

Focus on the Community

Thomas Porter uses photojournalism to show his strong love of people and the outdoors

By Günter Ott

A strong sense of community and powerful love of the outdoors are the guiding motivations that keep Thomas Porter living and working in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan as a photojournalist.

Getting started in photography was a family thing. "My grandmother was interested in picture taking and worked in a camera shop, and my mother's boss was a portrait photographer. I first explored my abilities when shooting for my high school yearbook which then led to me becoming the photo editor of the student newspaper," Porter says.

He attended the University of Lethbridge, studying Fine Arts and Geography. After a stint with the Lethbridge Herald, he moved to Prince Albert and worked as chief photographer for the Prince Albert Herald for four years before starting his own photography business.

"Covering every public function in a town of 40,000 gave me an immediate advantage as everybody knew me," Porter explains. "For someone else it would be harder to set up shop here. I started with no money, just a camera bag and an established reputation for being a man of many talents. Photojournalism allows me to be creative. My work tells stories about the people and places within our community – the stuff that keeps life interesting."

Staying Versatile

Porter is the quintessential outdoorsman who enjoys working with organizations such as Parks Canada, Saskatchewan Parks and Greenpeace. It also gives him a chance to market his images in a broader context. Porter quickly recognized that the top three things photographers shoot are nature, wildlife and landscape. So, to survive in the business, he had



Justin Simpson carves up the powder at St. Louis, SK, on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River after a heavy snowfall last spring. Taken with a Tamron SP AF300mm f/2.8 lens and a circular polarizer. The exposure was ISO 400, f/8 at 1/750sec. Shot from a Manfrotto monopod.

to ask how to differentiate himself?

"The answer for me was to work with like-minded groups that echo my interests," says Porter. "As an example, I started working for an Alaskan magazine called *Mushing* and am now known as "the dogsled guy" for shooting a lot of local dogsled races. On the other hand, I also shoot for *Canadian Diamond* magazine and will soon be doing documentary work for a mining exploration company."

The reality is that to make a living in Prince Albert, Porter is willing to travel and shoot beyond the town borders. He works out of a home studio since the bulk of his work is on-location – "where the forest meets the farmland," in his words. "Being outdoors is part of what I love about my job. Few photographers like to work outside because of the lack of control over the situation and because of the necessity of lugging gear. I find it more natural – not confining. Nature forces you to be creative and make the best of it."

Hometown Passion

Porter's passion for his hometown comes across in conversation. He

takes great pride in being intimately involved in the community. He's even started giving lectures about nature and wildlife to students and service groups.

"I am not afraid to market my ideas. In fact, that's how I land most of my work. I go to people with an idea and we build on it. A while ago I got the idea to showcase the people and events within the community. Since 2004 was the centenary of the founding of Prince Albert, it seemed fitting to document all the year's events such as street festivals, the city hall birthday party and just about everything you could see on a Sunday drive in northern Saskatchewan. I've added wildlife pictures, scenic landmarks and old photographs."



Porter linked up with a local multimedia company, Big Drum Media. They first considered doing a book or calendar but that didn't seem contemporary enough. Since all the images were to be shot digitally, Porter decided to produce the material in a way that reflects the times we live in.

"The images and narration will be packaged in a limited edition of 2004 DVDs and will take about a year to produce from start to finish. The DVDs will be distributed on a cost recovery basis," Porter explains. The 14 sponsors will do a lot of the work of distributing the DVD themselves. The project has already been nominated for three provincial tourism awards.

Community Commitment

This project has been a terrific labour of love to honour the community, and it is just one example of the kind of flexible assignments Porter can get as the only photojournalist in Prince Albert. He has certainly forged a lasting commitment to the community he documents, but he's also had his share of challenging – even unpleasant – assignments.


"My most unpleasant assignment involved going up in a

Digital Journalism Gear

"I've been shooting digital for the past year. My philosophy has always been – why blow money on expensive bodies; just use quality lenses. Currently I use a Canon D10 with Tamron lenses exclusively because I like the consistency of performance. My first Tamron lens was very sharp and fast. That compelled me to try other Tamron lenses. Ergonomically, they are extremely easy to use, and I like the fact that they seem so much lighter than their counterparts.

"My latest purchase was the Tamron SP 17-35mm Di. I use it a lot for special events. I'm thrilled with the performance of my SP AF300mm Tamron lens on a Manfrotto 455B tripod, which is my favourite rig for wildlife photography. I never have to worry any more about wind sway problems, which I used to solve by filling the legs of my tripods with lead shot to minimize wind sway. I use a big ball studio head to support the length of the telephoto."

CFB Buffalo and skydiving with my camera. I've taken pictures while driving a motorcycle through fire and have been chased and bitten by all kinds of animals.

"But the best challenge is working with people. If you don't have social skills, you'd be dead in the water in a place like Prince Albert. I like having fun with people and my casual style puts them at ease." 

Thomas Porter Photographics: Tel: (306) 764-3050, Website: www.smarterphoto.com

The chariot/chuckwagon photo was taken at the Prince Albert Exhibition Grandstand using a Tamron SP AF300mm f/2.8. Exposure at ISO 400, was f/6.7-8 at shutter speeds ranging from 1/250 - 1/500. Images had to be captured quickly as racers approached so the camera could be put under a dust cover after they passed. Very dirty job! These images were captured in August as part of my centennial DVD project.

The Prince Albert Highland Pipe band plays Amazing Grace atop a hill at Prime Ministers' Park with commemorative luminary candles in the foreground during the annual "Relay for Life" fund-raiser for the Canadian Cancer Society. Shot with a Tamron SP AF17-35mm Di f/2.8-4 lens. Exposure was 800 ISO, f/4 at 1/30.

The Harris hawk was taken with a Tamron SP 70-210mm lens on an EOS A2 while visiting the Alberta Birds of Prey Centre in Coaldale Alberta. Falconer Wendy Slater uses the bird during public lectures and demonstrations, to educate the public about the centre's work. The exposure, on 100 ISO film was not recorded.

Warm temperatures during an early spring thaw this year brought hungry beavers from their dens on the outskirts of Prince Albert. The groggy animals allowed me close enough to use the Tamron SP AF28-105mm f/2.8 lens. In some instances, I was close enough to have touched them if I had wanted. They were more interested in eating than in me. Hand-held, exposure unrecorded.

This Rockport Rooster was photographed at St. Louis, SK at The Winds of Chance organic farm. After being attacked by the unwilling subject a few times, I decided to move back a bit and use the SP AF300 mm f/2.8 SP Tamron lens to get the shot at 400 ISO, f/5.6 at 1/250sec.