

'Sunset' spectacular

DETOURS | Legendary Pacific Northwest photographer Russ Hall found his muse in the stark winters of Sandpoint, Idaho

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SANDPOINT, Idaho -- Every small town has a calling. Dann Hall heard it from the depths of Lake Pend Oreille to the top of Schweitzer Mountain in Sandpoint (pop. 6,835). Hall was born in this enchanting outpost about 60 miles south of the Canadian border and a 90-minute drive from Spokane, Wash. Established as a logging village in 1901, time moved like -- well -- sand in an hourglass. In 1901, the Sandpoint population was 4,000. In 1970, the population was 4,000.

Hall left.

He had 4,000 things to do.

He worked at Granny Goose Potato Chips in Oakland, Calif. He was hired because he was from Idaho, known for its famous potatoes. In 1968 Hall enrolled in the University of Florence (Italy) and in 1971 he was a ski bum in Vail, Colo. Now he is back in Sandpoint tending to the archives of his father Ross Hall (1905-1990). Ross Hall is one of the best known photographers in the Pacific Northwest.

Sandpoint is lush green in the summer and snow white in the winter. Hall made his pictures in the black and white open spaces of the seasons. His impressions of winter snow formations established him as one of the first photographers to elevate mountain winter imagery to an art form. His work appeared in National Geographic and Life magazine. In the 1940s, Eastman Kodak named Hall one of the top 10 scenic photographers in America.

Ross Hall attended the Illinois Technical Institute of Photography in Downstate Effingham before setting up shop in Sandpoint in 1931. Ross Hall went to work for the widow of photographer Dick Himes, whose pictures dated back to 1906.

Ross Hall also began to create images that took Idaho beyond the stereotypes of the plains and potatoes.

His stunning 1939 portrait "Sunset Fury" was a signal on how wild Lake Pend Oreille (American Indian for "hanging from the ear") can get. Ross Hall captured waves breaking on the tip of an American Indian burial island on Memaloose.

His 60-year-old son wears a black shirt and white shorts. He looks at the black-and-white "Sunset Fury" and says, "It's taken from the site of where the white man built the first trading post in the Northwest (circa 1809). It is a wild entry into the exploration of this area. His best friend (Dr. Neil Wendle and his American Indian wife Charlotte) lived there. He had zen gardens, cactus gardens. Dad was out there a lot."

"Sunset Fury" hangs in Hallans Gallery, 323 N. First, in downtown Sandpoint. The gallery is filled with black-and-white portraits made by Ross Hall and his wife, Hazel, 94. She ran the laboratory while her husband was out shooting. The gallery has 60,000 Ross Hall negatives dating between 1931 and 1978. Also, nearly 600,000 negatives include photographs of Idaho schoolchildren and sailors at the now-defunct arragaut Naval Base, all shot by Ross Hall's studio. Ross Hall also had the biggest postcard business in the Northwest.

The collection is curated by Dann Hall. "It's such a huge collection that he didn't finish in his lifetime," Hall says. "And I won't finish in mine either. We're not even up to the colors yet. You think of he and Hazel coming here during the Depression. It was a four-hour drive to Spokane. This place was zero. But his soul was here. As a small-town photographer, he considered it his duty to be a historian. Obviously, in the 1930s photographing people ice fishing, living off fish weren't going to buy photographs of themselves."

The gallery walls feature some of Ross Hall's favorite sayings: "Hot dog," "heifer dust" (Hall was raised on a ranch on the Texas panhandle) and "howdy, neighbor."

Skiers' heaven

Dann Hall likes to hang out at the patio of the Best Western Edgewater Resort along the lake and the Sandpoint City Beach. Some of his earliest memories live near the lake, which can run 1,200 feet deep along a 111-mile shoreline. The memories run deeper.

"There used to be a dock with boat houses and a little store," he says, peering out at a promenade near the water. "It was our civic center. I left when I was 17 and moved to the [San Francisco] Bay Area. It wasn't easy leaving here as a kid and explaining to yourself that you're from Idaho." Then he concludes, "But I always missed Sandpoint: the ski resort and the lake."

"Prior to the ski area during winter you could shoot a cannon down First Avenue. The only people that came through Sandpoint in the winter were lost tourists looking for Banff [British Columbia] and produce drivers from Spokane. Winter sport activity changed life here dramatically."

The area ski center is the Schweitzer Mountain Resort, 11 miles north of Sandpoint. The ski season begins around Thanksgiving, snow permitting. Sandpoint snags an average of more than 300 inches of snow a year and there are 2,500 acres of skiing terrain.

The base elevation of the mountain is 4,700 feet and it peaks at 6,400 feet. Two new chairlifts for skiers and snowboarders will be up and running this season as part of a \$10 million improvement project. The 160-room resort also features two lodge facilities within a quaint pedestrian village at the 4,700 foot peak. I stayed in the five-year-old White Pine Lodge that overlooked the mountains and Lake Pend Oreille. The center also had an outdoor hot tub and a fitness center, but I was too busy picking huckleberries on the mountainside to check them out.

The resort opened in 1963, a long way in time and space from the Sandpoint that Ross Hall knew. Hall's most popular print is "It's A Wonderful Life," a depiction of a snowbound First Avenue in downtown Sandpoint, circa 1934. No one is on the street. A banner across First Avenue promotes the showing of the Eddie Cantor film "Kid Millions" at the Panida (think PAN handle of IDAho) movie theater, still standing across the street from Hall's current gallery. Built in 1927, the Panida is a community-owned movie palace. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Dad sent the studio that picture," Hall said. "Cantor wrote back a neat letter regarding small towns. We put a copy of that letter with each of the prints we sell (standard image is \$225, www.rossshallcollection.com). I found that negative eight years ago and I made a print for my sister-in-law without any commercial intention. I had no idea it would have such universal appeal. It sells everywhere."

'A Wonderful Life'

Dann Hall first named the picture "First Street Sandpoint," but the first three people who saw the horizontal black-and-white print told Hall it depicted a scene from "It's a Wonderful Life."

Like a child with a net, Ross Hall captured the butterfly spirit of small-town America.

"I absolutely feel connected to my father," Hall says while looking at the photograph. "Although I print with more contrast than he would. He was more faithful to continuous tones and I like the drama of higher contrast. So I try and mix those two. I did my first black-and-white print when I was 3. But I never thought I would follow this as a profession. I wanted to move back to L.A. and get into film editing. Then I got married and started looking at his collection again, which I had kind of ignored."

During the early to mid-1980s Dann Hall also shot postcard and book scenic photography in Alaska for Dexter Press in New York City and H.S. Crocker in San Francisco. He used extra money to put into his father's collection. He now pursues photography as a fine art form.

Ross Hall embraced the nature that defines Sandpoint to this day. The mountain landscape is home for black bears, moose, mountain lions and osprey.

"Dad developed Alzheimer's in his 80s," his son says in measured tones. "He'd leave my mother at two in the morning, sneak out and start walking down the street. Fortunately, it was a small town so even the people coming out of the bars at two in the morning knew who he was and they'd take him home.

"But he'd always be heading to the hills."

For the skinny on huckleberry picking in the Sandpoint mountains, check out Dave Hoekstra's Scratch Crib blog at <http://blogs.suntimes.com/hoekstra/>.