



A Photographic Trip to the Palouse

By Rick Shapka

Why would I drive from the beautiful geography surrounding Vancouver, BC to photograph at an agricultural area called the Palouse in southeast Washington State? Is it because the visual opportunity for a picture is better in the Palouse than Vancouver? No, rather it is for the rich uniqueness of this area often referred to as “the Tuscany of the USA.” The Palouse changes color with each season, offering any photographer the potential opportunity to make exciting images. My many return visits to the Palouse complement my photographic style, which requires more than a single, quick visit. This is truly a beautiful area with seemingly never-ending rolling hills, old barns, farm vehicles, old churches, and friendly hard working people to photograph.



While most of the Palouse is in Washington State, a small portion lies in west central Idaho. There is some debate about the derivation or meaning of the name Palouse. It may be taken partially from the name of an old native tribe of the area, or perhaps from the French language meaning of “short thick grasslands”.¹ What ever the origin, today it is an area which produces a significant contribution to the US farm economy in the way of soft winter wheat, barley, lentils, and garbanzo crops. These complementary crops, while planted at different times from fall to spring, mature and then are harvested in a late summer sequence that provides much of the color that one will photograph.

Prior to making my first trip to the Palouse, I had asked fellow photographers



where I might make pictures. I was advised by some to simply drive the numerous local roads to find a viewpoint

on which to set up my tripod. While this may have been good general advice, when I arrived I did not find it the best

1 Stevens, Otto O. From 'The Palouse – Jewel of the Inland Northwest, May 11 2009



use of my photographic time. After a few days of random picture making, I visited with some local workers at the Colfax

municipal offices. The ladies proved to be a treasure trove of local photographic knowledge, as well as providing a large-

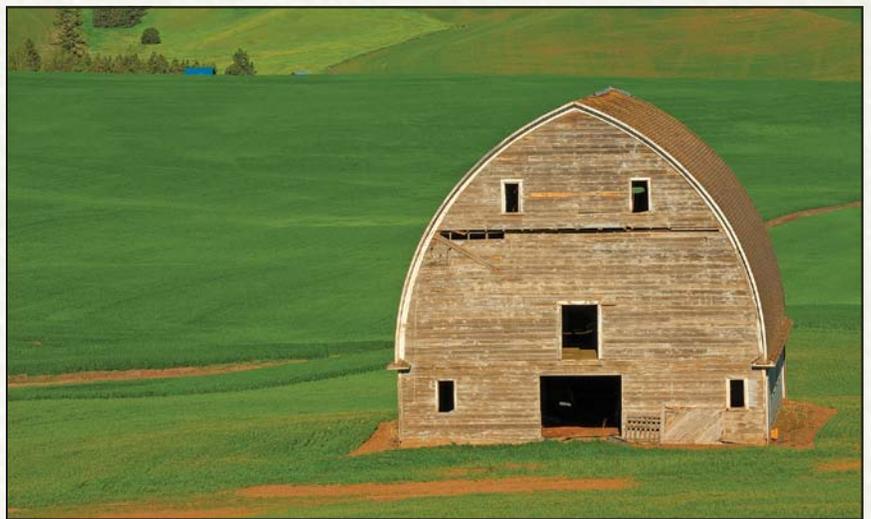
scale map of Whitman County. One even extended an invitation to photograph at her farm! With this county map in hand, I was able to pin point more locations when I spoke with people at some of the local eateries.

One of the more productive places for potential opportunities turned out to be the "Top Notch Cafe" in Colfax where some customers refer to themselves as the old "Codgers". These people were more than generous with their welcoming suggestions, while they spoke with pride about their farm buildings and activities. One of these "Codgers" was able to provide a location and direct me for permission to photograph on the property of the Manning Rye covered bridge, which I had not been able to find on a previous trip. Later while I



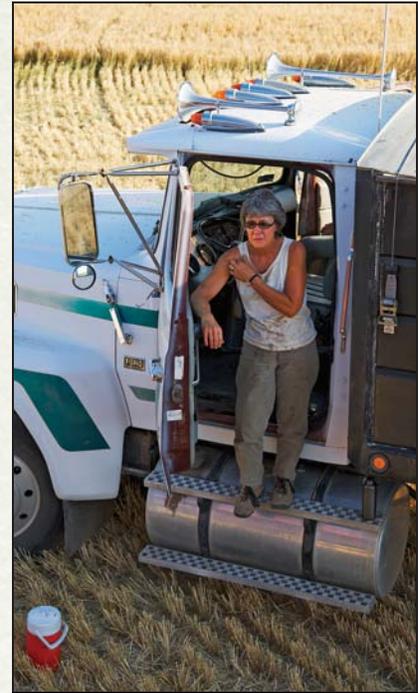
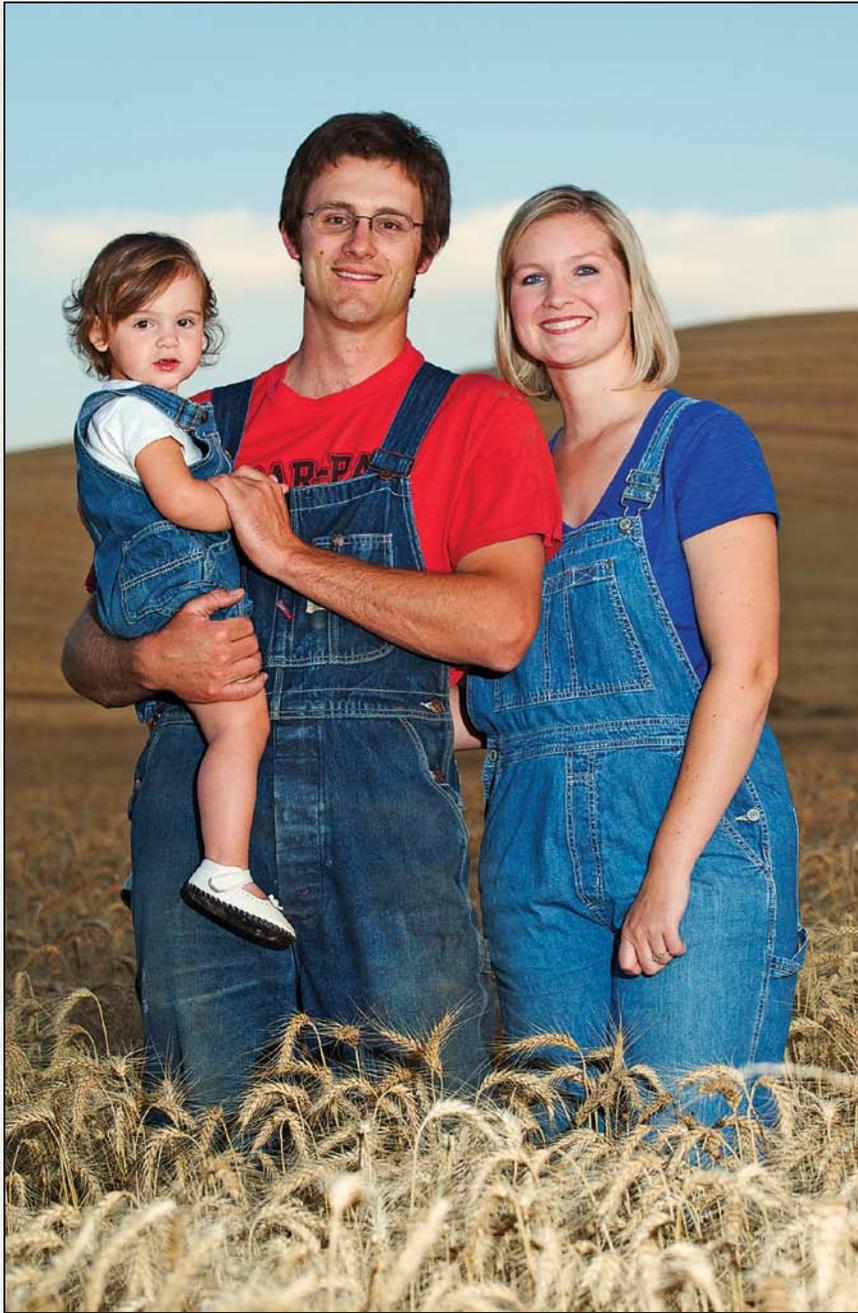
was scouting the proper light direction of this bridge, by driving further up the road I discovered another farm with numerous old tractors, and trucks with HDR picture potential. Another accommodating farmer provided further direction to a wonderful meadow, with gradual slopes to the river valley below. Her information provided many more hours of photographic opportunity.

The city (really town) of Palouse is another interesting place both for people and buildings to photograph. The townspeople are working hard to re-invent the town centre with the Bank Left Gallery, and Green Frog Café cheer leading the artistic rejuvenation. It was at the Green Frog one evening over a glass of wine that I met Pat and Doug who farm a few miles outside of Palouse. Pat



and Doug are the second of their three generations farming in the area. During our conversations, they extended an

invitation to photograph on their farm during the late summer harvest. What an opportunity! My spouse, and I traveled



back to spend a week with the family riding the harvesting combines and making pictures of them with the crops on the rolling hills as the backdrop.

While it may be best to photograph many subjects when the light is warm and the shadows long, it is tough to ask a farmer run the combine on that particular side slope early in the morning or late into the evening. One has to take the shot at the time the machine is at that great angle with the texture of the stubble showing its track whatever the time of day. Yes, it is possible to get some pictures

with a group of combines and series of grain trucks lined up and working at dusk, but that shot is more serendipitous than good planning.

Where to stay when shooting in the Palouse? There are a few motels available in the area. During the university summer break, Washington State University offers some of its dorm rooms to off campus guests. While this is basic accommodation in Pullman, Washington, it is a very economic and clean facility, which provides an opportunity to spend time visiting a

pleasant campus environment. WSU operates its own dairy with a retail outlet for great cheese and tasty ice cream!

I have visited the Palouse a number of times over the past three years from May through September to experience the color of these months. Although I have not visited in the winter, I am told there are great pictures to be made then as well. I recommend the Palouse to any photographer who would like to make pictures of the people, the land and the machines. For those photographers like me who like to hike and cycle there are numerous trails and roads that should fit most people's level of interest and fitness.

If you like company when you photograph, the roads of Palouse are a great area to travel with a friend and fellow photographer. More often than not your partner will see an opportunity that you may have missed because you were concentrating on the drive to your next stop. With a GPS and the Whitman County map it is possible to photograph on your own. However it is a good deal more fun to plan the next day's shoot over a beer with a friend who is interested as you are in making a great picture. I find it better to have more than myself to depend on to wake and leave my dorm bed at 3:15 AM, to head out the door to catch the sunrise at Steptoe Butte! ❄️