



A Man with a Vision

The Story of Dr. Henry Oles

by
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He is better known as the designer of the Scene Machine, a virtual background projection system that is used by photographers throughout the world. But most people don't realize that Dr. Henry Oles, of San Marcos, Texas, has an extensive background in photography that spans well over four decades. In addition, he is an inventor and innovator with an uncanny insight into the future

It was at a photographers convention in the late 1980's or early 1990's when Dr. Henry Oles spoke of future technology that would change our everyday lives. He spoke of wireless telephones that people would carry with them everywhere. He spoke of digital imaging that would revolutionize our industry and how photographers would send files to their labs over a telephone line. To many who were there, it sounded like science fiction, but all of those things have come to pass and have happened faster than anyone ever imagined.

Henry's career in professional photography began as it did with many of us... while he was still in school. Serving as the editor and photographer of his high school newspaper, he began generating income from photographing class reunions and community theater in Youngstown, Ohio. It was while doing community theatre that he met

his wife, Marian, who was an RN and assistant stage manager. This was over 44 years ago and they have been a team ever since.

In the early days of Henry's photographic career, he based much of his success on his desire to "be different" from the competition. He was one of the first photographers in his area to adopt color and one of the first to place special emphasis on outdoor wedding candids taken in local parks. His innovative ideas impressed his customers and sales skyrocketed. It was during this time that Henry realized the importance of backgrounds to enhance sales. "Rainy summer Saturdays were expensive and the long Ohio winters were devastating to profits," he explains. "You can't sell what you don't take."

Before long, Henry was the leading wedding photographer in the Youngstown, Ohio, area, photographing over 100 weddings a year while teaching psychology at Youngstown State University, studying for his PhD at the University of Pittsburgh, and raising three children. Upon completing the PhD, Dr. Henry Oles decided to close the wedding business and put his photography career aside and move to Texas to teach psychology full time at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.



The original San Marcos studio and camera store (left) dates back to the 1970's. The current location of Virtual Backgrounds (right) used to be a wool scouring mill until 1985 when Henry Oles purchased the building. It is registered with the National Register of Historic Places and has 120,000 square feet on twelve acres.



After just a few months in Texas, Henry and Marian decided to open a downtown studio in the growing Texas college town. Wanting to clearly distinguish their studio from others in the area, they decided to purchase an early and very primitive background projection system. With this new system, they would have the capability of providing their clients with an infinite variety of backgrounds without leaving the studio. At that time, only a handful of studios in the entire nation had such a system. However, the Oles were so enthusiastic about their success with the background projection process that they decided to share this information with others by writing the first article ever written for photographers which was published in the Professional Photographer Magazine. This exposure led to speaking engagements around the country and then the world.

In those early days, most studios usually had one or two canvas backgrounds and rarely ventured outside of the studio to make images. In contrast, the Oles had thousands of backgrounds for their clients and witnessed their enthusiasm on a daily basis. But Dr. Henry Oles was somewhat frustrated with the limitations of the projection systems available at the time and set out to design his own system with the help of a Florida photographer and engineer, Brian Lane. Much of that early development took place in a back room at the Oles' studio in San Marcos and in Lane's machine shop in Florida. One of the first customers to use the new system was a Texas photographer named L.C. Gilstrap who coined the name "Scene Machine." Throughout the years, the Oles have made many technical advancements that significantly perfected the virtual background process and made it much easier to master.

Eventually Henry had to choose between his full time 16 year long career in university teaching and his career as a photographer and manufacturer. He resigned his tenured full professor position at Texas State University and devoted his full attention to virtual backgrounds and professional photography. In 1992, Henry and his son David began Pixel Magic Inc., a leader in digital imaging solutions for retailers competing directly with Kodak and Fuji. Pixel Magic was sold to a Japanese company, DNP, in 2006.

Since professional photographers knew so little about the virtual backgrounds concept, Henry started a monthly three-day workshop presented and directed by photographer Jim Wilson at the Virtual Background center. The workshop, now also taught by



Each month, Virtual Backgrounds holds a three-day seminar at their classroom facility in San Marcos. The classroom is also used for workshops presented by guest photographers from around the country.

Trevon Baker, has brought thousands of photographers from every part of the world to San Marcos to learn about the virtual background process. The facility has a large studio classroom area devoted to workshops. Regular workshop presenters include Joseph and Louise Simone, Deborah and Rick Ferro, Diane Wilson, Chris Wunder, Trevon Baker, Greg Stangl and others. The underlying theme of each workshop is new and different ways to distinguish one's self in photography and to build profits. In keeping with Oles' lifelong ambition of always being unique and different, he purchased 7 actual railroad cars that are parked on a siding next to his building. Seminar and workshop attendees enjoy their luncheons on his private dining car as long freights and Amtrak pass by within 50 feet.

For ten years, Henry published a business/marketing column every month in The Professional Photographer titled "Your Bottom Line." Many of the predications made in this column have proven to be accurate. He also wrote a 220 page hard cover color book, titled "Background Power," which was the first book ever written on how to incorporate backgrounds into professional photography to enhance variety, creativity and profits.



Perhaps his best known publication, written four years ago, is the "Professional Photographers Perfect Storm." Henry felt so strongly about warning fellow professional photographers about the approaching storm that he printed and distributed tens of thousands of copies at his own expense. Initially, some photographers laughed at the predictions of how the digital revolution could overwhelm professional photography as the new digital cameras enabled amateurs to produce "good enough" photography. The book not only presented the problem but also presented a variety of solutions available to the professional photographer. Today, Dr. Henry Oles is writing a follow-up to "Perfect Storm" titled, "SOLUTIONS." The book explains how the professional photographer can survive and thrive. Henry believes that the greatest days yet lie ahead for the innovative professional.

Henry Oles purchased a 1950's railroad car that serves as his "railroad dining room" where seminar attendees are treated to lunch. In addition, Virtual Backgrounds owns two 1940's sleeping cars, three boxcars that are used for storage and a fully restored MKT caboose.