

Legendary Register-Pajaronian photographer Sam Vestal dies

Newsman played integral part of paper's Pulitzer Prize-winning effort in 1955

By KATHRYN GILLICK
and DALA BRUEMMER

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Sam Vestal never went anywhere without his camera — not even into death.

The former Register-Pajaronian photographer had his camera on his bed when he died at a San Jose-area nursing home Monday, according to his daughter Kim Vestal-Bowers.

"He was a newspaper man

morning, noon and night," she said. "That was his complete identity. He would work all day and then he would come home with a stack of newspapers and turn on the television and watch and read the news."

Vestal was 70 when he died.

Born in Honolulu, Hawaii, Vestal lived in Watsonville almost his entire life. He graduated from Watsonville High School, where he was part of the photography club

and worked for the yearbook and newspaper, in 1949. After high school he studied at the Art Center School in Los Angeles before getting a job with the Register-Pajaronian.

Vestal only worked for the Register-Pajaronian for two years before being drafted to fight in the Korean War. He spent two years in the Army — six months of it at Fort Ord and the rest in Germany as a staff photographer for Stars

and Stripes, the Army's daily newspaper.

Once he was done with his service, he was back at the Register-Pajaronian.

"Sam was born to be a news photographer," said Mike Wallace, a former editor at the Register-Pajaronian. "He loved to be in the thick of the action, and he had an unfailing instinct that always seemed to put him in the right place at the right time to get the picture

that really told the story."

One example of Vestal's ability to be in the right place at the right time was when he photographed Santa Cruz County District Attorney Charles Moore's car outside the home of a well-known gambler. After taking



Vestal

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Sam Vestal in 1948 as a photographer for the Watsonville Union High School yearbook, the *Manzanita*.

VESTAL

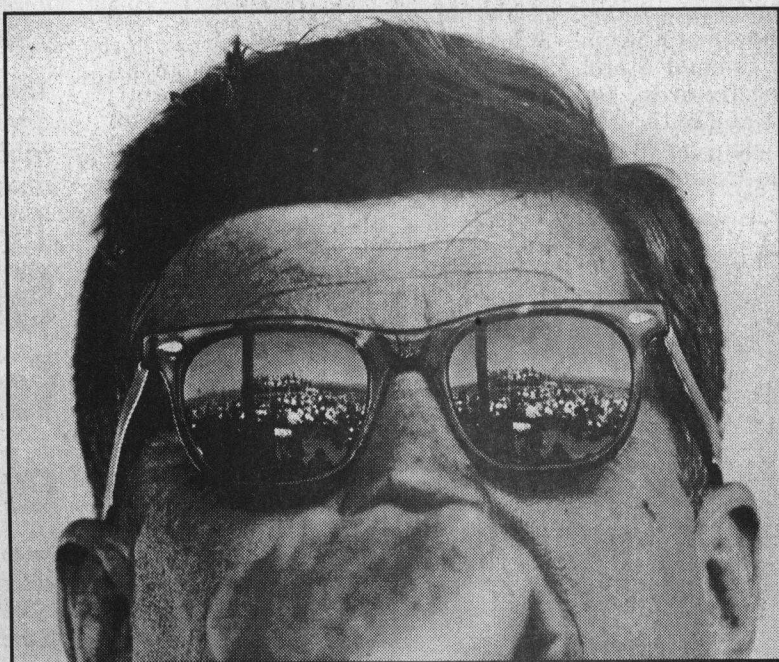
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a picture of the car, someone came out of the house pointing a gun at Vestal and demanding his camera. At that point he had passed the film to reporter Bill Kennedy, so when the gambler destroyed his camera, the pictures were still there, according to Vestal's brother Jim Vestal.

That photograph was part of an ongoing series about the District Attorney that won the *Register-Pajaronian* a Pulitzer Prize for public service in 1956. At the time, the *Register-Pajaronian* was the smallest newspaper to win the Pulitzer.

"In a lot of ways, Sam was the most famous because of that picture," said Ken McLaughlin, a former *Register-Pajaronian* reporter who currently works for the *San Jose Mercury News*. "He was the fearless young photographer confronting the guy with the gun, Ray Jehl, that picture that ran on the front page with that story and the other picture of the car with *The Sporting News* over the plate."

"What's ironic is how Frank Osmer (former Watsonville Police Chief) and Ward Bushee (a former *Register-Pajaronian* editor) also just died," he added. "Frank was the Dean of the town."



Sam Vestal/*Register-Pajaronian*

Register-Pajaronian photographer Sam Vestal took this photo of John F. Kennedy during a visit by JFK to Los Banos in 1960 during a campaign stop. This was one of Vestal's favorite photos.



the Deep Throat for the Pajaronian, and Ward directed the coverage of the news."

Although he was proud of the photograph and the Pulitzer, friends and family said he did not hinge his career on it.

"Nobody really made a big deal out of it," said Bud O'Brien, a former Register-Pajaronian editor. "You know, they were kind of proud of it. Almost everybody involved gave credit to everybody else on it."

His son Kirk Vestal said, "He was proud in a very healthy way. He was proud to get it. He knew it was an unusual thing. But he knew he deserved it. There was no false humility about it ... but his life was not the Pulitzer. He didn't rest on his laurels."

Vestal's brother Jim said job offers streamed in from all over after the Pulitzer Prize, but Vestal chose to stay in Watsonville.

"I worked with him for many years," O'Brien said. "Sam was a really great newspaperman. He wasn't simply a photographer; he was truly a newspaperman in his bones. He was a great photographer and a great news photographer. He understood what was news."

"He could have gone higher," he added.

Vestal lived in Watsonville until recently, when his three children, Kirk Vestal, Kim Vestal-Bowers and Victoria Vestal-Kupper, moved him into a nursing home in San Jose.

He was known for introducing new reporters to the Watsonville area.

"He used to be famous for giving reporters the Vestal Tour," McLaughlin said. "He would just take you out and sort of show you the whole town and tell you the history. ... The very first day he was there, he showed me the scrapbook they made up for the Pulitzer. He set a date for the tour. He took me out to north Monterey County, the coast, every street in town, and he'd give you the history — really colorful history, too. He knew everybody in town."

Vestal had the opportunity to photograph many celebrities, from John F. Kennedy to Elizabeth Taylor, and did freelance work for many magazines, including Life Magazine.

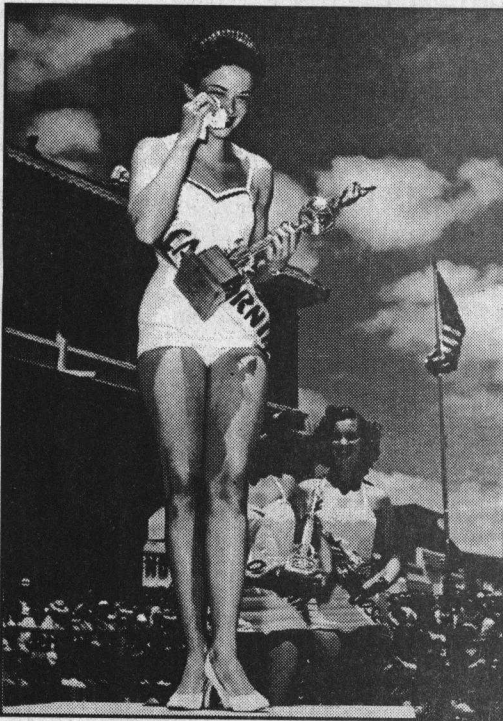
"He was really ahead of his time in terms of setting a professional standard for photos in the paper," McLaughlin said. "He refused to do the traditional check-passing photos."

"I used to depend on him a lot for institutional memory," he added. "I would say 'Who's this guy in city



Sam Vestal/Register-Pajaronian

Vestal took this photo of card room operator Ray Jehl as he approached Vestal and R-P reporter Bill Kennedy with a pistol after Vestal and Kennedy found District Attorney Charles Moore's car outside Jehl's gambling establishment. The holster to the pistol can be seen in Jehl's left hand.



Sam Vestal took this undated photograph of the Miss California Pageant that used to be held at the Boardwalk in Santa Cruz.

Sam Vestal
Register-Pajaronian

hall?' and he'd tell me not only who he was but all this other information about his family, his history, what he'd been arrested for a few years back. ... He knew where all the skeletons in Watsonville were buried."

Vestal worked at the Register-Pajaronian until the mid-1980s, but continued taking photos regularly until recently. His daughter Kim Vestal-Bowers said that until his death he was taking pictures of doctors and nurses who cared for him.

"I think it taught us to find something in our lives that we're

passionate about," she said.

The Vestal family is putting together a memorial photography exhibit of Vestal's work. The show opens July 20 at the Bockius-Orr House, home of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association, 332 E. Beach St., Watsonville. A catered reception will be held from 2 to 5 p.m. The public is welcome to come and celebrate Vestal's life. The photos will be on display through the end of July. For more information, contact the Historical Association at 722-0305.