

Photos document the legacy of the park

SEAN EMERY STAFF WRITER OC Post 8-5-08

As workers last week hurried to complete the new café in time to open with the first Great Park summer concert, Jerry Burchfield and Jacques Garnier looked up at the bannertime photographs lining the walls of the old El Toro hangar.

Being caught between the old and the new is a familiar feeling for Burchfield and Garnier, who are among the six photographers that make up the Legacy Project, a visual history of the move from the former El Toro Marine base to the 1,347-acre Great Park.

Six years after their first visit to the base, the photographers have amassed more than 100,000 photos, released two books with one more on the way, and show no sign of slowing down.

"I've never been a proponent of hit-and-run photography," Burchfield said of the long-term project, which is expected to last until at least 2015. "This allows our knowledge to develop."

The desire to photograph the base first came to Burchfield before the Great Park project was even approved. Frustrated at the political battle then raging over the base's future, Burchfield, a Cypress college photography instructor, decided that not enough was being done to protect its past.

Burchfield got permission to bring his photography students onto the base. Despite looking like a ghost town, the site's past was almost palpable, Burchfield said.

"It was an eye-opening experience," he said. "You could sense that children used to play on some of these streets, that there were backyard barbecues."

Burchfield soon realized that the job was too big for one photographer, and enlisted three fellow Cypress instructors – Mark Chamberlain, Rob Johnson and Clayton Spada – and two fellow well-respected local photographers – Garnier and Douglas McCulloh.

"I shoot abandoned spaces, so I thought I had died and gone to heaven," Garnier said. "There was a sense of wonderment and surprise."

In 2005 they photographed the entire perimeter of the base, from the outside looking in, a project they plan to repeat in 2015. The group then walked every inch of the base runways, using multiple cameras to shoot in four different directions every 30 feet, a project they also plan to repeat in a decade. Other projects are carried out on a more regular basis, including quarterly aerial shots.

In late 2005, the group took on its most ambitious project: the Great Picture. With the help of more than 400 volunteers, artists and experts, they turned an abandoned hangar into a lensless, pinhole camera obscura, creating the world's largest photograph, three stories high by 11 stories long, of a panorama of the base.

With the unveiling of the first portion of a 27.5-acre preview park last month, and the beginning of summer concerts, park leaders once again looked to the Legacy photographers to illustrate the juxtaposition between the bases past and present.

"Partly in gratitude to their dedication for this project and in respect to their fine work, we asked the Legacy Project to be our first exhibitors at the Great Park," spokeswoman Marsha Burgess said.

The exhibit, which was unveiled Saturday, includes six 12 feet by 8 feet banner photographs, combining the work of the Legacy Project with historic photographs found in base archives.

"What I'm hoping is that people will start seeing the development, and there will be a renewed public interest," Garnier said.

For more information on the Legacy Project, go to www.legacyphoto project.com. For preview park hours and directions, and a schedule of events, go to www.ocgp.org. **ON THE COVER** Douglas McCulloh's photo art depicts a P38 Fighter Plane superimposed over a runway of the ex-El Toro Marine Base.



Jacquies Garnier, left, and Jerry Burchfield are on a team of six photographers, each of whom agreed to focus on a separate portion of the base, and set off documenting every El Toro structure before they were demolished. PHOTOS BY JEFFREY ANTENORE/STAFF



Mark Chamberlain's "Nature Prevails" symbolizes the slow but inevitable transformation of the base into the park.



Garnier under his photo art called "Destiny": an F4 Phantom fighter jet flies over the El Toro base runway.

“ We felt that an important part of Orange County’s history was being overlooked due to the issues surrounding what it should be used for. Regardless of what happened to it, the history of the base needed to be documented as best could be done. ”

Jerry Burchfield, a Legacy Project photographer