



Photo courtesy Bob Ring

Don Toothaker, left, and Bob Ring started the New England Photo Workshops in 2009. Putting an emphasis on New England was only natural for Ring and Toothaker, both of whom are from the Merrimack Valley. Here, they are in Maudsley State Park in Newburyport.

SNAPSHOTS OF A SECOND CAREER

After becoming victims of the economic downturn, pair follows their passions to found New England Photo Workshops

BY KELLY BURCH

A group of photographers meets on the boardwalk in Newburyport, their large backpacks filled with spare lenses, tripods slung over their shoulders. They introduce themselves to one another and chat about previous events they attended.

Some of these photographers have worked together before, some have not; soon they all will know each other well. They're spending the weekend together, carpooling, eating dinner and scouring the Merrimack Valley for the best locations to capture images with their cameras.

"All right, let's do some introductions," says Don Toothaker, co-founder of New England Photo

Workshops. "We're going to start over at Maudsley State Park. The idea is, we're going to walk in, there's a stone-covered bridge with a pond. It makes a good place to shoot some black-and-white photos and think about black-and-white."

Each event New England Photo Workshops offers has a theme. This weekend is all about black-and-white photography. Toothaker asks who has experience with this and about half raise their hands.

"I think black-and-white means different things to different people. For me, and I think for Bob, as well," Toothaker says, speaking for his business partner Bob Ring, "a lot of the time it's going to boil down to tones, textures and details."



Photo courtesy Bob Ring

A group works on the S-Curve during a New England Photo Workshop.

Toothaker started his business after he lost his job as an administrator in higher education. He had realized the opportunity some time before, however, when he wanted to attend a photo workshop but found that many were out of reach financially and in terms of the amount of time he would have to take off from his job.

"I couldn't afford \$3,500 and a week off work, so I started looking for local workshops," he says. "I thought, 'I'll find something close that I can drive to.' I quickly realized that the only people who did workshops in New England were people who didn't live in New England, but brought people here."

Furthermore, most of these workshops were aimed at the very obvious places, like Cape Cod in the summer and Vermont in the fall. No one was doing tours on a local level, he says. He saw a need for workshops that focused exclusively on New England, offering more time in field and classroom, but over fewer days.

He let the idea incubate for about a year, searching for the right business partner.

"This is not something I wanted to do on my own. I think something like this works better when you have more than one person. I was

NEW ENGLAND PHOTO WORKSHOPS

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kind of stuck, because I knew I needed a particular type of person," he recalls.

In December 2009, Ring came into Hunt Photo in Melrose, where Toothaker works part time. Ring mentioned that he had been laid off and wasn't sure what he was going to do next.

"I remember thinking, 'That's the guy I need to ask,'" Toothaker says.

He and Ring knew one another from a camera club. Together they would help other club members and they found it very rewarding. That afternoon in Melrose, Toothaker ran after Ring and asked for five minutes of his time.

"I explained it to him and he said it sounded like a great idea, let's give it a try," Toothaker recalls. "We quickly got together and took my concept, had a meeting of the minds about

how we'd do it."

The Merrimack Valley pair agreed on a few principles for their new business: They would focus on New England and they would strive to make their workshops affordable — both in terms of time and money.

"We put a big emphasis on value," Toothaker says.

For Toothaker, founding New England Photo Workshops was the realization of a longtime dream.

"I always wanted a camera as a kid, but I grew up in a family where if you needed something, they provided it for you; if you wanted something, in essence they told you to go cut a few more lawns and save your money," he says.

At age 20, he had the funds to make the purchase just before being stationed overseas in the military.

"I didn't even know how to load film," he says. "But once I started hearing the sounds of the shutter and stuff like that, I was hooked."

For many years, photography remained a hobby while he worked in higher education.

"I figured that would be my career path and photography would be something I did for

myself," he says. "I used to daydream about working for a magazine or a newspaper. I very much thought about it, but I never made that happen."

Meanwhile, he became increasingly engrossed in photography.

"I joined a camera club and that was one of the biggest catalysts of trying to be a better photographer," he says. "I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Merrimack Valley Camera Club in North Andover."

He began taking on photography jobs to support his hobby.

"It made me realize that this is what I want to do, but I certainly didn't have the guts to quit my

SHOOT LIKE A PRO

GETTING STARTED?

Seek out a camera club, co-founder Bob Ring suggests.

"I consider myself to be self-taught, but I belong to two camera clubs, the Lynn Photographic Association and The Merrimack Valley Camera Club. You learn a lot," he says.

LOOKING FOR A CAMERA?

"If you're really serious, I would recommend a DSLR camera," Ring says, noting that brand is a matter of personal preference.

The DSLR, or digital single-lens reflex camera, allows the user to change lenses, shoot at night, and play with many types of photography.

"It enables you to do a lot more than just a point-and-shoot camera," he explains. "You have much more control."

good job to go try to be a photographer," he says.

Ultimately, he didn't have to make the leap on his own.

"They laid me off and made the decision for me," he says.

Toothaker decided to dedicate the paid time from his severance package to pursuing his photography career. He had nine months to figure out if it could work for him

"I thought, 'I can spend nine months trying to figure out if this is going to work.'"

New England Photo Workshops is the result and has turned into a second-career success story.

In the beginning four years ago, they offered only three workshops. Last year, they ran 30 events, ranging from one-day processing workshops, to week-long excursions covering Northern New England.

Before a workshop, Ring and Toothaker scout locations and put together a loose itinerary.

"The itinerary can change at a moment's



Don Toothaker captured this image of Amesbury's Pow Wow River: "What I teach is how to have your photos reflect how you feel about things. When I listen to water, it is in motion, so I create a reason to make it in slow motion. I used a neutral density filter to give that cotton candy effect."

notice," Toothaker explains. "If we're driving down the road and I see something, we stop. The fun is in the spontaneity."

Many of this year's workshops already are sold out. They have learned that eight to 12 participants is the ideal group to host.

"We realized that if there are less people, participants enjoy the experience more, because they receive one-on-one attention," according to Ring.

About half of participants are return customers. Many find their way to them through camera clubs at which the pair makes presentations.

CK and Laurie Rha drive from Connecticut to attend every one of the New England Photo Workshop events. That would be an impressive level of commitment from anyone, but CK and Laurie are 74 and 75 years old.

"If we don't see them for a few months, we miss them," Laurie says of their instructors.

"I'm in love with them," CK adds. "They are so diligent and well prepared. Bob and Don are such a match."

"Like father and son," Laurie agrees.

Although many people who attend have camera experience, anyone can participate in New



Photo courtesy Bob Ring

The group that participated in an April workshop with the New England Photo Workshops at the John Whittier Greenleaf House. They spent the entire weekend together, carpooling, eating dinner, and scouring the Merrimack Valley for the best locations to capture black-and-white images.

England Photo Workshops events, Ring says. "We get people who say, 'I bought this camera, now what do I do?'" and those that just need us to take them out to a new locale. It's a whole range," he explains.

For many photographers, signing up for a photo workshop is way to ensure that they get out and shoot.

"If I pay money, I'm going to go," says Stephen Fales, a contractor from Haverhill. "Plus, the camaraderie; average people come out. Bob and Don show you how to shoot better. And we have fun."

Most workshops include a classroom component, where the participants discuss their work and edit a few pictures. Focusing on all steps in the photography process, and all types of photography, is part of what has made New England Photo Workshops such a success.

"Bob and I try very hard to emphasize photography, rather than one particular type of photography," Toothaker says. "We do any number of things, which we both think makes (workshops) much more beneficial, because you get exposed to everything."

Back in the field, Toothaker discovers something he wants everyone to see.

"This is a fantastic s-curve," he says, pointing ahead on the trail, where it snakes into the woods. "It has lots of tones and textures. What's missing?"

"Color," someone replies.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

New England Photo Workshops will be running many events this year. This is a sampling of upcoming workshops. For a full listing, visit www.nephotoworkshops.com

■ ISLAND AND FLOWERS

June 27-29; \$395

This workshop will explore the Maine coast, with field work and classroom time every day.

■ GREAT NORTH WOODS

September 22-25; \$1,395

This all inclusive workshop includes lodging, meals, and in-field and classroom instruction.

■ BLACK AND WHITE WEEKEND: BEACON HILL AND CAPE ANN

November 8-10; \$299

This workshop will focus on teaching participants to "see" in black and white. Two days of shooting will conclude with image review and print-making.

"Exactly. It already lends itself to black and white," the instructor responds.

Ring points to a participant who is crawling through bushes to get a unique shot.

"That's what it's all about," he says. "We give people space to make their own image. It's great to see people being creative."

After he captures his own image, Toothaker

helps Sally Gaffney of Lawrence frame her shot. He adjusts the camera and steps back so she can see what he's done.

"That's just me, though," Toothaker says as Gaffney looks through the lens. "You need to figure out what you like and what you don't. Now, let me get out of the way and see what you do."

Gaffney plays with the settings and the lens snaps. Toothaker looks at the image.

"I like that," he says.

Neil Matthews, an electrical salesman from Gloucester, participated in workshops before and his images have begun winning awards.

"I think I get lucky," he says. "Don says I see it, even if I don't know it yet."

It seems that Don may be right. As he points out a set of initials carved into a tree, Matthews teases him.

"I beat you to that," he says.

Toward the end of the afternoon, the group stops at the foundations that once supported the Moseley family's house. The participants set out to shoot a variety of items; Ring is quickly fixated on a curve in the foundation wall.

"I have to see why you like that," says CK Rha, noticing Ring's focus.

"I'm going to show you," Ring replies.

The group gathers around him and he explains his thinking.

CK sighs.

"You're a genius," he says, then turns to his wife. "I can't even copy him." **MVB**