

FIELD NOTES

Making Sure No Guest Is Forgotten



TERRY DEROY GRUBER



'ONE-SHOT DEAL' Terry Gruber, above at camera, uses a large-format camera to revive the lost art of the banquet photo, which had its heyday in the late 1880s to the 1960s, when it began fading in popularity. Top, his group portrait at the wedding of Brenda Malloy and Hal Reiter.

By VINCENT M. MALLOZZI

ON a recent Saturday evening at the Harold Pratt House in New York, Terry deRoy Gruber stood on a ladder and peered through the lens of a 25-pound wood-framed camera perched atop a 10-foot tripod.

"Ladies and gentlemen, can I have your attention?" Mr. Gruber, a wedding photographer based in New York, asked the 112 people seated in the Rockefeller Room for the wedding reception of Brenda Malloy and Hal Reiter. "Please make certain that you can see the lens, that nothing is blocking you."

After five hours of preparation, Mr. Gruber was putting the finishing touches on the creation of a single, 12-by-20-inch black-and-white group portrait known in its heyday as a banquet photo. Most popular in the late 1880s, when Mr. Gruber's banquet camera was made, until the late 1960s when it began fading from vogue, the large group photo all but vanished in a Nikon nanosecond.

"This kind of photograph is the perfect way to memorialize a unique gathering of important people," Mr. Gruber said on Monday while sitting in his studio beside his antique camera, which is better suited for the work of Mathew Brady, the Civil War photographer, than Annie Leibovitz. "Most people who posed for banquet photos in those days were dressed to the nines," said Mr. Gruber, 58. "But somewhere along the way, I think the world got less formal in the way portraits are taken."

Geoffrey Berliner, the director of the Center for Alternative Photography in New York, specializes in historic cameras and photographs. He drew a parallel between banquet photographers like Mr. Gruber and Rembrandt.

"Rembrandt would get paid by people who wanted to see their faces in his paintings," Mr. Berliner said. "That's really no different than people in later years who belonged to

corporations, unions and other organizations who paid banquet photographers to document their events by taking these huge portraits, made from 12-by-20 negatives, where everyone's face can be seen clearly."

Mr. Gruber, who grew up in Pittsburgh and came to New York to work as a freelance photographer shortly after graduating from Vassar in 1975, has always had a fascination with banquet photos, buying them at flea markets throughout the years and putting them in frames to decorate his studio.

"Remember that great scene at the end of 'The Shining,' when they zoom in on Jack

said Mr. Jones, now 89. "I'm glad that Terry is carrying on a great tradition."

Mr. Berliner said that "there are maybe a hundred people in the country still using this type of camera, and they are using it mostly for landscape or architectural work."

"There are many reasons why photographers no longer use these cameras," he added. "It's hard to get the film, it's hard to print the negatives and the camera is too heavy and cumbersome, so they use smaller cameras. But if you blow up a piece of 35-millimeter film to 12 by 20, all the detail would be gone."

That was why Ms. Malloy hired Mr. Gruber.

"These photos create a classic sense of connectedness," she said. "It's the most intimate way to capture one of the most memorable events in a person's life."

Mr. Gruber, whose banquet photos start at \$2,500, a price that includes three prints, spends hours scouting every location where he will work. He also works with wedding planners, floral designers, musicians and wait staffs to make sure that everyone and everything, including tall centerpieces and long chandeliers, are not obstructing his view of any guest leading up to what he calls "my one-shot deal."

"The whole process, it's a real dance," Mr. Gruber said.

At Ms. Malloy and Mr. Reiter's wedding on Oct. 15, Mr. Gruber told their guests: "When I say, 'Open,' that is your cue to freeze. If you're ready, I will begin."

Then, as he said, "Open," he manually opened the shutter and triggered the flash on his camera. Seconds later, he squeezed a plastic pump, and six flash bulbs strung around the wood-paneled room popped in unison.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Mr. Gruber said, as all the guests began to uncoil. "We are done."

The lost art of the group portrait at events finds a modern audience.

Nicholson in that banquet photo, it's very haunting," said Mr. Gruber, raising his eyebrows. "Whenever I looked at one of these photos, I loved how every face drew you into the image and thought to myself, Why is this so fascinating? I'm looking at people I don't know. I wondered what it would be like to know the people in the image."

Mr. Gruber found out in January 2003, when he had a banquet photo taken with family and friends at his 50th birthday party in New York. After a long search for a banquet photographer, Mr. Gruber found Jayson Jones, who was semiretired and living in New York. They soon became friends, and when Mr. Jones sold Mr. Gruber his banquet camera for \$500, a lost art was resurrected.

"There really isn't anyone around the country still taking these kinds of photos,"