

# GREY VILLET PHOTOGRAPHS

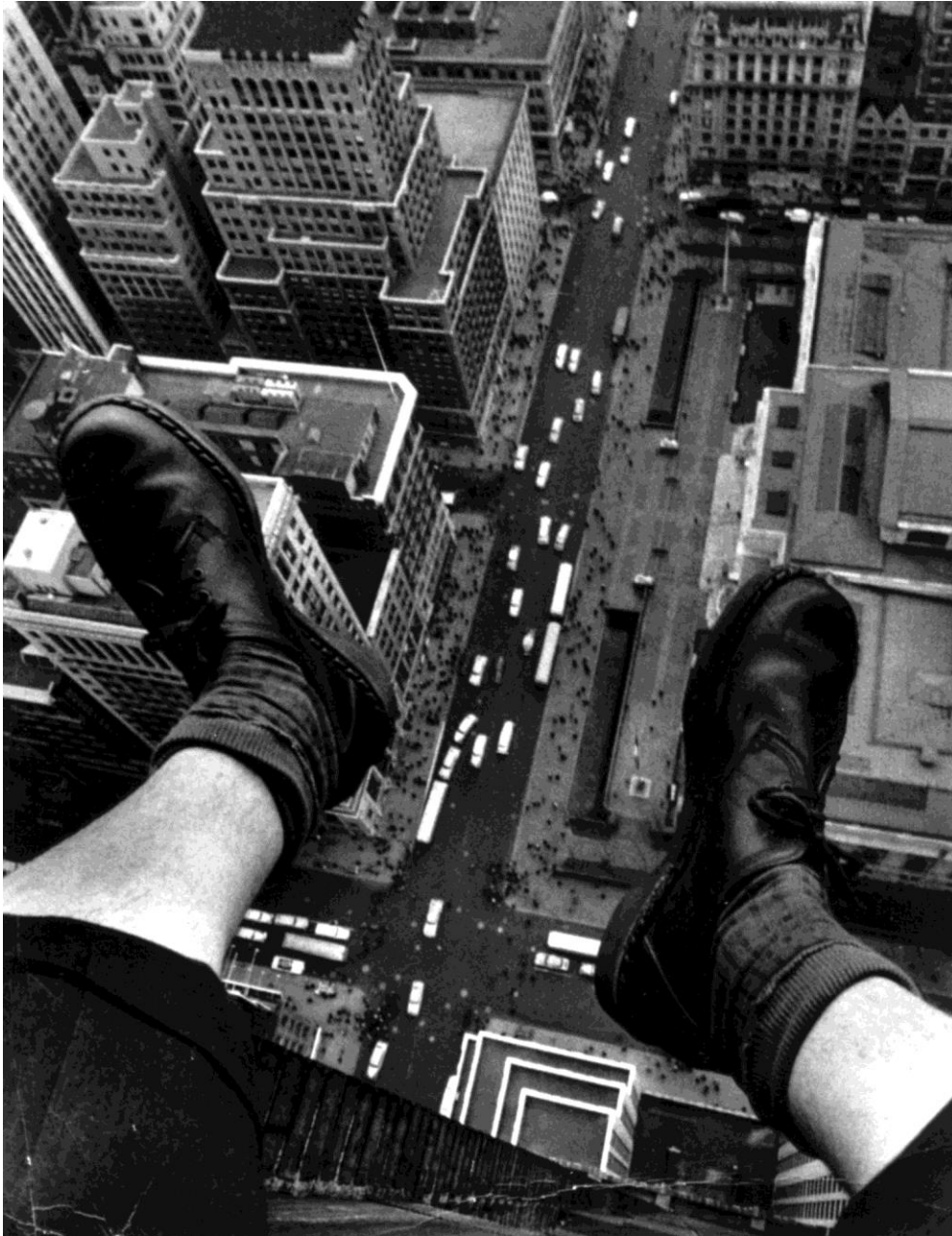
## OVERVIEW OF THE OBJECTS

<b>Repository:</b>	Crandall Public Library. Folklife Center Glens Falls, NY.
<b>Creator:</b>	Grey Villet (1927 – 2000)
<b>Title:</b>	Grey Villet Photographs
<b>Dates:</b>	1964 - 1982
<b>Quantity:</b>	3 prints
<b>Identification:</b>	Photographs

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Grey Villet was born in South Africa in 1927. At 18, and to the dismay of his doctor father, Grey abandoned pre-medical studies at Capetown University to pursue photography. Unable to dissuade him, his father reluctantly sent him to London in 1946 for professional photography training, but, planting himself on his instincts again, Grey soon left school to earn a meager living as a street photographer before landing a job with a provincial newspaper in Bristol. The work he produced there proved his worth, and at 22 he was hired by Reuters, a major wire service, for its London office. Two years later, a job offer from South Africa's foremost newspaper, the *Johannesburg Star*, brought him home. But the dismaying realities of apartheid and the frustrating limits of work on a daily newspaper fostered a dream of becoming a "magazine photographer," and by 1954 that dream had carried him across half the world to New York and the offices of *LIFE* magazine with only a portfolio of his newspaper work to represent him.

What followed was both improbable and meteoric. On the basis of that portfolio, *LIFE*'s picture editor gave him a trial assignment that resulted in the sensational photograph that also happened to open an exhibition in the Folklife Gallery in 2017. Two hundred freelance assignments and a year later, Grey became the youngest member of *LIFE*'s celebrated staff of photographers and won photojournalism's most prestigious award when he was named photographer of the Year in 1955. Other honors would follow, including multiple firsts from the National Press Photographers Association and golds from World Press Photo, but by the time Grey and Barbara met on assignment in 1961, and she became his wife, as well as his colleague at *LIFE*, he had abstained from competitions to focus entirely on the quality of the work he was producing.



A purist, guided by a poetic sense of the power of the authentic and a belief in letting life tell its own stories, Grey refrained from posing pictures or asking for repetitions of actions, as was common practice even among the most celebrated photographers. Instead, quiet as a cat so that he almost seemed to disappear as he worked, he let a story unfold before him in natural light, composing images in his cameras from ephemeral moments that distilled the heart of the matter. Able to conceive and plan his stories as a coherent whole as he worked, he was a storyteller whose mastery of the difficult form of the photo essay remains influential to this day.

In an era before any digital tinkering with his results was possible, Grey's was a technique that required intense concentration, patience and understanding of his subjects, joined with a technical skill that allowed rapid use of differing cameras and lenses to capture and compose the "right stuff" on film as it happened.  
Adapted from "The Story of Grey Villet" by Barbara Villet.

### **HISTORICAL NOTE**

In 2017 the Folklife Gallery at Crandall Public Library hosted an exhibition entitled "Rights, Race & Revolutions; A Portrait of LIFE in 1960s America by Grey Villet," co-curated by Barbara Villet and Todd DeGarmo, Founding Director of the Folklife Center.

### **INDEX TERMS**

**Topics:** Castro, Fidel  
Farms  
Family

**Places:** Burlington, Vermont  
Cuba  
Wing, North Dakota

**Important People:** Castro, Fidel  
Smith, Dr. Robert  
Villet, Barbara  
Villet, Grey  
Vogel, Sarah

**Form/Genre:** Photographs

### **ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**

**Preferred Citation:** Grey Villet Photographs  
Folklife Center  
Crandall Public Library, Glens Falls, NY.

**Accession Information:** Donated by Barbara Villet , July 2018.

**Processing Information:** Arranged and described by Erica Wolfe Burke, November 2018.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECTS

### **The Dream Persists, 1964**

11 x 14 inches, black & white print, digitized from original negative.

In a moment of self-examination during his tour of Cuba's collectives in 1964, Castro toasted the revolution's successes. It had achieved major reforms in education, almost erasing illiteracy on the island, and by providing Cubans with pure water and free universal health care. But, perhaps because an American-imposed had helped choke growth, its overall economy had remained depressed.

### **Father, Child, and Dog, 1966**

16 x 20 inches, black & white print, digitized from original negative.

Dr. Robert Smith got a kiss from the family collie as he also embraced his daughter Betsey, after her dangerous dash for the street in front of their home.

In 1966, as an antidote to one of the Vietnam War's bloodiest years, the editors of *LIFE* asked Grey and Barbara Villet to undertake a series that would examine the bonds of a single multigenerational family, in the hope of affirming some fundamental American values. The family they chose were the Smiths of Vermont. Completed over a year of working with the three households of Smiths clustered in Burlington, the photo essay series ran on sequence for four weeks in 1967 and proved to be among the largest photo essays the magazine ever published.

Each essay focused on one of the three generations: the patriarch, 82-year-old Levi Smith and his wife Julia, and the families of their three sons and the grandchildren. In essence, all four were about the same thing: the bonds of "continuity, commitment, and caring" that bound the Smiths to a long family history in Vermont, to their community, and to each other. Uncommon, both in their privileged place in Burlington's society and their cohesiveness at a time when such large families were becoming rare, the Smiths' daily concerns, nevertheless, reflected the mundane beauty in ordinary family life.

### **Farm Collapse, 1982**

11 x 14 inches, black & white print, digitized from original negative.

The '80s brought an economic recession that hit hardest in the prairie states, where big agribusiness then took 60% of all agricultural subsidies while medium and small farmers were being overcome by debt. Sarah Vogel, a young lawyer from an old North Dakota family, had come home from Washington, D.C. to take up their cause. In this telling image, she was visiting neighbors facing foreclosure at the Oster wheat farm near the small community of Wing, North Dakota. Overall, she would prove a formidable ally in saving individual farms like this one. Two years later, Sarah Vogel became lead attorney on a national class action case on behalf of 240,000 farmers, which resulted in an injunction prohibiting USDA from seizing nearly 80,000 farms. She remains a force for environmental and farming concerns in North Dakota to the present.