

All the King's Men

David Best

"I have a dossier of letters we wrote back and forth. When I read them now, I can sense that he liked me, that he respected me as a photographer."

Bob Kolbrener

In 1968 Bob Kolbrener wandered into Best Studios in Yosemite National Park, which was owned by Ansel Adams and his wife, Virginia. "There was classical music playing," he remembers, "and incense burning, and these six amazing photographs on the wall, which blew my mind. I had never seen an original photograph with such depth and beauty before."

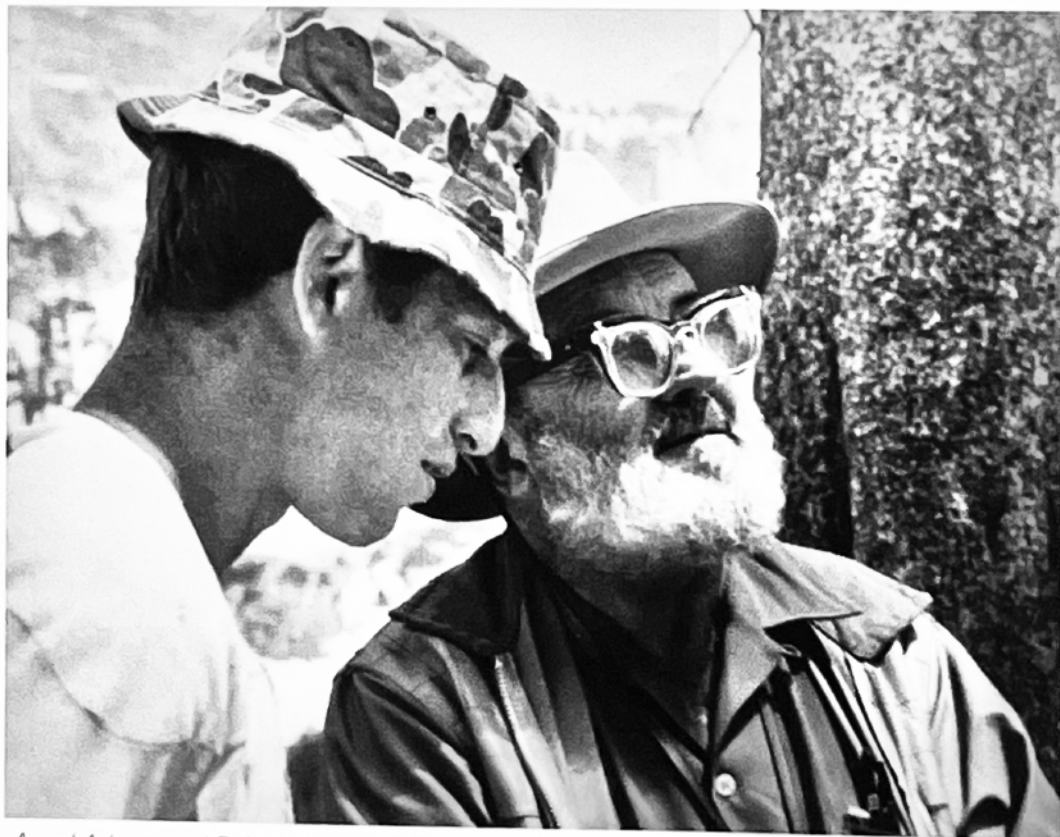
When Kolbrener returned home to Saint Louis, he read in *Popular Photography* magazine that Adams offered workshops. After sending in

his portfolio for consideration, he was accepted for the Spring workshop in 1969. When Kolbrener subsequently took a winter workshop in 1973, Adams asked if he would like to become an assistant. "I said, 'ABSOLUTELY!'" That's how I started working for Ansel.

"The next year, he hired me full time to teach dark-room techniques to Park employees, and to lead photo walks for people visiting Best Studios. I had a binder with photographs as examples, and every afternoon I would take six to 12

people out to the base of Yosemite Falls, then through the horse stables, and show them a little portraiture technique."

At some point, Bill Turnage, Adams' business manager, invited Kolbrener to breakfast with the Adamses at the famous Ahwanhee Hotel, Yosemite's premier eatery. "I'm scratching my head," Kolbrener says, "wondering why little Bob Kolbrener would be invited to breakfast? But I showed up, and there's Virginia and Ansel and Bill already seated. I'm just a



Ansel Adams and Bob Kolbrener, 1969. Photo by Bob Kolbrener

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really low guy on the totem pole—there's no reason for me to be there. I just can't process this. Anyway, the upshot is that Ansel and Bill had decided they wanted to change the name of Best Studio to the Ansel Adams Gallery. Best Studio had been started by Virginia's father in 1902, and they didn't have the courage to suggest the change to Virginia without somebody being there to make sure that the place didn't explode.

"I was never an insider like Ted Orland or John Sexton—who worked very closely with Ansel in the darkroom. I have a dossier of

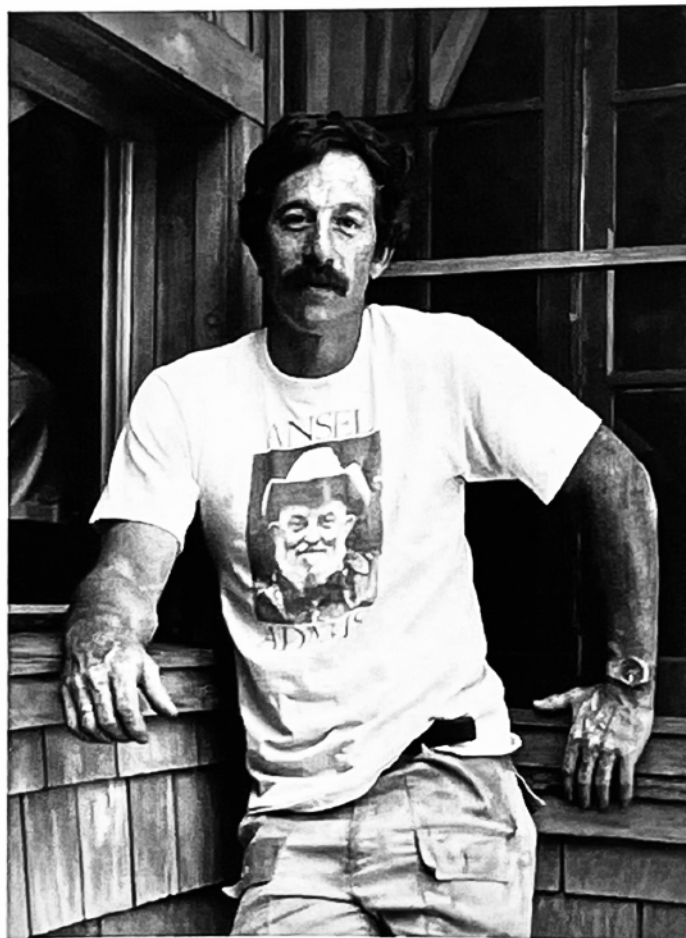
letters we wrote back and forth. When I read them now, I can sense that he liked me, that he respected me as a photographer. That's in writing, if you will. There was a relationship. But I didn't work with him every day. I was more of an outsider who sort of came and went in Ansel's orbit.

"Having said that, my best description of Ansel is that he was a big man with a big camera, and that's all meant to be complimentary. He was very jovial, very outgoing, and just a huge guy who had a big presence physically. He was such a delightful man, full of energy. He was the kind of person that comes

along once in a century, he was just off the charts. What was fun is that we all knew it. He was already a known entity when I came along in the late sixties. There was an energy about him. Everybody respected him. Everybody hung on every word. We knew at the time that we were in the presence of greatness. And that was really exciting and really fun for all of us.

"Ansel influenced me in several ways. One thing that people never talk about is how fast he had to be making decisions and using his equipment when he was out shooting. Most people think, incorrectly, that the great landscape photographers find some beautiful location and just hang out there, waiting until Mother Nature creates this amazing scene. And then at the climax of it all they click the shutter, and it's a done deal.

"That's absolute hogwash. It's really the reverse. It's an absolute race out there, and I use that word emphatically. It's a race. You see something wonderful or astonishing and it's a race to set up your tripod and camera, choose the right lens, the right filter, the right composition, the right exposure—blah, blah, blah—before what's happening before you is either depreciated or changed to the point where it's gone. People don't understand that. They often ask me if I had to wait a long time to make some of my popular photographs, and I have to explain to them that it's a race to capture a scene before it disappears. So I know, even though I've



Bob Kolbrener, self-portrait

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Continued

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never seen it documented, that Ansel Adams had to be the fastest guy ever, because a lot of his amazing short-term weather-related landscapes are made with a view camera. And he either had the most amazing ability to anticipate beyond anything human, or that son of a bitch was as fast as you could be. And I'm going to bet on the latter.

"Ansel's been gone now for almost 40 years, and it's great that *Black & White* is collecting these stories from those of us who knew him. When we were young students, in the late sixties and seventies, there was a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid, at least on the West Coast, were Edward

[Weston] and Ansel. It was a generational thing. The next level down was Henry Gilpin and Wynn Bullock and Al Weber and Brett Weston. Then it went down to the next generation, which was us. And you knew where you were on the pyramid. Those of us who are still around have worked our way to the point where now we are at the top of the pyramid. What's interesting to me is that with digital photography, there is no longer a pyramid. There's no more hierarchy. It's not good or bad. I just find it interesting.

"The most influential comment that Ansel ever made to me was at a print review in Yosemite. I was still a student then, and I showed him 10 or 15 prints. He looked

them over silently, and then looked at me and said, 'Well, Bob, these are a nice record of something that exists.' That's paraphrasing, but really close. He said, 'You need to find a way to insert yourself. You need to find some way to raise the bar. You need to find some way to put yourself in these photographs, so they're not just records of something that exists.'

"That's the most important comment anyone has ever said to me, and I've been influenced by it ever since."

(Visit bobkolbrenerphotography.com to see more work. Kolbrener was featured in the October 2021 issue of *Black & White*.)