

The New River Gorge Bridge and Star Trails

Near Fayetteville, WV

2005

I had only taken a few photographs of the New River Gorge Bridge, none of which I was proud of. The bridge is a subject that has been photographed a million or more times since it opened in 1977. Almost every tourist visiting the area has either taken a photograph or bought a post card with a picture of the bridge on it.

Around December of 2004, I came up with the idea of doing a time exposure of the New River Gorge Bridge at night. I've done a few simple night photographs with the star trails, and I found them fascinating. My initial thoughts were that this photograph would be a piece of cake. I couldn't have been more wrong.

My first attempt to take this photograph was on February 8, 2005. I chose this date because there was no moon and it was clear. My wife Linda and I drove down to the old bridge that crosses the New River just upstream from the New River Bridge to set up my equipment. I took my 4x5 view camera with a 65mm super-wide-angle lens, (this lens is as wide as an 18mm lens on a 35mm camera), and my Hasselblad 120 format camera as a backup. I soon found out that it was too dark to see the bridge on the ground glass of my view camera. I also couldn't focus my view camera, so I set up my Hasselblad and opened the shutter. The wide-angle lens on the Hasselblad wasn't wide enough to cover the entire bridge, and I knew that this photograph wasn't going to be what I envisioned. I shut the camera down after only 30 minutes of timed exposure.

My next attempt to take the photograph was sometime in March. I decided on the spur of the moment to make another attempt at the photograph when I noticed that the weather conditions and moon phase were just right. It was starting to get dark when I left home in Beckley, so I stopped on Route 19, set up my view camera, and pre-focused on some distant jet trails. I continued on to the old bridge and set up my view camera, confident that I would capture the scene. Wrong again.

After processing the 4x5 black and white sheet film, I found that there had been camera movement. The photograph was no good. The New River Gorge is full of train and car traffic and I had covered the lens to prevent

extraneous light from spoiling my photograph. I assumed that I had moved the camera while covering the lens. I then decided that the next time I took the photograph I would not cover the lens when a train passed, only if a car crossed the old bridge. The headlights and vibration would ruin the photograph.

My next opportunity to take the photograph came sometime in April. I was getting frustrated now, and I was determined not to do anything that would shake that view camera. I returned home after taking the photograph feeling very confident that I had nailed it. Not so. The ghost image of the bridge was still there. I knew I hadn't touched the camera, and no cars had crossed the old bridge. What was causing this double image of the bridge?

I began going over every step of my setup process, and I finally realized what caused the problem. A view camera is not like your standard roll film camera. The lens is mounted on a six-inch square lens board that is attached to the front standard of the camera. There is the slightest amount of slop, for lack of a better word, in the connection. My view camera is stored in its carrying case upside down. When I turn the camera right side up, to mount it on the tri-pod, the lens board is seated against the top of the front standard. Sometime during the multi-hour exposure, the lens board dropped about a sixteenth of an inch to the bottom, causing the ghost image. Mystery solved.

My next opportunity to take the photograph came on May 1. The moon phase wasn't perfect, but the weather was clear, and I was anxious to get this project completed. I arrived on the old bridge prepared for the long haul. I brought my lawn chair, a warm coat, a thermos of coffee, my radio-tape player, and a good Book On Tape to listen to.

I set up my view camera on an extra-heavy-duty, 17-lb. tri-pod, and hung 40 additional pounds of barbell weights on it for stability. At 9:45 p.m. I opened the shutter and waited. The stars were great until about midnight, then the dreaded haze moved in. At 1:00 a.m. I closed the shutter and headed home.

I processed the film the next day and made a few prints. The photograph was good, but not what I wanted. I wanted a full night of star trails, and I was determined not to give up until I got it. The prime time to take such a photograph is in the late fall close to winter, when the humidity is low and the sky is extra clear. I knew that if I didn't get the photograph soon I would have to wait until November.

Sunday, May 8, 2005, Mother's Day, was beautiful, and the weather report was for a clear and moonless night. Moonlight dims the stars by reflecting light into the atmosphere. I knew this would be my last chance until fall to get this photograph.

I arrived on the old bridge very early on the evening of May 8. I set up my view camera and focused it on the New River Gorge Bridge while there was still plenty of light. I waited and watched as the sun slowly set in the west. The stars slowly began to fill the sky. At 9:45 p.m. I opened the shutter and began my long wait. I couldn't have asked for a more beautiful night. I counted twenty shooting stars and countless satellites streaking across the sky. Several trains ran both up and down the river, but I had learned that their headlights didn't affect the photograph, so I didn't cover my lens. Around 2:30 a.m. a carload of young people crossed the bridge and stopped to view the sights. I covered my lens momentarily while I explained what I was doing, and they graciously moved off the bridge.

At 5:00 a.m. on May 9, I noticed the beginnings of daylight, so I closed my shutter. The exposure was 7 hours and 15 minutes long. The stars rotate counterclockwise around the North Star, (Polaris, which appears in the top right portion of the photograph), creating the circular streaks. When I had closed the shutter the stars of the Big Dipper were passing through the bridge. The sun setting in the west two hours before I opened the shutter created the bright glow below the left side of the bridge. The lights on the transport truck trailers crossing the bridge caused the bright-white, continuous streak along the top of the bridge.

I arrived home at 6:00 a.m. Monday morning, but I was too wound up to sleep. I had to know if I had captured the photograph I had been working on since Feb. 8. By 7:00 a.m. I had the film processed, and I could relax. I'd gotten the photograph that I'd been wanting.

Looking back on the project, I realize that even if I had never achieved the photograph I envisioned, the wonderful nights I spent on that old bridge, watching the stars, were priceless.

**Bruce Burgin
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