

# Photographer behind iconic North Iowa images dies

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Elwin Musser displays the Speed Graphic camera he used as a Globe Gazette photographer in this 2008 file photo. Musser died Saturday, March 28, 2015.

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MASON CITY | A Mason City photographer who captured some of the most iconic images published by the Globe Gazette has died.

Elwin Musser died Saturday in Mason City. He was 95.

Hired in 1946 as the Globe's first full-time photographer, Musser was remembered by colleagues for his skilled composition and technical precision. He could light up a nighttime crash like it

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happened at noon, and capture an entire scene with one photograph.

photographer Elwin Musser

"Elwin is one of the last of what I call the professional journalist photographers," said former Globe Gazette reporter Jim Collison. "I don't know if younger people are coming along who have what he had, which is the importance of being technically correct in his photography."

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Musser's ability to get the shot was evident in the image he is best known for — the Feb. 3, 1959, plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, J.P. "Big Bopper" Richardson and pilot Roger Peterson.

He captured everything about the now-infamous moment, from the wreckage to the bodies of the music legends in the snow, Collison said.

"You see the crashed plane and you see the body, or bodies, in the snow," said Collison, who also covered the historic crash for the Globe Gazette. "That had to be taken from the right angle to get all that."

The photo was selected in 1999 as a "Photo of the Century" by The Associated Press.

Although the Holly crash photo was his most famous, Musser compiled a diverse body of work in the 35 years he worked at the Globe Gazette. He retired in 1981.

President Harry Truman's stop in Manly in 1952; the visit of Pope John Paul II in Des Moines in 1979; a steam engine and diesel train collision in 1949; and the deadly Braniff Airlines crash in Swaledale in 1954 were just a few of the many historic moments he caught on film.

"You could send Elwin Musser on any assignment anywhere in North Iowa and, by God, you were going to get a picture back," said former Globe Gazette photographer Bob Nandell. "It was that simple."

He said Musser did all of it with one lens, a stark contrast to the photographers who lugged around a bag full of lenses to use in different circumstances.

"He just concentrated on one lens and did it," Nandell said. "That was his gift of composition."

Musser began his career with a 4x5 Speed Graphic camera, switching to 35mm before his retirement. In later years he began using digital cameras.

"All those decades Elwin was the tried and trusty photographer," Nandell said. "Photographers came, photographers went, but Elwin stayed."

A memorial service for Musser will be at 10:30 a.m. Thursday at the First United Methodist Church, 119 S. Georgia Ave. Visitation will be 4-6 p.m. Wednesday at Major Erickson Funeral Home, 111 N. Pennsylvania Ave.