

67-Year Era for Boston Camera Club Draws to a Close with Death of Henry F. Weisenburger

Henry F. Weisenburger, believed to be the longest-active living exponent of amateur photography in New England, has died at 96. The event occurred at North Florida Regional Medical Center, Gainesville on Tuesday, March 16, 2021, at 4:30am. The cause of death were cardiac problems, for which he was scheduled to undergo a procedure mere hours before his passing. Susan Mosser of the Greater Lynn (Mass.) Photographic Association, one of the first to report the event, spoke for all by saying that “we lost a giant this morning.”

Henry’s loss is a tectonic event in the New England photographic world, where he was active for two-thirds of a century, being a president of six photo organizations including the Boston Camera Club, which he joined in 1954, and the Photographic Historical Society of New England, a member since its founding in 1973. It also gives occasion for looking back on a long and achieving career in aeronautical engineering.

Henry’s death took everyone by surprise, since he had been his perennial hale and unstoppable self until then. Henry, whose longevity is a worthy and cautionary testimonial of a man who never drank or smoked, lived since 1960 in one house in the village of Cochituate, Wayland, Massachusetts, west of Boston. Into his mid-90’s he thought nothing of driving regularly from there to Florida with his second spouse Elizabeth and cat Missy Midnight in his large camper, in which and its predecessors over the years he’d gone from the Canadian Maritimes to the Pacific, visiting 41 states. For the past year and more during the COVID crisis, Henry and Elizabeth were sojourning in Lakeland, Fla. with Elizabeth’s daughter Lisa. Some months ago the three relocated north to the town of Henry’s later college days, Gainesville, Fla.

A decided detail man, anyone who knew Henry—and got him going—knows he spared little in recounting his colorful and achieving life. Much of the following was written down in long telephone conversations with Henry over the past decade and more. Henry Francis Daniel Weisenburger, who went by Hank when young and never used his third name, was born on May 22, 1924 in Astoria, Queens, New York City. His father Henry A. Weisenburger, of German descent, served in World War I; his mother, Martha F., was of Irish extraction. In 1925 the family moved to West Palm Beach, Florida. In 1934 they visited the national Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago, which deeply impressed Henry. The photographic world knows much about his over eight—you heard that right—decades in that sector, which began in the 1930s, and his uncountable administrative positions and awards. But his long career as an aeronautical engineer is equally amazing. Since few people know about that side of him, recounting it first might be in order. Then again, it’s not an easy task to relate one without the other, since with him both pursuits were intimately connected.

Henry got involved with airplanes at an early age. While at St. Anne’s High School in West Palm Beach he started hanging around the local airport and took night courses in aircraft engines. By the time he graduated in 1944, he was a certified aircraft welder and licensed Civil Aeronautics Board engine mechanic. World War II still ongoing, he was turned down for military service because of a problem with his feet—one recalls the sturdy shoes he wore throughout his life. But that didn’t stop him from serving. In the war he was in uniform in the U.S. Civil Air Patrol, where he worked with submarine-hunting planes flying the Florida coast.

Two-thirds of a century later, in 2011 he gave a presentation there about that sub-chaser operation. Meanwhile, at West Palm Beach airport he continued working as a mechanic's helper. He also attended courses in aircraft weight, balance, and hydraulics in Shelbyville, Mississippi.

At this time, not yet in college, he got a call from a technical rehab outfit which offered him schooling at the University of Miami, so he enrolled there. As an undergraduate, he taught mechanical drawing to fellow undergraduates. Typical of Henry, he worked nights too. Periodically he was summoned back to West Palm Beach to do paid aircraft engine inspection work. Two years later, a third city beckoned. While on a visit to the University of Florida up in Gainesville, he wandered into a hangar at the local airfield, where he soon found himself invited to become an engineering assistant and transfer student. It was in a university painting class in 1949 that Henry met Elizabeth Nolen, who decades later would become his second spouse.

For someone as brilliant as Henry, one is surprised to learn he had difficulty in college, having for example to repeat a difficult thermodynamics course. Still, he graduated with a bachelor of science in aeronautical engineering at the University of Florida, Gainesville in 1951. All the while, his aircraft experience was growing. He built *drop-test* rigs—which literally drop a Navy plane some feet to make sure it can stand up to rough aircraft carrier landings.

Henry's career might best be described as coming up with ingenious solutions to make the country's military planes fly better. His talent was working mechanically, with his mind and hands, to solve challenging problems. In his career he did work for the U.S. Air Force, Army, Marines, Navy, and the Defense Dept.'s famed DARPA—Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Reciting all the planes he's worked on seems almost to recount the history of U.S. military aviation since World War II—the Navy's F6F Hellcat, three kinds of bombers, three types of transports, the F-4 fighter, and in the 1980s and 1990s civil jets used as military testbeds.

In 1951 Henry took his first professional job with Fairchild Aircraft Corp. in Hagerstown, Maryland, where he worked on the testing side of the company's C-119 Flying Boxcars, which they were turning out at a rate of one a day. During one test he had to climb down into the nose wheelwell of the plane, in flight, to pry something loose which had gotten jammed, a parachute strapped on his back for safety.

In 1953 Henry came to the Boston Camera Club. That year Fairchild sent him up to Norwood, Mass. to work on a plane that never made it into production, the M-232, one of the country's first short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft—futuristic technology for the day. In the process he attended the club's Christmas, 1953 party in Boston, where he met his future first spouse, Hazel Fulbright. He soon joined the club in 1954. When his stint in Norwood ended, Henry returned—temporarily, as it turned out—to Hagerstown, where he continued as an associate, or corresponding, member of the club, mailing prints for competition up to Boston.

In 1956 Henry had occasion to visit Boston again. This time he met the club's Lee Ellis, manager of photographic operations at Raytheon Co., west of Boston, which promptly hired Henry as a senior systems engineer. His stay at Raytheon wasn't exactly short—he stayed to 1992, during which time he was sent to England five times. At Raytheon his career became a pageant of specialties that can only be called bewildering. He installed radar pods. He worked in aircraft hydraulics, a specialty few others knew. He solved corrosion and vibration problems.

He did acoustic testing of gunfire. He tested and integrated electronics, controls, and computers on such planes as the B-47, America's first jet bomber, and on the B-52. In 1957 he worked on the Doppler radar of the supersonic B-58 Hustler—a job he called “27 months of hell.” If one mentions the well-known C-130 Hercules prop and C-141 jet transports, he worked on those too. Ditto the Vietnam-era F-4—a hot Mach 2-plus fighter that flew so fast that no one could get its forward-looking radar to successfully capture images on the ground. Henry came up with a simple but ingenious solution—point the radar backward, and snap the image as the plane flew by. Later at Raytheon he worked with radar phenomenology and GPS, some of the work being done through MIT Lincoln Laboratories at Hanscom Field, Bedford, Mass. In one project he came up with a clever way to send piping or cables through a high-pressure aircraft bulkhead without compromising it. For the U.S. Marines he led an unusual project—hanging a Sparrow missile on a helicopter. And so on. The secrecy of some of these projects prevented him even today from discussing them in detail. To be sure, besides England, he took countless business trips around the U.S.

Henry was a mere 74-year member, since 1947, of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, which in 2007 threw a banquet in Boston in honor of his 60th year. In his recent sojourn in Gainesville, pre-COVID he continued to attend AIAA breakfasts. Expectedly there are plenty of personal stories. Since 1949 Henry was friends with Col. Gail S. Halvorsen, the hero known as the “Candy Bomber” of the 1948–1949 Berlin Airlift, who famously dropped tons of candy on miniature parachutes for children around Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, of which he was later the commanding officer. Henry last saw Halvorsen in 2003 at—where else?—Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, at the 100th anniversary celebration of the Wright Brothers' first flight. As one might imagine, Henry was an avid aficionado of aviation history. But it should be noted that he went to Kitty Hawk as much interested in the history of the famous photograph of that flight as in the flight itself (see Photographic Historical Society of New England, *Journal*, 2013).

Which brings us to photography. Perhaps one needn't give too detailed a blow-by-blow here, since it has been posted across the Web in recent days (see the Boston club's writeup page and *Reflector* newsletter, January, 2019, at bostoncameraclub.org). Still, an account of his lesser-known early camera adventures, and some signal later accomplishments, is in order.

One might note that Henry was five years shy of having been a member for half the existence of the Boston Camera Club, the nation's oldest extant club founded by amateurs, 2½ weeks after President Garfield's assassination in 1881. As it is, he was a member for 48% of the club's life. At 67 years, he is also the club's second-longest known member. The longest is Henry's good friend, the club's 71-year member Gordon Hicks, an honorary member who died in 2009 and who, appropriately, lived near Henry in Cochituate, Wayland (see *Reflector*, April, 2009).

Henry began taking pictures while he was a Boy Scout—where he was a scoutmaster—and in high school in West Palm Beach, where it is believed he was on the yearbook staff. But he said he didn't get really serious about photography until he got to college, where he was president of both the University of Miami and University of Florida, Gainesville camera clubs. There aren't many people, then or now, who can say, as Henry often proudly did, that in Gainesville he put himself through college with photography. Although he shot sports games and college life for the yearbooks, he was good enough to scoop other photographers and was often able to sell prints to the subject. He also hired out with a commercial photography studio in Gainesville.

Later, while working for Fairchild in Hagerstown, Md., expectably he was president of that company's camera club.

In New England, in 1963–1965 Henry was a vice president, and in 1965–1967 president of the Boston Camera Club (BCC). A decades-long member of its executive committee, he was also longtime finance committee chair. In 1979 in recognition of his service, he was made an honorary member of the club. Soon he did much of the prep for the club's last Boston International Exhibition of Photography in 1981, for which it took the club a man-year of labor to prepare. In the club and in eastern Massachusetts Henry was in constant demand as a competition judge. He was named the club's judge of the year for 2012–2013. As for his camera work, in BCC he is perhaps best known for his black-and-white photographs of his favorite genre, nature.

In 1954, the year he joined BCC, Henry joined the Photographic Society of America. By 1981 he had over 1,000 acceptances in its competitive salons, at last count receiving its 3-star recognition in pictorial color, 2-star in nature, and 1-star in prints. In 1972 he was named an associate of PSA. In 1959 he was a founding member of Massachusetts Camera Naturalists, a by-invitation-only statewide organization of enthusiasts established by BCC honorary member Leslie A. Campbell, who died last September (see *Reflector*, October, 2020). Henry, an early president, often hosted the group near his home in Cochituate. From a year begging research, Henry was active in the New England Camera Club Council (NECCC), an umbrella group of clubs including the Boston Camera Club. He attended many, and helped organize some, of NECCC's annual summer conferences in the Five College Area in western Massachusetts. In 1966 NECCC named him a master member, and in 1981 its photographer of the year.

Considering the time he sank into the Boston Camera Club, missing few meetings in 67 years, it's hard to imagine Henry having the wherewithal to devote serious time, let alone leadership, to another organization. But Henry is Henry, and such is the case. He joined the Photographic Historical Society of New England (PHSNE), a leading U.S. group involved in camera and image collecting and history, at its first regular meeting in 1973. A decades-running fixture on its executive committee and five-term president for six years, 1977–1997, he was named a charter honorary life member, for many years one of only two holding the title. Since 1975 the present writer has attended many of PHSNE's semi-annual, now annual, trade shows in and around Boston, and can't remember Henry ever not having a table at every show, chock-a-block with cameras, lenses, and photo gear.

There were more affiliations. In 1995 he was a founding member of Sudbury Valley (Mass.) Nature Photographers. By his professional photo work in Florida he was a member of Professional Photographers of America, the world's largest entity of its kind, older than the Boston Camera Club.

Not your average photo practitioner, Henry's avocation found yet more avenues. He was a photo educator, from whom thousands have learned something about the craft, in BCC courses starting in 1957, and in NECCC. At one time he traveled the country giving up to 15 seminars a year. He was a serious camera collector, particularly of Graflex and the German Leica and Kilfitt lines. If nothing else, he was a photo documentarian. In BCC and PHSNE he was indefatigable, taking innumerable snapshots of organization events for posterity. With Henry's passing, the living component of the Boston Camera Club's institutional memory is shortened by

decades. One also mentions what might be called his photographic carpentry. In earlier decades Henry was often at work in the club, building stages, props, and furniture, starting at the club's mid-20th-century headquarters at 351A Newbury Street, Back Bay, Boston, and at the Presbyterian church in Brookline Village, where the club relocated in 1980. After it moved to its present headquarters at All Saints Parish, Brookline in 1997, there was Henry, at 70-something, on his back up near the 14-foot ceiling, hammer in hand, putting the finishing touches on the club office's present shelving.

Turning to Henry's marriages, if one expected that for once one could briefly mention two happy but uneventful threads and move on, one cannot. Because these too are storybook tales. It is unknown how many marriages have resulted from membership in the Boston Camera Club, but two things are certain. There aren't many, and Henry's first marriage did. His first spouse Hazel Nowlin Fulbright and Henry, her future second spouse, met at the club's aforementioned Christmas party in 1953. After he returned to Fairchild in Maryland but transferred to Raytheon back in Massachusetts in 1956, they started dating. The gesture initiating the affair was classic Henry. He mailed Hazel an aluminum postcard, stamped with an invitation to meet him for a date at Bickford's restaurant near the club's Back Bay, Boston headquarters. They married on Henry's birthday in 1958. Settling first in Auburndale, Newton, Mass., in 1960 they moved to the house in Cochituate, Wayland. Like Henry, Hazel, born in 1912, joined the club in 1954 as well. She was a club vice president in 1979–1982, secretary of the club for 4 years, and editor of the club's *Reflector* newsletter for 7 years. Professionally she worked at Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., Boston, alongside two distinguished BCC honorary members, architects Cecil B. Atwater and L. Whitney Standish, who jointly designed the company's headquarters building. Hazel, like Henry an accomplished photographer, preceded him in the Photographic Society of America, winning its color slide of the year award in 1953. Hazel died in 2001.

In her obituary writeup, Henry's stepdaughter Lisa calls him a "patient, humble man of vision with focus to finish," words which cannot be exceeded in accuracy, as the foregoing has shown to a fault. Henry was never a man to leave a part of his life unachieved. In 2001 he returned to Gainesville for his University of Florida class's 50th reunion. To this affair he invited the now-Elizabeth Nolen Phillips, who was back in Gainesville, where she and Henry had met in 1949. Although the couple had dated at the time, in that post-World War II era they were headed in different directions and marriage was not in the cards for them then. So at the reunion Henry and Elizabeth struck up their relationship again and married that year, 2001, for Elizabeth her second marriage as well. Returning to Massachusetts and settling in the Cochituate house, Elizabeth and Henry continued their regular not-especially-short trek into the club's weekly meetings in Brookline.

A memorial service for Henry was held in Gainesville on March 29, 2021. He was interred in Forest Meadows East Cemetery there. Henry, who had no children, is survived by his second spouse Elizabeth Nolen Phillips Weisenburger and her daughter Lisa P. Birkner, both of Gainesville. It was Lisa, a retired R.N., who in Lakeland and Gainesville lived with and offered daily support for Elizabeth and Henry. Henry is also survived by a niece, Jan Williams of Georgia, and by Elizabeth's son David B. Phillips. Henry was predeceased by his first spouse Hazel Nowlin Fulbright Weisenburger and his younger only sibling, John T. Weisenburger of

Georgia. An archive of Henry's photographic work, especially in Florida, resides at the University of Florida, Gainesville. Other photographs are held by the Boston Camera Club.

The passing of Henry F. Weisenburger leaves the Boston Camera Club with three honorary members—longtime BCC portrait group chair and model-of-the-year competition director Gordon Yu of Quincy, Mass. (2001); Boston's veteran commercial photographer, photojournalist, author, and photo educator Lou Jones of East Boston, Boston (2007); and longtime BCC, PHSNE, and Mass CamNats treasurer Gregory A. Crisci of South Weymouth, Weymouth, Mass. (2012).

James A. Luedke, Jr.

03/29/2021
