

Digital workflow in the e-Casita
© 2004 Larry Angier
www.angier-fox.com

Six weeks, 7100 miles on the road and an additional 655 miles traveled over water on five separate ferries. Three digicams, two Powerbook G4s, Thousands of images. dozens of burned DVDs and CDs. And all stuffed in a 17 foot travel trailer pulled by a third-hand Toyota.

Traveling the west with Casita 17 foot travel trailer has made the business of digital capture much easier than film. It is the ultimate digital accessory. Though it is small, it is fully equipped with shower and toilette, heat and a/c, stove and fridge. It gives us a place to stash our Powerbooks while traveling and a place to come home to when away from home.

On the road, if we are lucky and have power at a campground or rv park, we have it made. All systems are plug and play. Battery back-up gives us a couple of days when we don't have a/c. Then we use a small 200 watt voltage inverter to convert battery power to 120 volt. When the battery gets low or we are on an extended stay in the middle of nowhere, we use the Honda generator to power it all when noise won't be a nuisance.

During the day, we are out driving, walking and constantly photographing. If all goes well, I have enough CF cards to last the day. I shoot between 300-700 and sometimes more between two Nikon digitals. Usually, 4-5 GB will last the day. I use the voice recorders as needed and take notes as to names, place names and other features. If there is an interpretive sign, it's just a matter of taking another frame for later reference. Sometimes I take notes in my daybook, if it is convenient.

All this time we are constantly on the lookout for good photo ops. Usually, there is never a shortage of things to photograph. We try to eat out at least once a day, if we are traveling mainly, to get a feeling for the people and learn the local gossip. At many eating establishments, there are local newspapers and travel racks full of ideas with even more leads to explore and photograph.

At the end of the day, it's time to download and prepare for the next day.

After finding a safe place to park for the night, which many times is a gravel pit or wide spot in the road, we go to work.

Batteries are checked on the cameras and pulled for changing as needed. We set up and turn on our Powerbooks for the next couple of hour's work and away we go!

Since space is at a premium in our Casita, one of us may take a hot shower or

prepare our supper as the other starts the task of downloading, editing, captioning, numbering, and back-up.

First thing is to get all the cards together from all the cameras. We fire up the Powerbooks and start downloading. I use both a 32-bit cardbus reader and firewire card reader to download as quickly as possible. The daily folder is created and named 041015-location a, location b... This makes it easy to sort the folders later and gives us a fast reference to previous places we have visited.

The daily shoot is downloaded into the folder and cards are ejected and mounted as they are emptied. The cards are piled next to the Powerbook, downloaded, then placed in another head to double-check and eventually be reformatted after all work on the Powerbook is backed-up.

Once all cards are downloaded, the daily folder is opened in Photomechanic. I screen the photos quickly for any problems at this point and rotate the images at the same time. Absolute junk is dumped at this time. Images are then grouped and the IPCT data is added to each group to caption.

My boilerplate seldom changes, but caption, city, state, country does. Accuracy as to place, names, etc. is pretty important at this stage. This seems to take the most time. Maps come in handy, as do my notes and sound files.

Next, all the photos are selected and the image editing begins. I use the Review command and a split screen with thumbnails at the bottom, a histogram to the lower right and the file info in the upper right.

My data includes date and time, camera and frame number, focal length, ISO, and the rest of the camera info if I need to analyze the pix if there is a problem, and most importantly, the caption, city, state, country.

I can double-check as I go to make sure the caption info has been attached while I am in this view.

I pretty much use the keyboard to go as quickly as possible to edit at this time. I look for keepers to tag, catch rotation a second time, look for debris that have fallen on the sensor and get a feel for the day's imaging. If there was a problem with downloading, it shows at this stage. Bad images are deleted as I go.

Upon completion of editing, the photos are selected in groups and tagged with year-month-subject-sequence coding to further identify images. DCIM-5678.JPG just doesn't do a thing to keep file naming simple. My naming convention is simple and easy to do in Photomechanic. At the start of a trip, I preset the sequence to 0001 and set-up the boiler plate naming. For instance, for the Alaska journey in August 2004,

we went though several states and provinces. Thus, when we were in Alaska, a typical file name was "0408-ak-6354.nef". This tells me the year and month of the image, the location, in this case ak for Alaska, the sequence of the image (unique number) and the file type. Photomechanic keeps the sequence number ready to go and uses the original file extension. I only need to change the date, if it goes into the next month, and the subject as I cross into the next county, state or provence.

If I don't have a full DVD full of images, I back up the file to an external hard drive and I get the night off after double-checking the cards back in the camera to insure that all cards have been downloaded. If I'm satisfied that all the cards are downloaded, then I format the cards in the camera. I now get the night off to eat, shower and sleep.

If I have enough for a DVD, I set up the burner and run Toast to burn a back-up disk. Usually, I need to burn a disk every other day. Sometimes I fill a disk in a day, but in any case, I try to fill them up in sequence. A typical disk has several folders of the daily images. For instance, folders names 0408-20b, 0408-21, 0408-22, 0408-23a may be burned on a single disk. This translates into folders for the second part of August 20 (0408-20b is part two; the first folder of this day is on the previous disk), the full day's take of August 21 and 22 and the first part of August 23 (0408-23a). This create a full copy of all images taken. The disk is burned and verified and put into a sleeve and placed with the exposed film separately in the Toyota.

The files are once more dropped into Photomechanic for winnowing. I select the tagged images, flop the selection to the untagged and dump them, leaving me with just the flagged photos. I then save this folder with other winnowed photos on the back-up drive. Once I get enough for a disk, I burn the winnowed files to another DVD and label it.

Now that I am home from weeks on the road, I have a bunch of files on the Powerbooks and boxes full of DVDs, a full set and a best-of set. The disks are stashed in multiple buildings at the studio to insure safe back-up. The drives are downloaded on the desktop G4 and G5 computers for further processing and editing. They are ready to go and be printed, uploaded to the web site, or sent to an editor via ftp, or the old fashioned way--CD via Fed-X.

Though we have worked daily on the road, sometimes till 11 pm and occasionally till midnight, our photos are all ready. With film, typically, the processing, editing, captioning and preparation would take weeks and and sometimes months to make ready. Now they are all down when we unhitch the Casita and unload. And, best of all, the original is safely stored and backed up under *my* control.

###

Studio workflow for final file prepping

Now its time to prepare a submission for an editor.

The hard work is done, images have been captioned, rotated, filed, and winnowed. It's just a matter of preparing the images, organizing, burning the disk, printing the captions and proofs and sending the package.

First thing is to choose the best images. Fewer is better! Using Photomechanic, I copy without deleting my best into their own folder. I select all images and do a Export-Text... and save a text file containing the file number, caption, location, etc. (all variable in Photomechanic). I save and print the list.

. Next I open the folder in the File Browser and I do a fast adjustment to the raw files by selecting the group and opening each in raw and using the (alt-) option-Update feature in Camera Raw to change color, contrast, saturation, exposure, etc. of each image, if needed. Groups of similar photos can be changed easily using this process.

I open the files and check for dust and debris. If I am lucky and aced the exposure, the sensor was clean and the color and density are fine, I won't have much and close the file. If not then it is re-saved into the folder with the rest of my picks.

Using Dr. Brown's script, I can now take that folder and export tiff files to their own folder. This script opens each file, sizes it to your specification, adds copyright, if it isn't already in the file, and saves each to a new folder. It's quick and easy. This script will save to most any resolution and save your files not only as TIFF, but JPEG and PSD, each in its own folder. Most files are saved as TIFF files and tagged in Adobe RGB 1998. I leave the CMYK and sharpening conversions to the next person usually.

I then use the Contact Sheet II found under Automate and create 4 column x 5 row thumbnails for proof sheets. I save contact sheet the files and print them.

When all my prep is complete, I take the Tiff files, caption text file and contact sheets files and put them together in their own folder. I launch Roxio Toast and burn a disk.

My final package consists of a disk with all the files, proof sheets of all the images, and a complete hard copy of all the captions. This is placed in a bag and sent via the client's choice, usually Fed-X.

It's a bit time consuming, but with faster computers and better programs, it will soon be the only way to go.

###

Addendum

I just upgraded Photomechanic to 4.2.1

The web page gallery feature is pretty neat and extremely fast, even with raw files. I think it needs a few tweaks to make it perfect such as embedding my website url as a hyperlink, but the galleries look great.

Now there are color coding ratings in addition to the check marks. Simply press 1 for Winner, 2 for winner alternate, etc. Now my top picks can be sorted better. Way cool!

While ingesting images from cards (and watermarking each with copyright, photographer, etc. Photomechanic puts them all in one file. Yippee!

There are other changes besides bug patches, all in all, I can't live without this program!

###

Hardware/software

Our on-the-road digital consists of not only cameras, but computers and software. Redundancy is part of the design. We use Macintosh G4 Powerbook computers with combo drives that can read DVDs to check them on the road after burning and burn CDs if the DVD burner fails. External 2.5 inch Firewire powered hard drives give us immediate backup. A LaCie 8x DVD/24xCD burner. A 200 watt 12 volt DC to 120 volt ac inverter to charge the camera and computer batteries and power the DVD burner when we don't have shore power. We have several Lexar and Delkin Firewire CF readers and carry USB readers, just in case. I use a Delkin 32 bit Cardbus adaptor and download from two sources to speed the process.

Our software includes Photomechanic for editing and captioning, Photoshop CS with the Camera Raw module to *really* check the photos; Toast to burn CDs and DVDs. For image recovery we use both Photo Rescue and Image Rescue. Each has recovered files from reformatted cards or other glitches. So far, we have lost only a very few images, but are prepared none the less.

We carry a bunch of Lexar 40x WA cards from 256mb to 1gb which will usually last us a day of imaging. Though the speed is not always needed during capture, the faster the card, the faster the download at the other end.

We use Verbatim Datalife DVD and CD-R media. Not the cheapest disks, but quite adequate for media stability and durability in our research and experience.

Of course, we are using digital cameras, the Nikon D70, D100 and D2h. They are also backed-up by several high-end consumer cameras, including Nikon Coolpix 5000, 5700 and Olympus C5050 from the America 24/7 book project. They all use Compact Flash cards and each group of cameras has common batteries.

For the most part, we shoot in NEF (RAW) and occasionally, jpeg fine. Jpeg we reserve for fast-action shooting, such as shooting rodeo or another event. We monitor the histograms as we shoot and adjust the ISO as needed along with the color balance. As a long-time transparency shooter, I feel it best to ace the exposure and color balance when a photo is taken, rather than correct later on.

When we finally import the raw files into photo, they need only a small bit of fine tuning and correction. Some photographers just shoot raw and don't adjust the color, etc. when they shoot, but this seems to work more quickly for us back in the studio.

**© 2004 Larry Angier
Image West Photography
Jackson, California
www.angier-fox.com**

209.223.2881