

PIONEER Photographer Don Rutledge, who told the story of missions through his camera lens for several generations of Southern Baptists, died Feb. 19. He was 82. First in the United States and eventually throughout the world, Rutledge captured quiet moments of humanity and mission ministry in hundreds of classic photographs taken for the Home (now North American) Mission Board and later for the Foreign (now International) Mission Board. He called them "windows on the soul." His images inspired millions of Southern Baptists to pray for and participate in missions.

Don Rutledge
1930-2013

MIDLOTHIAN, Va. (BP)—Renowned photographer Don Rutledge, who told the story of missions through his camera lens for several generations of Southern Baptists, died at his home near Richmond, Va., Feb. 19. He was 82 and had been in declining health for some time.

Traveling throughout the United States and to more than 140 countries over 40-plus years, Rutledge captured quiet moments of humanity and mission ministry in hundreds of classic photographs taken for the Home (now North American) Mission Board and later for the Foreign (now International) Mission Board. His images helped millions to understand, pray for and participate in missions.

"I love photojournalism and enjoy using it as a worldwide Christian ministry," Rutledge once wrote. "It forces me to see, to look beyond what the average person observes, to search where few people care even to look, to glance over and beyond my backyard fence.... It helps me translate the national and international ministries into human terms by telling the story through people rather than through statistics."

Born on a farm in Depression-era Tennessee, Rutledge originally intended to be a pastor. He tried preaching for a time after studying theology in college and seminary. But he discovered an old box camera that belonged to his uncle—and the call to photograph the world and the people in it proved far stronger.

"He was a good pastor because he was a good listener," Lucy, his wife of 61 years, remembered. "But photography was always in the background."

BLACK STAR, BLACK LIKE ME

Rutledge began to shoot photo stories as a freelancer and obsessively studied the work of great photographers. Some of his self-assigned stories in the 1950s and early '60s required considerable physical courage, including coverage of the violence surrounding the growing civil rights movement in the South. Still a raw rookie, he heard about New York-based Black Star, then the nation's top photojournalism agency.

"In total ignorance, I wrote and offered to do photo stories," Rutledge recalled many years later. "A form letter replied that they would need to see a portfolio of my work. I felt my pictures were not yet good enough for me to send a set."

But he sent a list of 10 story ideas. Black Star expressed a mild no-promises interest in one of them for a magazine client. Rutledge took that response as a firm assignment, shot the story and sent in the film. Amused and intrigued, Black Star and the magazine's editor decided to take a chance on the young upstart and asked for more

photos to fill holes in the story, which was eventually published. Rutledge's future was set.

He eventually joined Black Star as a staff photographer—a job offered to only a handful of America's top shooters—and covered stories for the next 10 years in numerous countries for magazines such as *LIFE*, *LOOK* and *Paris Match*. He would disappear for months at a time into Latin America and other regions, armed with hundreds of rolls of film and a list of story assignments.

"I always packed his suitcase with enough shirts, socks and underwear for 10 days," Lucy said, remembering her early years as a young bride learning the patience and longsuffering she would need for many decades to come. After that, he had to find someplace to wash his clothes. On the first long trip, she added, "I put all his socks in one compartment [in the suitcase]. I don't think the man found them until he got home."

Rutledge's reputation quickly grew—and he became internationally

most powerful and influential chronicles of the struggle for change during the civil rights era.

BACK TO HIS ROOTS

At the height of his potential as a globe-trotting photographer, Rutledge left Black Star in 1966 to shoot pictures for the then-Home Mission Board in Atlanta. Several photographer colleagues told him he was crazy but they didn't understand his deepest motivations. He'd been

the material. I sent him \$25. It was the beginning of a lengthy friendship and the publication of many photo stories from this Black Star photographer, who was also a Baptist minister....

"Later, when the [Home Mission Board] needed a photographer, I recommended Don, but those hiring said he wouldn't come for our salary. I said, 'Why not let Don make that decision?' Don accepted the position and, in the process, changed the denomination's concept of the power of

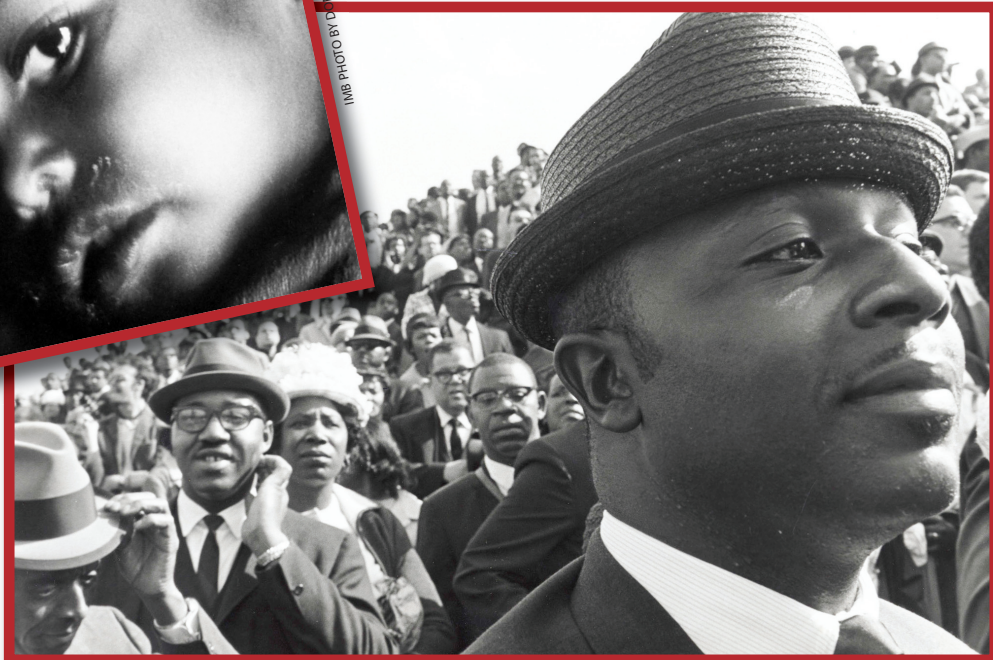
photography. The publication I edited felt the readership quiver from his first cover, and [photographer] disciples flocked to be taught by his gracious skill."

Over the next decade and more, Rutledge traveled to all 50 states, capturing the compassion of missionaries and the needs of the people they served in the pages of *Home Missions* magazine and several full-length books.

"They were doing real gutsy kinds of things," Rutledge said of home missionaries. "They had people in New York doing ministries right in the middle of the drug culture.... I felt that the camera at this point could become a means of

searching for creative ways to communicate the Gospel since his youth in Tennessee.

"In the early 1960s I received a package with photographs and story of an inner-city mission in Chattanooga from a Don Rutledge, known to me only by his part in the creation of the book, *Black Like Me*," said



DIGNITY Don Rutledge photographed many stories about the struggle for racial equality and justice in the South during the height of the civil rights movement. This image reveals the dignity of men and women who had long been denied their rights as Americans—and as human beings.

Walker Knight, editor of *Home Missions* magazine at the time. "I recognized the quality of the work in the envelope and immediately wrote back that I would like to publish the story, but I did not have a budget for freelance work. He wrote back that I was to pay what I could and go ahead and use

communicating something that people needed to know about.... They were doing things out of their Christian faith and their love of people."

He shot many stories over summer-long road trips with Lucy and his two young sons. The family would pile into a car and head west. Mom and the

boys enjoyed the traveling, sightseeing and motel swimming pools along the way while Dad shot mission-related photo stories. They always ended up at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center for Home Missions Week.

Rutledge went alone, however, to shoot perhaps his greatest U.S.-based story. He spent three weeks in 1979 with Bailey and Luvania King, a rural Mississippi couple who had long struggled with poverty.

At 62, King was broken by a lifetime of dawn-to-dark labor to feed his family. Doctors claimed it was meningitis and a stroke. "It weren't that," a friend said. "His body just plumb wore out."

But King's mind was keen. In fact, he was a country Baptist philosopher. "What's the difference between me and a colored man?" King asked. "Ain't none, 'cept sometimes people call me mister." His belief in accepting others and sharing what little he had shone through. Some folks "don't want to fool with nothin'," King observed. "But ... people is worth foolin' with. All o' them is. I guess not carin' is 'bout as bad a thang as is."

In the lines and ridges of King's weathered face, in the light and shadows of his sagging clapboard house, Rutledge's photographs found his soul.

TO THE WORLD

In 1980, Rutledge joined the then-Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Va., as a special assignment photographer, continuing his photographic ministry worldwide for another 15 years,

your writing was going to be arranged around Don's photos, you were assured of greater readership. He raised the photography bar high



POVERTY Bailey King was broken by a lifetime of poverty and dawn-to-dark labor by the time Don Rutledge came to spend several weeks with him and his family. Doctors claimed it was meningitis and a stroke. "It weren't that," a friend said, "His body just plumb wore out." But King's mind was keen—and his lifelong belief in accepting others and sharing what little he had shone through. In the lines and ridges of King's weathered face, in the light and shadows of his sagging clapboard house, Rutledge's photographs found the windows into his soul.

indeed for the two Southern Baptist mission boards. When Don brought in his single lens reflex cameras, the Home Mission Board photographers were still carrying heavy, large format cameras around. It is absolutely true

that he revolutionized photography for the boards: equipment, philosophy, presentation. He took it from dry documenting to an art form.

"Don Rutledge talked a lot about 'going beyond' in photography," Creswell said. "He was not looking to merely document an event, but



MENTOR AND TEACHER Joanna B. Pinneo, one of the most distinguished of the many photographers influenced by Don Rutledge, describes his influence in a Baptist Press story "Don Rutledge: teacher & encourage," available at BPNEWS.net. In the article, she said the photo above of an Eskimo family at their home above the Arctic Circle in Alaska is one of her favorites. "It hangs on my wall, so I see it every day I am at home. In it, each family member has a different expression and body language. A Native American woman dressed in a patterned summer dress stands on the porch of her clapboard house holding a little boy while another child pokes her head out of the door, her fingers stuck in her mouth. Another young girl stands on the porch, leaning out and holding on to the doorframe. A slightly older girl stands just beside her, bending to her right almost as if she is holding on against the wind. In the far left of the photograph, still another girl peers out of a window, her mouth slightly open in a sort of greeting. The house has tarpaper tacked in places. A mop leans in a corner where the house line bends. ... Your eye moves easily through the photograph, starting with the woman on the porch. She is smiling and everyone seems to be gathered to welcome visitors. The way Don framed the photograph and captured each expression draws us in; we, too, feel welcomed by this family. I never tire of examining this picture and wondering about the lives of the people there."

who always seemed to have to pick up the tab when they went to lunch with him, loved him. The photographers he has influenced are legion.

"The chance to learn from Don Rutledge was one of the best opportunities in my life," said photographer Stanley Leary, who first encountered Rutledge as a young newspaper photographer and eventually wrote a master's thesis about his work. "Don's storytelling with his camera helped

missionaries realize God's calling for them. Those impacted by his work are vast. Just as vast as his stories are those he mentored. Unless Don was on the phone, his door was open at the office. While I worked with Don, I cannot remember how many people came by or called to ask for Don's advice. No matter how bad their work, Don treated each and every one with honor, dignity and respect....

"Don understood [that] the relationship of people to each other in the photo is the real power of the storytelling image," Leary said. "Don understood that God gave His life for a relationship with each one of us. Nothing was more important than to establish and grow relationships. All of Don's work was to show the power of God's love. You either see the celebration of God's love or you feel the sadness of someone who isn't letting God into their life. Don helped me to realize how I could fulfill my call to ministry with the camera. Don was a pastor who realized the camera was a pulpit and the congregation wasn't limited by the walls of a church.... I can never thank Don enough for helping me to see the world through God's eyes."

In addition to his wife Lucy, of Midlothian, Va., Rutledge is survived by two sons, Mark, an IMB missionary in Haiti, and Craig, of Albany, Ga.; and five grandchildren. Funeral arrangements are incomplete, but the family anticipates a memorial service will be held Feb. 23 at 11 a.m. at Winfree Memorial Baptist Church, 13617 Midlothian Turnpike, Midlothian, Va. 23113. Burial and graveside services will be scheduled later in Murfreesboro, Tenn., Rutledge's hometown.

He received more than 300 awards for his work and inspired hundreds of young photographers, writers and mission communicators—many of whom he mentored personally—to follow in his footsteps. Even the writers, who were the frequent target of his collection of humorous travel stories and