

WHO'S WHO IN THE SHROUD WORLD

An Interview with Barrie Schwartz, the man behind the website

How did you first hear of the Shroud?

In 1976, I completed a seven month project as a photographic imaging consultant for a company named Information Sciences, in Santa Barbara, California. They were a contractor to Los Alamos National Laboratories and were an imaging company themselves. The project required making images of green screen raster display monitors. As I had another client, a software manufacturer that required me to photograph their software on green screen displays, I had considerable experience in doing this type of work. Throughout the project, I worked closely with Don Devan, an imaging scientist with Information Sciences.

A few months after that project was completed, Don called me and asked me what I knew about the Shroud of Turin. I had vaguely heard of it and reminded him that I was Jewish! He laughed and reminded me that he was Jewish too! He also pointed out that that fact might well be an asset on this project, since it was going to be pure science. Religious preference was not a criteria and in fact, as Jews, certainly no one would expect us to be biased in favor of the Shroud's authenticity.

I was skeptical, but I agreed to go to the next step, so he sent me a pile of literature about 18 inches high. I remember reading through it and being VERY skeptical. The answer that kept going through my mind was that this image was just another cleverly painted relic.

So at Don's suggestion, I became a member of the STURP team, but I didn't feel very comfortable about it. In fact, a few months into the project, I remember jokingly saying to Don Lynn at one of our many meetings, "What's a nice Jewish boy like me doing on a Christian Project like this?"

Don smiled and answered that perhaps I had forgotten that "the Man in question was also a Jew." "No, I knew that," I stated.

So then Don gave me some of the best advice I've ever been given. He said, "God doesn't tell us in advance what the plan is. Go to Turin and do the best job you can. Some day, you'll know why." His words kept me on the team at time when I was seriously considering

quitting. And to make a long story short, he certainly was right!

Could you describe the experience with STURP?

From the very beginning, I felt somewhat uncomfortable and out of place on the STURP team. Here I was, something of a hippy photographer, rubbing shoulders with a group of really smart scientists! To make matters even more difficult, the list of photographic tasks quickly grew to such a long one that there was no way one person could ever have done it all. It was then I suggested calling Vern Miller. Vern was the head of the scientific and industrial photography department at Brooks Institute of Photography, my alma mater. I had been in the first class Vern taught, and he and I had become good friends. He had hands on experience in many of the technical and scientific areas where I had only minimal experience. It didn't seem appropriate to go and "practice" on the Shroud, so I invited Vern onto the team.

After I graduated in 1971, I opened my first studio in Santa Barbara. In fact, in 1976 I started teaching a course at Brooks Institute myself, so Brooks was a logical place for me to go for assistance.

That part of the story is a view of how the STURP team was "chosen." After the initial group decided to form up, whenever a new discipline was determined as necessary, someone called an expert in that field that they knew. Many members joined the team in that manner.

My recollection of those first two years of preparation is rather sketchy. Although I am somewhat of a natural collector (read archivist), I had not yet begun to realize just how important an event I was about to participate in, so I didn't make any copious notes at our many meetings.

The group of us in Santa Barbara, ultimately the imaging group within STURP, included Vern Miller, Don Devan, Sam Pellicori, Ernest Brooks, Mark Evans, Don Lynn and Jean Lorre. Don and Jean would drive up from the Los Angeles area for the meetings, as they both worked at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

Many meetings were held and the experiments were developed that included all of the scientific imaging done by Vern and Don Devan and the spectral work done by Sam. It also included the photomicroscopy plans for Mark Evans and Sam and the photodocumentation

requirements that I would fulfill. Ultimately, we devised a method in which researchers would mark their data sample sites with magnets. I then would make a series of photographs of the magnets on the Shroud, from which I later could reconstruct maps of each experiment that showed where each data sample came from.

The night before we were to leave for Italy, the news broke that John Paul I had died. I called Don Devan to ask what impact that might have on our project. He said that I should just plan to go and not worry about it. Interestingly, a few weeks later I sat watching a television set in the lobby of the Grand Hotel Sitea in Turin as the white smoke rose from the chimney in the Vatican signifying the election of John Paul II.

After our arrival in Turin, we learned that all of our equipment was being held by customs. They had seen a radiation sticker on the crate containing the x-ray equipment and panicked. It actually took five days and threats of an international "incident" before it was finally released and delivered to the Royal Palace in a dump truck.

Before the equipment arrived, we had some time to spare, and I remember deciding to get up early one morning, while the lines were short, and go to see the Shroud with the pilgrims who came to see it from all over the world. That was a very important moment in my involvement with the Shroud. Until that morning, I had taken the whole thing rather lightly. I was thinking that at least I had gotten a trip to Europe out of the deal, so it wouldn't be a total loss. As serious as it should have seemed to me, I remember that it just didn't seem very serious at all.

However, as I stood in front of the Shroud, surrounded by these faithful, I was compelled to look around at their faces. It was then that I realized that, no matter what I thought of this cloth, it was VERY important to these people. I realized that I would have to start taking this a lot more seriously. It was a major milestone and probably my first realization of what I was getting involved with. I have taken it very seriously ever since that morning in 1978.

When the Shroud was brought to us in the Royal Palace, I started a non-stop marathon and spent most every waking hour in the room as the investigation proceeded. Of the 120 hours we were given for the examination, I was in the room more than 102 hours. I didn't sleep much during that 5 day period, and lost around ten pounds.

How and why did you set up the web site?

In 1995, a friend called me to let me know that the "Shroud thing" I was involved with was nothing more than a photograph by Leonardo da Vinci. I was rather shocked at this revelation and did some quick math. I knew the Shroud had already been exhibited in the mid-1300's, but remembered that Leonardo was born in the 1400's, so I asked him where he got his information. He said that he saw it on the cover of a tabloid when he and his wife were checking out at the grocery store (where tabloids are typically sold in the U.S.). It occurred to me at that moment that the general public had little if any access to the information I always had taken for granted. It was during that conversation that I wrote the following words into a manilla folder on my desk, "Consider building a website."

I had already been online for about 6 months and had realized early on that the internet was going to be a powerful tool for dissemination of information in the near future. Little did I realize just how quickly that would happen, or for that matter, to what extent. I just remember realizing that instant global access to a database of information on the Shroud of Turin by anyone interested, and for free, was a pretty powerful concept. I saw it as a way to share my photographs and the vast collection of other Shroud-related materials I had accumulated over the years. However, I never expected it to grow into the largest website on the Shroud. In April, 2004, the website had over 2 million hits, the most in its history.

Could you tell us some anecdotes about running the web site – the best and worst moments?

The best moments in running the website are the letters I receive from website viewers (as many as 1500 in one day!) telling me how important it has been in their lives and how the Shroud has lead them back to their faith. Also, the letters from younger viewers move me the most and I always try and take time to answer requests or questions from students. It is my hope that in doing so, I might be helping to encourage the next generation of sindonologists. The worst moments are the long hours spent, particularly in the first five years of the site, in which I ignored my imaging business and spent all of my retirement savings in order to sustain myself and the website. I guess one could say I was rather compulsive about it, but I have no regrets in having done so. Of course, nowadays, the worst moments are the same as the best moments: 1500 e-mails in one day!

Where do you see the site going in the future?

The website will continue to grow and expand, ultimately including more and more of the science, history, art and religious research being done on the Shroud. There is much more that I wish to include in the future, and I am currently working with a group of interested individuals who have expressed their intent to help me achieve these goals by forming a foundation that will enable me to continue the work and ensure that the website stays online, even if I die.

Where do you see Sindonology and the Shroud world going? How would you like it to develop?

Currently, Sindonology is very splintered and divided along nationalistic and political boundaries. There is little cooperation between the various Shroud organizations and researchers, even those here in the U.S. I would like to see another unified effort by a multidisciplinary team of true experts working together to further our knowledge of the Shroud, similar to the work done by STURP in the late 1970's. One caveat to this is that I am very frustrated by so-called experts stepping out of their personal fields of expertise to postulate on the Shroud. There are many interested individuals who ARE experts in their respective fields that could be tapped to participate in formal research. However, egos and personalities need to be set aside to allow this to happen. Frankly, I am not very hopeful, based on the current state of Sindonology worldwide, and the ever present politics that seem to permeate everything in the world of the Shroud. Perhaps what is missing is humility amongst the researchers, but that's another story...

Could you tell us something about your life apart from the Shroud - food photography and all that.

What life? All of the food and other photographic work I did in the commercial arena is behind me. I still work with medical device manufacturers and participate in their research and marketing by producing videos and stills. I also participate in clinical trials and other medical research where imaging is the primary mode of data collection and evaluation. However, if the foundation becomes reality, I will probably retire from direct outside imaging work and devote the rest of my life to Sindonology.