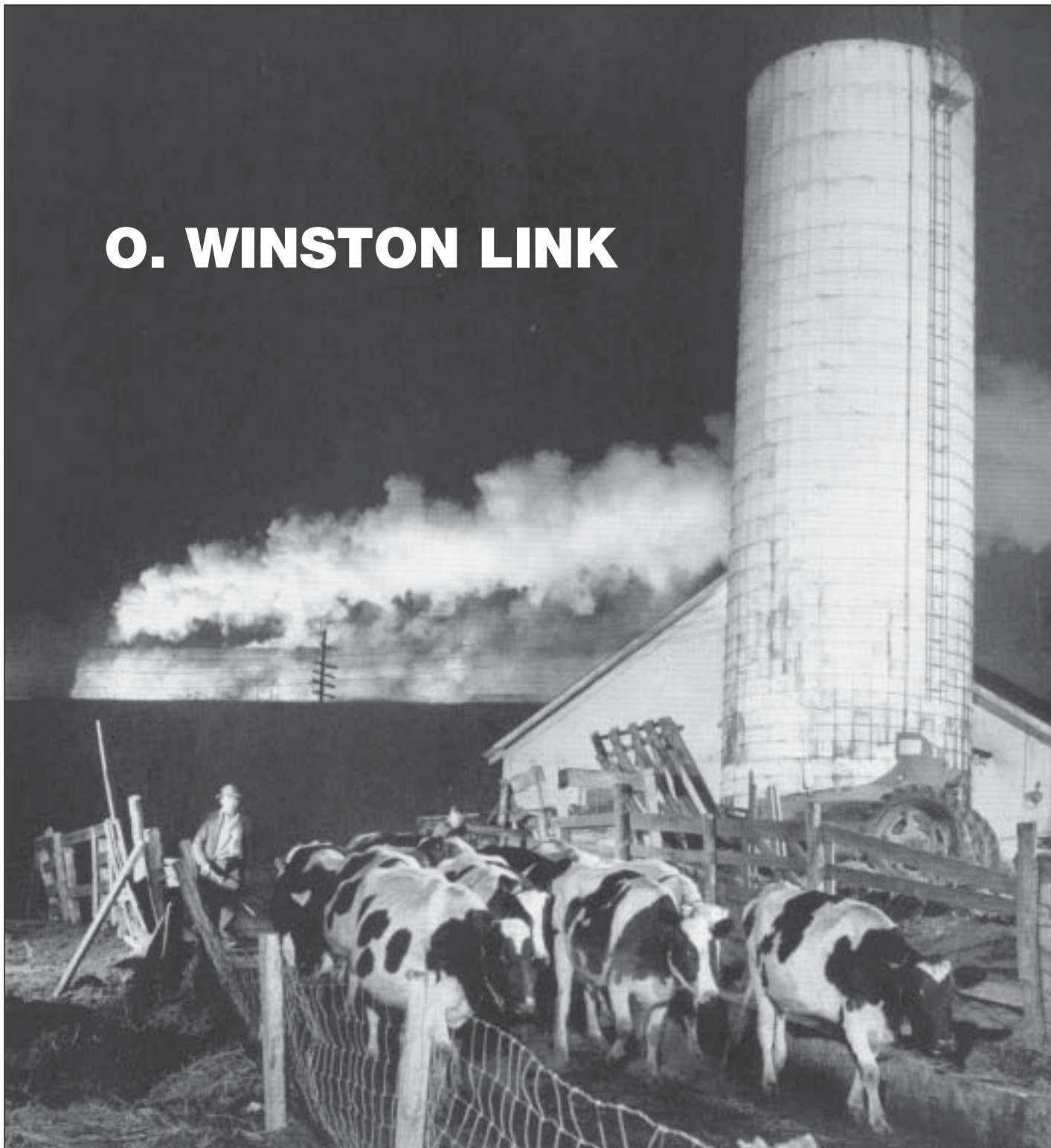


# O. WINSTON LINK



PRINT & IMAGE

**His journey from railfan curiosity to art-world sensation was as unusual as the perspective of his lens**

**By TONY REEVY**

In June 1983, I was a summer intern at Glaxo Group Research in London, England, and was about to take a hike on Dartmoor in Devon. I stopped by a map store in Covent Garden and saw railroad photos displayed in a storefront window nearby. The photos advertised an exhibition by a fellow American who I had never encountered before, O. Winston Link.

I paid the admission—50 pence, I believe it was—and viewed the exhibition with increasing excitement and even joy. Here was a different way of looking at the railroad. It combined the human element that I had been seeking in railroad literature and photography with what was an undreamed-of weirdness in composition and an amazing technical virtuosity. I was especially taken by the photo titled, “Norvel Ryan and his son bringing in the cows, Train No. 3 in the background, Shawsville, Va., 1955.”

The photos brought out a theme that was echoed in John L. Stilgoe’s book, *Metropolitan Corridor*, which was published in the same year—namely, that it was no longer enough to examine railroads from a mechanical standpoint. Railroading was composed of, and affected, people. Both Link’s photos and Stilgoe’s revisionist history supported the notion that the social and cultural aspects of railroading are fertile fields for study.

What makes Link’s own story intriguing is that his photos did not take root in the railfan community. His

**“Trains are strange,” Link said. He achieved the otherworldly effect of No. 3, *The Pocahontas*, passing Norvel Ryan’s cows in the early evening by popping flashbulbs straight into the passing train, catching the steam and dust in wraithlike swirls.**

© History Museum of Western Virginia

now-famous nighttime images of steam engines on the Norfolk & Western Railway in the 1950s lay obscure and neglected—more objects of awe than imitation by other rail photographers—until they were discovered by the art world in the 1980s. Since then, his images have proliferated across the popular culture and been the subject of museum exhibitions, two art books, posters, calendars, and rapidly appreciating collectors' prints.

The opening of the O. Winston Link

Museum earlier this year in Roanoke, Va.—three years after Link's death at age 86—promises to solidify his reputation. Already the press has dubbed the Roanoke collection “the world's most famous train photographs,” and, by implication, Link's images of giant locomotives thundering above children splashing in a stream and hurtling past a couple relaxing at a drive-in theater have become touchstones of the contemporary world's understanding of the railroad in mid-20th century America. ...

**Link started out doing industrial publicity photos that were sold to newspapers and magazines. His most famous—of a seductive girl not in peril thanks to the strength of a sheet of “Tuf-flex” glass—was reprinted around the country.**

Courtesy of Tom Garver

