four wheel drive. We weren't always on the move, sometimes we'd spend days in the one place.

It hasn't always been good times and to make ends meet Rhonda has worked and I have had a total of thirty three different jobs, from photographer to opal miner. Sometimes I could combine both photography and work in another job. I used to work for Blacktown Council of an afternoon and spend the morning in my canoe on the Hawkesbury River photographing birds.

Rhonda has always been super supportive, accompanying me on the trips. She has never asked to see a photo I've taken, except now when I take photos of the grandchildren! Just like the professional painter whose house is never painted, I didn't take many photos of our children, except when they were in the context of a scene. It is different nowadays with the grandchildren, Sharnae and Brody.

I suppose all up I must have done around 100 books of photos. Some were small A5 books and other large hardcover books. Half of the photos in the book *Presenting Australia* came from my collection. At the time it was the largest selling Australiana book on the market and it was reprinted several times.

I've been a professional photographer for about thirty years. I was self taught, but my greatest influence was Len Marchoff. I became a foundation member of the Hawkesbury Camera Club when it reformed in the late 1950s. (They had stopped meeting during World War 2.). Mum drove me up to their first meeting as I was so young I didn't have a driver's licence. I was a member of the Club for years after that. I have to say that Mum has been the most influential person in my life and supportive of whatever I wanted to do.

At the Camera Club we used to submit photos for appraisal. I remember one time Len gave one of my photos a one out of five. When I protested that it was being viewed upside down, his only comment on reviewing it the right way up was that he supposed that he still had to give it at least a one! This criticism stung, but made me so determined to do things better.

Fortunately for me, Len saw potential in my work, I used to go out to his place and spend hours working in the darkroom with him. Later I was blown away to have him award a five out of five for one of my photos. He didn't often award such marks.

I upgraded my equipment over the years. Calendar publishers only accepted photos taken in the medium sized format. The equipment was so expensive that it limited the number of photographers for many jobs. In the calendar field for example there were around four to five of us who submitted photos each year. The others included Jocelyn Burt and Ken Stepnell.

I only took medium film format slides. The beauty of slides was that they could be copied for a print. You would be invited to send off several hundred of your slides for consideration. They would copy and pay for any that they used and return the actual slides to you.

Although I wouldn't call myself an organised person, my slides are all labelled and filed alphabetically in broad categories in cabinets so that I can find them. Although slides are largely superseded, technology allows me to scan the slide into a digital format and to continue to use them.

I never worried about what subject "sells" at any particular time. The market has tightened up due to the financial crisis and the fact that digital cameras allow basically anyone to produce outstanding images. If you press the shutter button enough times, you will eventually end up with a good photo. Publishers can save money as some people are happy to see their photos in print and don't charge for them. Despite this I continue to make a living through selling my photos.

In the days of slide film, photography was different in one major way to digital; the end result was "it", no such things as Photoshop back then. Once a slide was taken it couldn't be altered. If you wanted to enhance a sunset for example you had to put a particular filter on the lens at the time you took the photo. This meant carrying a lot more equipment. I used to have a bag with three medium format camera bodies and assorted lenses in one hand and a bag with accessories such as filters and

film in the other. (I'd also more than likely be carrying my son Daniel on my shoulders at the same time.)

In addition the equipment was much more expensive. One Hasselblad brand filter could cost \$400-\$500. You can buy a lens for that now! Nowadays I carry one DSLR body and six lenses. I still travel to some extreme places and have my camera and lenses professionally cleaned on a regular basis.

Just like when I was young I have always been prepared to work at, or wait for hours or even days to get a particular photo. I have built bird hides in trees to get close enough to take a particular photo of a bird. I once squatted without moving for hours in a bird hide taking photos of a bird. When I went to move, I couldn't because my legs had gone numb. It is never boring waiting, my life ambles by in front of my eyes and the time just goes.

Do I plan my trips and what I want to photograph before I go? Not really, I go away with loose plans of where I would like to go and what I would like to photograph, but it can change because of something I happen to see along the way. One of the best days of my life was spent at Wilcannia, taking photos of the wild birds from the weir across the river. I had come across it by chance.

Have I ever taken the ultimate image? No, but have I taken photos that I am happy about at the time? What I mean is that I can take a photo that I am happy with at the time, but look at it later and want to change something about it. I'm always open to suggestions about my work. Who can be 100% happy with what they have done?

The digital format has improved my photography especially with wildlife. With digital, I can see instantly whether the photo I've taken is what I wanted. In the days of slide film I had to wait until I got home and had the slide processed to see if the image was what I wanted. It might have been the first photo I took that day, but I wouldn't know and had taken more in case. Now you look at the images in real time and can move on if you have the shot you want.

Just as I did with film, I have taught myself about digital photography, learning by trial and error and asking others. I enjoy working on the computer and the time flies when I am. I can get up and work on the computer from six in the morning until lunchtime without noticing the time.

What does being a photographer involve? It is about having the ability to "see" what is going to make a good photo. If you can visualise the end result, and produce that, you are a photographer. Anyone can press buttons and take photos, but a good photographer moves and sets up the photo to capture the view at its best.

I have pretty much always been in a camera club, as a member, judge and mentor. These days I'm a member of the Castle Hill Camera Club, which with over 300 members is the largest in New South Wales. I still like to compete and challenge myself and be challenged by others.

I have also taught photography. A good mate, Geoff Pfister, had the idea of holding classes for people which we did together for sometime. I hope to continue teaching by holding classes at various locations for people with particular interests.

If you ask if I have tips for a family photographer looking to take photos of their family I would make a few suggestions. Put the camera on a tripod; don't be in a big hurry; don't have your subjects looking into the sun and squinting or wearing sunglasses. Make sure the light is falling correctly on

their face and look at the background and make sure it doesn't look like trees are coming out of somebody's head. People should continue to learn, talk to other people and pick up tips as they go.

These days I go away taking photographs with my grandson Brody who has a good eye for photos. He studies photography at school and one of his photos was entered in an Australia wide competition where he was awarded 5th or 6th. Was I proud? You bet, I was over the top.

Retirement? No such thing. What would I do in retirement, jump in the car and go out and take photos??? I've recently purchased a camper van, which once fitted out, will hopefully allow me to get away more.

Someone once asked me where I would live if I could live somewhere else? I said I couldn't imagine anywhere better than Riverstone as I've got my family and friends here, what is more important than that?



2012 Geoff at work in his office.

(Photo Rosemary Phillis. Image digitally enhanced by Geoff Higgins.)

If you would like to view some of Geoff's photos, look up the Geoff Higgins Collection on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhUrw4G23N4>. We also have three of Geoff's books in the collection at the Riverstone Museum.