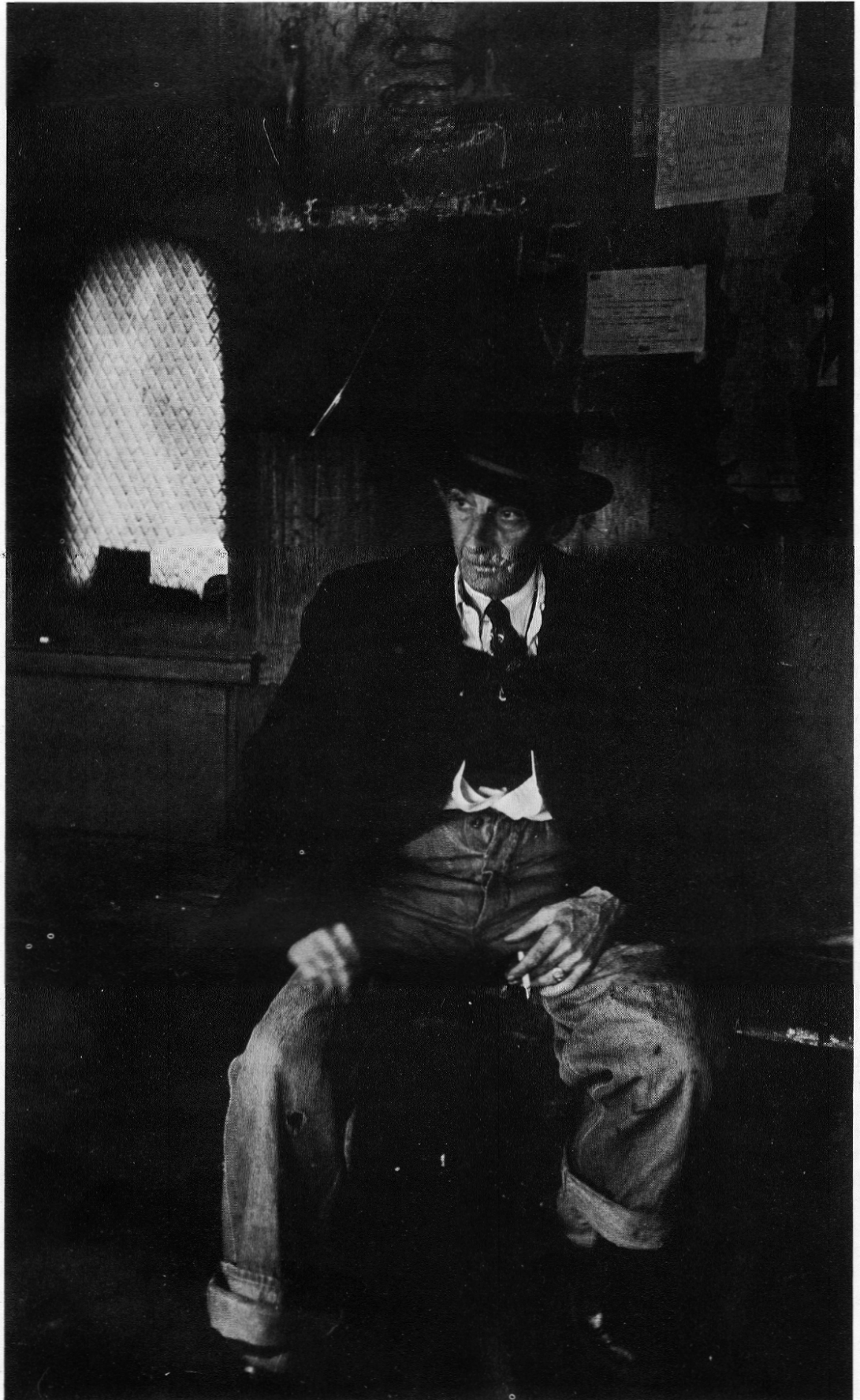


**RAILROAD  
MEN**



**RAILROAD MEN:** A Book of photographs and collected stories by Simpson Kalisher with an introduction by Jonathan Williams. New York, Clarke and Way, Inc. (1961) \$6.95

This is probably the bravest photographic book of the recent year. It had the courage to appear without the intellectual cosmetics bought in academies and coffee houses and strikes none of the attitudes which might bring big, dizzying success; it exhibits no nakedness in public, screaming for you to look, and is not another of those "hostility" pieces which somehow never affect anything. It will never have precious, highsounding esthetic explanations (the mind's emptiest traffic noise); it needs no explanation at all. Here everything is black, white and that all-inclusive gray which someone (Gide ?) has said is the color of truth. It is admirable for it to have arrived, as in a famous film, in the midst of such a brouhaha, just before the strip tease of the subconscious, in the center of senseless exhibitionism and shouted, applauded, impotent introspections, right at the wildest moment of the party. It has a good chance of remaining after all that is over. If you like it, you may like it as much as anything you have ever liked; if you don't like it, I am sorry to say that is your loss and not mine.

This was a good book to have, alone, one Sunday afternoon of bad weather in Chicago. A thin one, but the first passage through its pages lasted until nightfall. It was not a trip through any luridly lighted tunnel, splotted with insults to the human body in its most private and tragic postures, messages of sociological and smugly liberal don't-get-your-hands-dirty humanitarianism, corpses of animals, aggressive and mock-meek children older and more worldly-wise than their parents and as tiresome now as the demodé cats of the camera clubs and the flotsam and jetsam of the marine and vegetable world. For once we are spared those images of obvious symbolism to be endlessly combed and never straightened out. As has been suggested, it is unlike most photographic books today. It is good for the eyes and makes a gift to you of large, particular sensibilities. It will communicate with anyone who can recognize the poetry in the lyrics of popular songs, the sound of a train whistle from childhood before the Diesel (or can imagine it), a good cup of coffee in some lost place, or the air we have forgotten we breathe. Mr. Kalisher never dyes anything with sentiment and if you give his results a little of your thought, you will find they are the statement of the same elusive truths which have occupied a long line of writers from Villon through Jean Genet.

But, first of all, there is Jonathan Williams's Introduction. By photographic philosophers and purists, Jonathan Williams would be called one of the "word people." This is no compliment and at its best implies an outsider who does not practice the medium. If the word people have ever used cameras they do not confess it. Sometimes they make poignant and enlightening statements and often it would be good for the insiders to hear from the outsiders, but they never listen. Max Lerner and Henry Steele Commager listened to de Tocqueville and seem thereby to have been helped in making present-day life in America more comprehensible to some. Jonathan Williams, who is an excellent writer, tells us about Mr. Kalisher's pictures so well it would be better to reprint here what he has written

than have someone who is neither of the word nor the camera people attempt it. There are memorable passages in his short essay for which I shall never have to return to the text; for example, the fine paragraph in which he speaks of the passing of the railroad man: "another of the manly vocations disappearing from the American scene." If an anthology of photographic belles-lettres is ever compiled, this essay should have an honored place in it.

Simpson Kalisher's part of the book begins with one of the shortest of the stories announced in the title. These turn out to be not his stories at all, but narratives and statements by the people the book represents. They were transcribed from tapes recorded while the project was being realized and some sophisticated people may have trouble with them. In spite of the large army of professional folk singers, there are still people in the United States who speak the American language in idioms peculiar to their areas and professions and few of them live in Greenwich Village. Simpson Kalisher's people are real and may be misunderstood by those who have been listening only to the other kind. The juxtaposition of text and pictures is done with respect and understanding. The result is matched only by Paul Strand's and Cesare Zavattini's *Un Paese* where the photographs also have an accompaniment of statements by their subjects from the Italian village of Luzzara. Some of the stories of *Railroad Men* are like lyrics or prose ballads which, with the photographer's irreproachable placement and his sensibility for rhythms, lengths and sequence, do much to develop and intensify the reminiscent and entirely photographic character of his book.

All this, however, has been only a statement of the auxiliaries which are a setting for the photographs. These articulate a simple, yet eloquent, camera language so perfectly that one is not stopped dead in the path of approach either by a consideration of the medium or its techniques. Your first thought is not, these are photographs. This is a wonderful accomplishment and used to be called, in the forgotten past of not so many years ago, the balancing of form and content. Although Kierkegaard said some great things about it which should trouble our modern consciences at the time of a vogue for anti-art, it is doubtful that it is ever mentioned in academies of esthetics. In *Railroad Men* you are at once in contact with the picture, its intellectual structure and its significance. The realism does not rise from some private, internal, esoteric affair which, because it is so small, has to be loud, aggressive or pretentiously insane in its exposition. It is stated in images of undistorted truth which are large, deep and general.

As a photographer Simpson Kalisher has affinities with one of the traditions of realism in American photography of which traces may be found as far back as the daguerreotypists. It emerged from its quasi-primitive state in the work of the American-English Peter Henry Emerson and was brought back across the Atlantic by Stieglitz, a small part of all he has left us. In America again, it has produced individuals as far different from its forbears and as diverse among themselves as Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Eugene Smith, Robert Frank. All of them are recorder-interpreters who transcend their time and subject matter so that their work is characterized by an enduring contemporaneity. If they have not had phenomenal commercial successes, they

have exerted much influence and have always had their constant admirers. They are photographers in the strictest sense, not poets, merchants, philosophers or painters with mistaken ambitions, and only one has ever been a teacher. Due to their unyielding and sometimes fanatical integrity, the reflection of the age in which they live and that characteristic of timelessness which will be found in the work of all of them, they must be called artists. They are all a little outside the various views of the world they have made permanent for us and each has his special and somewhat nostalgic sympathy for it.

These photographers have often been wrongly pigeon-holed as mere documentarians and there is danger that some people may sense the document in Simpson Kalisher's book and never venture inside the covers. You are on a blind alley chase if you want to know what he thinks about railroads or railroad people. Unless you are entirely prejudiced about the photographs, you will end by thinking and feeling something about the subject yourself. Perhaps the largest themes of the pictures are those ancient qualities, human dignity and character, which are hardly believed in any more, but still recognized when encountered. Here is great consideration of them and much respect. Seldom before, except in the work of Lewis Hine, has the same complete and unhampered relationship existed between the photographer and his subjects. The rapport is mystic and fragile and there was no stabbing or shooting to bring these fine and ordinary people to us. The ever-changing light of sunless, temperate days, with adumbrations deepening to strong yet penetrable black are here; photography's best pigments are used for these scenes and portraits. There is also the welcome and masterly practice of photographic chiaroscuro which has been employed recently with such originality by Robert Riger in his great action photographs of football and which enriches this book where it is used with a consciousness of its difficulties and just as unusual a mastery of them.

Good things have a consistency and harmony which are different in each of them and what we are at first tempted to separate from a work and even wish to reject may later be recognized as one of its integral parts. From this book I wanted to separate nothing for not once did its frank character deceive or change. It was always there and sustained, from the frontispiece through the photographer's Epilogue which tells the story of the entire experience and where, as in the photographs, nothing is stripped bare, but all is revealed. So, from all of it, came the pleasure, not common in any time, that is granted us when something unexpected, difficult and necessary has been done and here a photographer is the victor.

Hugh Edwards

**Man and Stone, A Journey Into the Past**, Andreas Feininger, with an introduction by Kasimir Edschmid; New York, 1961, \$7.50

Andreas Feininger is that rare photographer who has managed to forget he is a photographer, and is thus able to use his camera as a powerful tool in solving problems other than those stemming directly from photography per se. This doesn't mean that he maligns the camera, or handles

it superficially, but that he bends it and the photographic process to his will, which implies, first, an encyclopaedic knowledge of photography and, second, a broad and deep understanding of the problems to which he applies this knowledge. In this book, with great economy of action and powerful intellectual organization, he serves his interest in Man as he is reflected in his artifacts, thus his interest in Man, stone, the past, and the effects of time and the elements on Man's most ambitious attempts to transcend his mortality and endure forever through his art.

If other photographers are sometimes awed by Feininger's reserved catholicity of taste and breadth of scholarship, they will certainly understand, if they will take the time, his strategy of photography. I will say, furthermore, that any photographer who considers doing photographic books ought to study this strategy. In his introduction, Kasimir Edschmid has spelled it out carefully; not only does he explain the author's premises and how he employs them, but he delivers a pungent and well informed essay on the art of seeing—seeing in general, seeing nations, seeing sculpture, art, stone walls, and seeing as it applies to participating in this book as a rich and rewarding personal experience.

The thing that strikes me most forcefully about the pictures in this book is that I am not in the least aware of them as pictures, nor can I even force myself to be, though I have very considerable experience in making my eyes do as I tell them to. I am aware, instead, of *things*—prehistoric temples, stone walls and roads, bridges, statues, buildings, etc. I am there! That this was Feininger's intention for me, the reader, I can have no doubt whatsoever.

Let Feininger speak for himself, as he is well able. In his forward he says: "But more important than the objects themselves is what they say: stones speak if one listens. In indentation and polish they tell of numberless feet that crossed and recrossed a pavement, of the many hands that gripped to gloss a stony balustrade—and bear witness to man's work and play, tragedy and happiness in the unceasing procession of life . . . and so, *through imagination* (italics mine), dead stone is brought to life in pictures of proud and humble things that tell the story of man's aspirations and dreams, his victories and defeats, the ephemeral and the enduring—as manifested in the power and beauty of man-shaped stone." Having listened carefully and sensitively to stone, Feininger stepped aside and let stone speak for itself, no mean photographic feat.

The photographs were made in Italy and France, carrying us from prehistoric times to the present, to visit colossal places and humble places, to experience the throbbing stone of the mighty Michelangelo and the soft whisper of the forgotten artisan.

The book is scholarly in conception, organized for pleasurable reading and the experiencing of stone, tautly written from end to end, well art directed, and well printed. I suspect that many photographers will not particularly like the book. However, it was not made for photographers, which is one of Feininger's fundamental secrets. I happen to like the book, and intend to keep it near me for many a long year for what it can tell me about the universe and Man.

Ralph Hattersley