

Remembering Vivian Walworth

By Victor King McElheny, 18 June 2016, Spoken at The First Congregational Church, Concord, MA on the occasion of a memorial service held for Vivian K. Walworth



We remember Vivian as a person who treated us with affection and respect. But we also remember her constantly calling on us to work on significant things. For decades, she was devoted to building a considered, almost official account of both instant photography and applications of light polarization. For her tasks, she was always giving us assignments.

In the summer of 1972, after I had turned in a consultant's report on the development and functions of the remarkable Polaroid SX-70 film and camera system, Vivian pulled me into reviewing multiple drafts of the article she co-authored with Edwin Land and Howard Rogers for the Seventh edition of Neblette's Handbook of Photography and Reprography. This was the chapter that the company published as a paperback in 1977, and which evolved into an article with Stan Mervis in the 1989 Eighth edition of Neblette's, which she edited with John Sturge and Allan Shepp.

This opportunity for me to repeatedly study the Neblette chapter was a significant step in mastering Land's technical universe for what became my biography of him in 1998.

Vivian's assignments kept coming. In 1978, thanks to Vivian, I had the chance to interview many more of the SX-70 pioneers at Polaroid for a book chapter. They spoke eloquently of how their association with Land had raised their sights higher than they ever expected.

Soon after Land's death in 1991, I was one of the many editors Vivian helped pull together for what became the three volumes of Edwin Land's essays, edited by Mary McCann and published by the Society for Imaging Science and Technology. As you probably know, Vivian not only served as president of the society but edited its journal for six years. Vivian assigned me to check over Land's 1947 paper on onestep photography before its text was digitized.

After my book on Land came out, I spoke before quite a few professional groups, including the Society for Imaging Science. I not only interviewed Vivian for the book, but she also steered me to a source that opened up contacts with Land's very large set of relatives – eighteen first cousins and the two sons of his sister.

Several years ago, I had the fun of going with Vivian to visit Harvard's Baker Library to see some World War II 3-D vectographs that had been specially unfrozen for her and several colleagues from Stereojet. This gave me a new appreciation that vectographs were not only important for reconnaissance but also for detailed training in assembly and repair of military equipment.

Just last year, Vivian recruited me for a stimulating Forum here at the First Parish that was followed by vivid audience questions. And soon after, I found myself speaking at the MIT Museum in Cambridge on an occasion that Vivian inspired. This was the dedication of an American Chemical Society plaque to be placed outside Land's laboratory at the corner of Osborn and Main Streets. It seemed appropriate to discuss Land as an innovator and enthusiast for popular involvement in the excitement of science.

Amid all Vivian's other activities, the thrill of discovery was a central theme of her life. I feel proud and grateful to have known her for more than forty years.