



*Ansel Adams: Celebration of Genius*  
**Educator Guide**



# Ansel Adams

Ansel Adams was a 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer best known for his black and white landscape photographs and efforts to preserve America's wildlife. He was born on February 20, 1902 in San Francisco. His father, Charles Adams, inherited a lumber business but was never very successful with it. He was admired by Ansel, however, and was a dedicated father who was intimately involved in Ansel's education. He made sure Ansel was well-rounded and encouraged him to learn about the arts. Ansel had tutors for the piano as well as **photography**. His first **camera** was a Kodak Brownie camera, a very important camera in the history of photography.

The Kodak Brownie camera, created in 1900, was the first camera that could be used by anyone. For the first time, it was easy to take pictures. Kodak's slogan for the Brownie was, "You press the button, we do the rest." The camera cost just one dollar and **film** sold for 15 cents a roll. As a result, the Brownie camera became popular very quickly and people began to travel with the camera to use it during their vacations. This development changed the American culture and the work of many photographers.

In 1915, Charles Adams gave his son a year-long pass to the Panama Pacific Exposition as part of his homeschool education. This exposition was an **exhibit** celebrating the completion of the Panama Canal and featured contemporary paintings and sculpture by artists such as Monet, Cezanne and Van Gogh. Ansel loved it and went everyday.

Ansel Adams' enthusiasm for the arts increased over time. In 1925, Adams decided he wanted to become a pianist and bought a grand piano. Although very talented, neither Adams' photography, nor his music generated enough income to support him at this time.

Adams had a series of jobs throughout his career, beginning with his job at the Sierra Club Lodge as a custodian. He eventually worked his way up to tour guide through Yosemite National Park. It was during 1916, at the age of 14, that Adams began taking black and white photographs of Yosemite National Park. It was also during this time that he met his future wife, Virginia Best.

Although many people appreciated Adams' photography early on, it was not until much later that he focused entirely on his artistic photography. For the first 30 years of his career, Ansel Adams had to work as a commercial photographer to support his wife and two children. He was always very clear about separating his commercial photography from his artistic photography.

Then on March 28, 1933, Adams met Alfred Stieglitz, a very famous and influential

On the Cover: NANCY NEWHALL, Ansel Adams, ca. 1945, Gelatin silver print, 26.2 x 33.9 cm., Image courtesy of George Eastman House

opening in November, 1936. After this exhibit, his artistic photography became recognized by the art community and he was able to spend more time dedicated to it, eventually supporting his family without returning to commercial photography.

Adams was not only good at taking pictures, he was also skilled in the **darkroom**. Today, many people let machines develop film, but Adams did all the **developing** himself. Adams is known for his high quality prints without errors. When he decided to make photography his career, he bought a large 8x10 inch camera and made **negatives** on plates of glass instead of film. Adams had so much heavy equipment that he had to use a donkey to help him carry his things when taking pictures of Yosemite Valley in the early 1920s.

At this time in his life, Adams was asked by the Sierra Club to join their board of trustees, on which he served for 37 years. He was asked to meet with lawmakers to appeal to them on behalf of the Sierra Club and the environment. He published *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail* in an effort to depict the park's natural beauty and help **preserve** the land. The book was sent to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, who passed it on to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt enjoyed the book so much that it was added to the White House collection. Thus, it had the influence it was meant to, and in 1940, the Kings River National Park Bill was passed.

Although Adams is better known for his landscape photography, he also photographed other subjects that interested him. In 1943, Adams visited an internment camp where Americans were being held as prisoners for looking Japanese. Adams was outraged by the denial of their rights as Americans without fair trial. He took a series of photographs of the camp and exhibited this body of work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. These photographs were published in his book 1994 *Born Free and Equal*. After reviewing the exhibit and reading his book, many accused Adams of being a disloyal American.

Adams fought throughout his life for the causes that were important to him. He met with Presidents Johnson, Ford and Carter, each time appealing to them on **conservation** issues. In 1980, President Carter gave Adams the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. Today, Adams is the only photographer in history to receive such an award.

On April 22, 1984, Ansel Adams passed away. Most people are familiar with his artwork postcards, posters, t-shirts or in any of the over 90 publications showing his photographs. To honor his great service to our nation's wildlife, Congress passed legislation six months