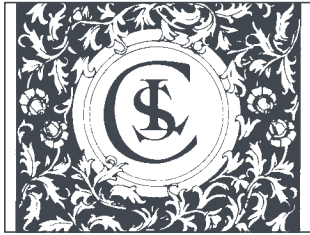


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# Bulletin





# Bulletin

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**Front Cover:** Controlled Burn # 1, Yosemite National Park, 1999. Photograph by Bob Kolbrener.

**Back Cover:** Erwin S. Chapman. A Stainless Flag, 1906. This little pamphlet was published by the Anti-Saloon League and sold millions of copies. Courtesy of Victoria Dailey.

**Illustrations / Photos:** pp. 2-11, Bob Kolbrener Portfolio; pp. 12-17, California History Section, California State Library (CSL) and courtesy Debbie Hollingsworth; pp. 18-22, courtesy of Victoria Dailey; pp. 24-28, Sutro Library Branch, CSL; p. 32, courtesy Todd Cheney, UCLA; pp. 36-38, California History Section, CSL.

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# Living by the Sun:

{ An Interview with Fine Art  
Photographer Bob Kolbrener  
By M. Patricia Morris

Self Portrait, Lake Powell, Utah, 1990.



*Bob Kolbrener*

*“I just kept going,” Bob said. “I liked it so much that I wanted to see how I could spend every day with a camera in my hand.”*

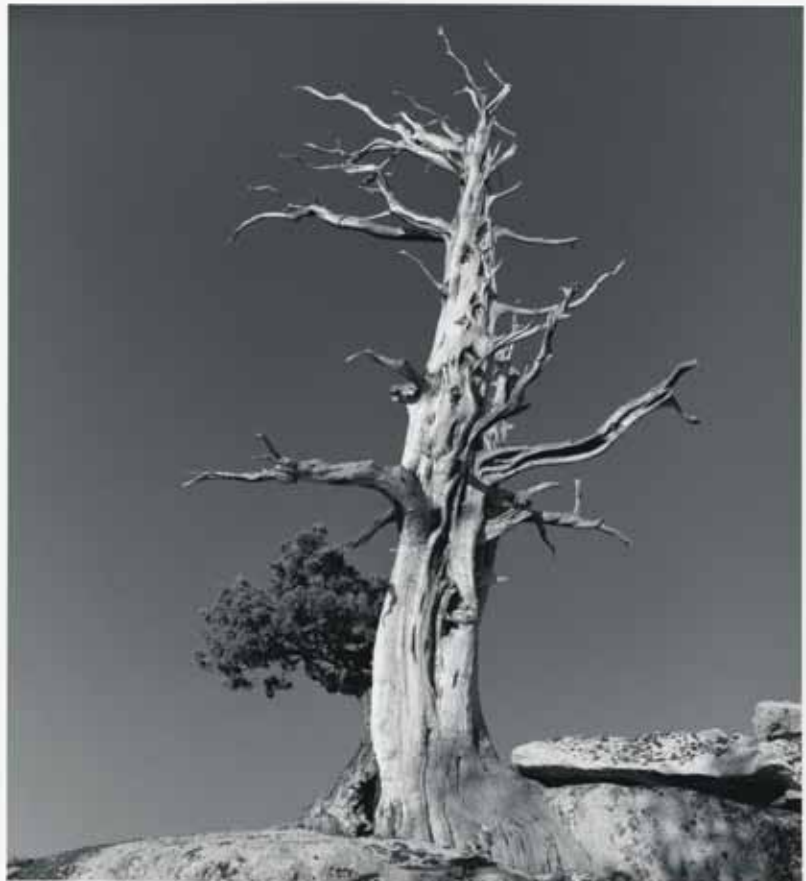
It felt like a group of kindred spirits had gathered around the table at Cox Black & White Lab, Inc., compatriots who shared an appreciation of fine photography. The group included lab owners Jeff Cox and Katherine Weedman-Cox, Sharon Kolbrener, and Foundation Executive Director Gary Kurutz. When everyone had settled in, all eyes turned toward Bob Kolbrener, who I was about to interview for this article.

The California State Library was in the process of acquiring a portfolio of Kolbrener photographs for its collection. This interview was an opportunity to announce the acquisition and to acquaint *Bulletin* readers with the work and career of this remarkable photographer. After seeing *Kolbrener's Yosemite* book, Gary Kurutz had written a letter to him many months earlier to propose the acquisition. He said in the letter, "I have studied photographs of the great valley for close to forty years and these are the finest I have ever seen." In the letter, Kurutz proposed raising the funds to purchase a portfolio of twenty photographs. He was successful in that effort and the pictures you see in this issue of the *Bulletin* are among the Kolbrener photographs that are now a permanent part of the Library's collection.

Let's return to the assemblage at Cox Black & White Lab, where for a delightful hour, I interviewed Mr. Kolbrener in the company of these good and talkative companions, who from time to time chimed in with comments and an occasional ques-

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

*M. Patricia Morris has written several profiles and articles for the Bulletin and has a particular interest in California's colorful culinary heritage and the French in the Gold Rush. Please see the Notes section for her award-winning historic costume.*



Dead Juniper Tree, Yosemite National Park, 2009.

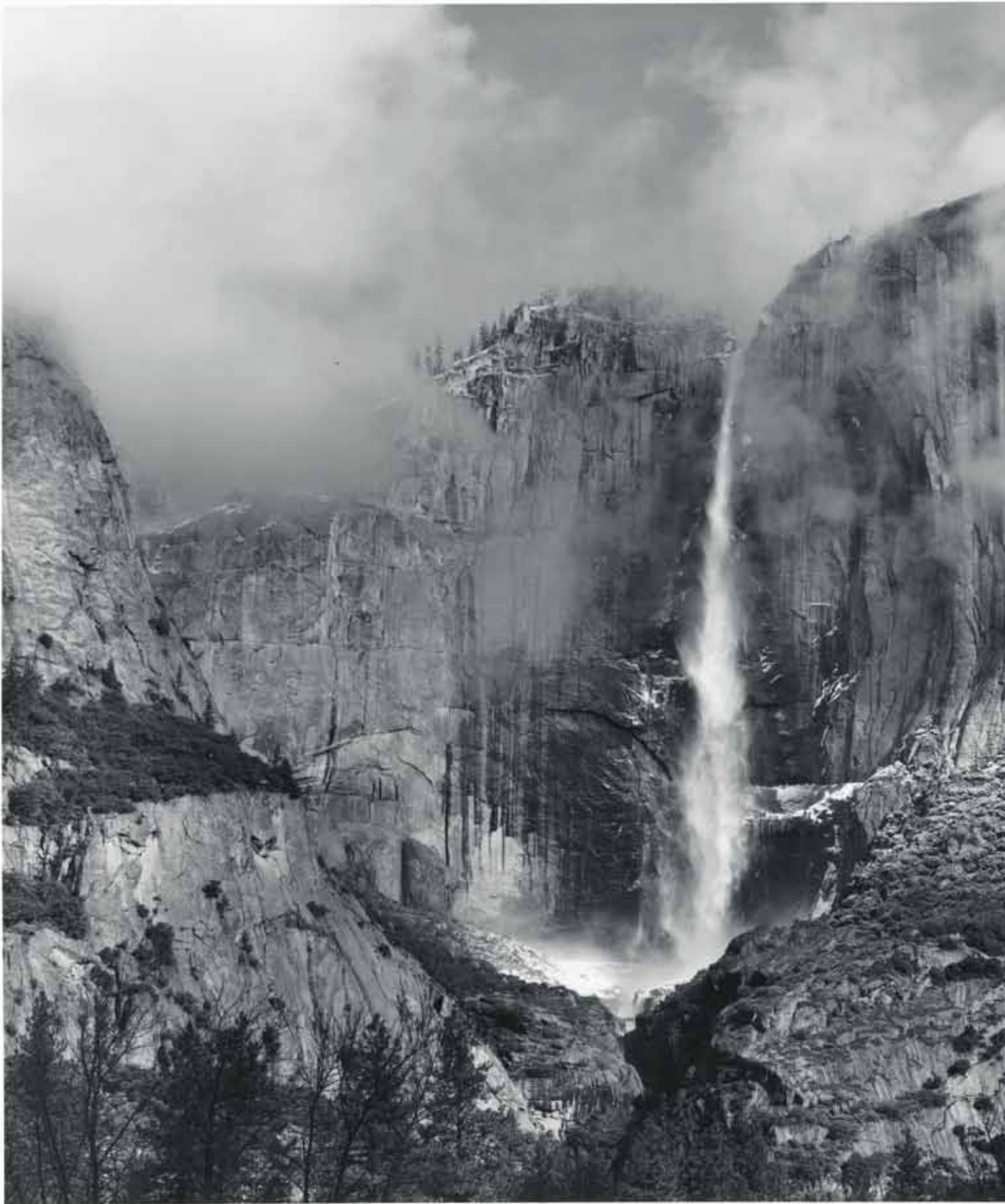
tion. This is my report of what we learned that day about him and his work.

#### A HOBBY AT FIRST

Bob Kolbrener's career in photography had modest beginnings in the early 1960s. In a way, the story reminds you of high tech entrepreneurs who got their start working out of a garage; only for Bob, it was a tiny darkroom that he and a friend had set up in his folks' home in St. Louis, Missouri. He was born and raised in St. Louis and attended schools there. Looking for a way to enjoy the inclement winters in St. Louis, he took up photography as a hobby. He described how he and his friend spent many hours perspiring and processing film in the closet darkroom. "We didn't have much knowledge. We were self-taught," Bob said.

When his friend lost interest, Bob found another collaborator who shared his enthusiasm, one who had a better darkroom. "I just kept going," Bob said. "I liked it so much that I wanted to see how I could spend every day with a camera in my hand."

His hobby eventually evolved into an occupation. Starting out as a sports photographer, he soon moved into advertising. In 1969, he opened a commercial photography business in St. Louis, where most of his work was for middle-sized advertising agencies. "I loved photographing anything and everything," Bob said. He went on to explain that big agencies were looking for photographers who specialized, who fit into a niche—fashion, food, sports, architecture. He did some big jobs like Monsanto's annual report and a brochure for the



Upper Yosemite Fall, Yosemite National Park, 2004.



*Bob Helgren*

Rio Grande Railroad. He photographed art objects at the St. Louis Art Museum and one time, he took the door off a helicopter to photograph land for a shopping area. “I loved that,” he said. “Every time the phone would ring, who knew what the assignment was going to be.”

#### A STUDENT AT ANSEL ADAMS WORKSHOPS

The same year Bob started his commercial business, he attended his first Ansel Adams Workshop in Yosemite National Park. The year before he had been in Yosemite where he visited Best Studio, which is now the Ansel Adams Gallery of Yosemite National Park. It was an unforgettable experience for him. “Before me,” he wrote in his book *Kolbrenner’s Yosemite*, “in all of their glory were six Ansel Adams’ photographs of epic size and imagery!” All told, he returned for eight years to participate in Adams’ workshops in Yosemite and also in his Carmel Highlands home.

Over time he graduated from student to teacher. In 1973, Bob said, “I was asked to be an assistant at Ansel’s spring Yosemite workshop.” The next summer, he was invited to live in Yosemite and conduct camera walks through the Ansel Adams Gallery. “So every day, five days a week or so,” he explained, “I would take whoever would sign up — three, five, seven, nine people — and take them on an hour and a half or so photography walk.” Four years later, he taught at the spring workshop with Adams and portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh. “I just sort of graduated from student to assistant to teaching with him,” Bob said. “I had a wonderful time doing that.”

#### ROMANCE AT THE LAB

In the late 1960s, Kolbrenner began taking time out to photograph the American West for himself. With his marriage to Sharon in 1977, he gained a life-long partner to join and assist him on these gambols in the West. They met in a photo lab. “I was doing commercial photography,” Bob recounted. “Sharon was working for a