



### LW2 Three Complementary Analyses of Ansel Adams' *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate an interdisciplinary investigation of an iconic photograph to demonstrate a deeper context and meaning of the image.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating a greater appreciation for alternative methods of viewing photographic evidence, revealing layers of interpretation not previously contemplated, either by its creator or subsequent observers.

Ansel Adams created his most popular and iconic photograph with the single click of a shutter. *Moonrise Over Hernandez, New Mexico* was taken in late 1941, although it likely did not see the light of day until 1943 when it was published in the *U.S. Camera 1943* annual, preceding a 1944 show at the Museum of Modern Art, where it was exhibited. Ian Jeffrey, curator of the Phaidon Press' *The Photography Book*, said this about the work: "In this, one of the most epic of Adams' landscapes, humanity is signaled by a field of scattered crosses in the near foreground. The settlement itself makes an irregular diminishing rhythm from left to right, in contrast to the flowing horizontals of the mountain range and the swift, painterly markings in the sky. The whole of this musicality is related to the imperceptible slowness of the moon rising."<sup>1</sup>

This photograph is the subject of many stories, from Adams' jumping out of a car on Route 84 to capture the last moments of fading daylight, with or without his new-fangled light meter, or whether the photography was really captured at f32 with a one-second exposure.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, the hurried roadside process resulted in only a negative being created, and Adams did not record the exact date and time the picture was created.

While not discounting Jeffrey's poetic license about the musicality of the photograph's composition (Adams had studied piano), the legend of the image has created a miasma around the possible facts of its creation, all of which can be subject to further investigation and interpretation using different modalities, which will be discussed during this presentation.

First, the collecting of first-hand accounts, both near-contemporaneous and later, of how the photograph was captured by Ansel Adams will be presented. Hopefully, historical consensus can provide both depth and breadth to the circumstances of Adams' actions, including using the new technology of hand-held light meters.

Second, as the image gained in popularity, the question of just when it had been taken took on some importance. Two astronomers have pegged the date and time variously on October 31, 1941, and November 1, 1941. The calculations and celestial tables may track the moon; however, history suggests both the movement of the road after 1941 and the fact that Adams may have taken the photograph from the top of his station wagon.<sup>3</sup> Scientific measurements frequently depend on contextual information; perhaps the answers emanating from the High Altitude Observatory in Boulder, CO, and *Sky and Telescope* magazine will be found wanting for lack of an adequate background.

Finally, all of these discussions are divorced from the cultural aspects of the photograph, which contains the depth and breadth of human experience to fulfill the promise of the detailed image. The crosses and gravestones in the cemetery alit in the setting sun, the houses behind, the woods, the rivers, and the churches in the picture all tell their story without which a full understanding of *Moonrise Over Hernandez, New Mexico* may not be clear to the viewer.

#### Reference(s):

1. Ian Jeffrey, *The Photography Book*, Phaidon Press, 1997, quoted in "Photos That Changed The World: #3 Moonrise," <http://www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2014/september/22/photos-that-changed-the-world-3-moonrise/> (accessed 7/31/17).
2. "[T]o my dismay, I could not find my light meter!", Ansel Adams, *The Negative*, New York Graphic Society, Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1984, p. 127 (comment to figure 6-2).
3. di Cicco, Dennis (November 1991). Dating Ansel Adams' Moonrise. *Sky & Telescope*. 82 (5): 529–33. ISSN 0037-6604.

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**Photography, Anthropology, Astronomy**