

The World Accord

William Albert Allard, National Geographic's famous maverick,

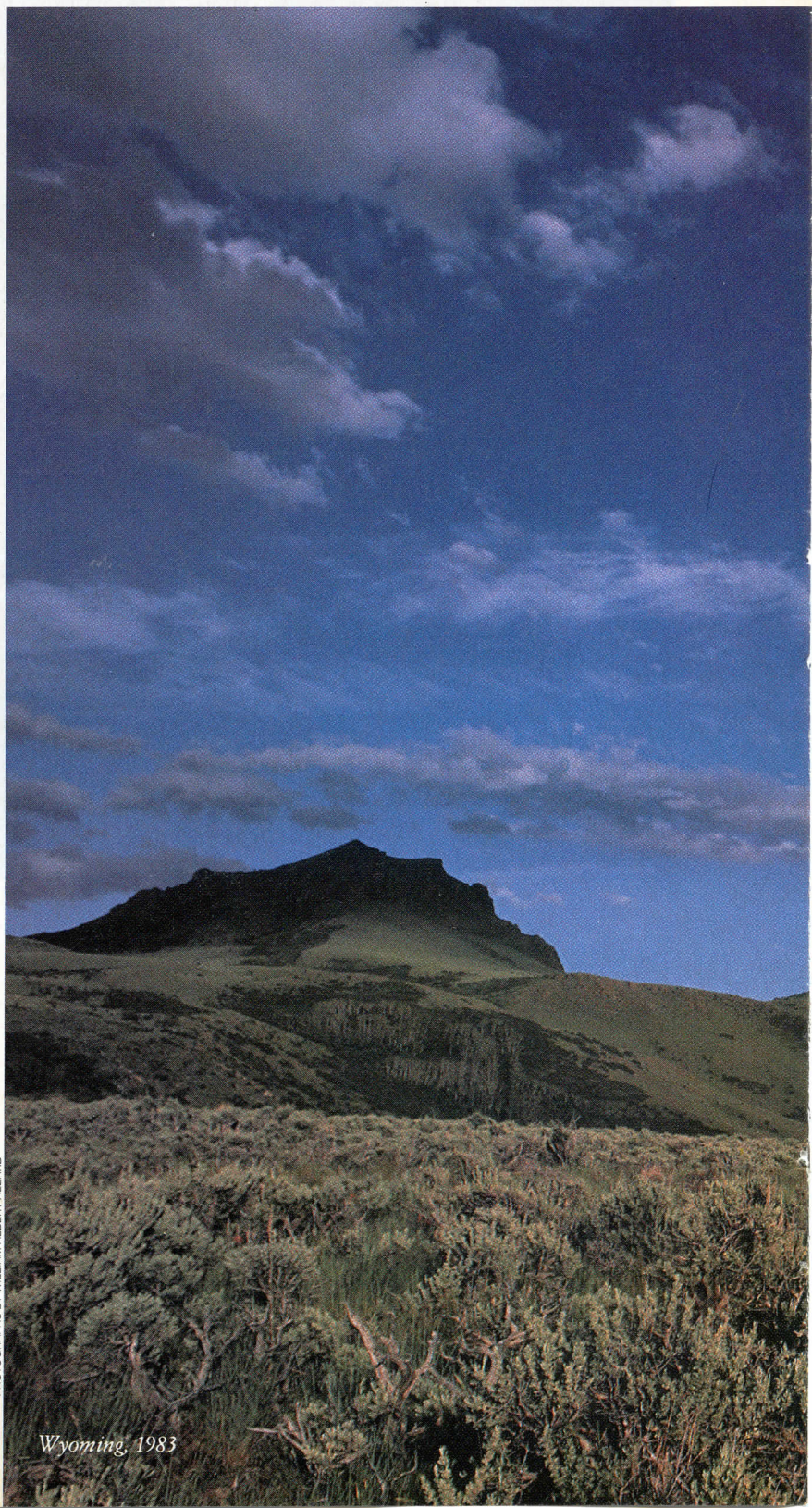
Pretty pictures make Bill Allard uncomfortable. No purple mountains' majesty for this *National Geographic* photographer; his palette runs more to the blood-red hues of Peruvian slaughterhouses and the earth tones of the Basque country, settings that have lent themselves to some of his strongest work. Allard is equally loath to make a "point" picture—one that merely illustrates something described in text. That kind of just-the-facts photography may be the currency of the classic picture story, but Allard won't have it.

Such standards have cost Allard dearly. When *American Photographer* last looked at his work, in 1984, he was in the third year of an excommunication from the *Geographic*—a hiatus brought on by his railings against the magazine's visual status quo. A change of editorial guard brought him back into the fold in 1985.

One reason Allard is back is that he knows a good thing when he sees it. "My work habits have been influenced very much by the fact that my main publisher is *National Geographic*," he admits, referring to the incomparably generous time the magazine allows a photographer to pursue a story. But Allard may feel more at home than ever partly because his work has played a big part in redefining the *National Geographic* story. From the beginning, some 25 years ago, his was a far more personal and impressionistic view of things than had ever been seen there.

On the following pages, we take another look at Allard's work, courtesy of a new book from the American Photographer Master Series (published by Little, Brown) called *William Albert Allard: The Photographic Essay*. As you'll see, what lies behind this tough-minded photographer's success is more than mere technique or location; rather, he has won out by constantly testing and stretching the documentary form.

—RUSSELL HART



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD

Wyoming, 1983

ing to Allard

is back in the fold but still taking pictures his way.







Peru, 1985

Peru, 1981



Nova Scotia, 1964

The High Road

An interview with William Albert Allard

AP: For a lot of photographers, the hardest thing about taking pictures of people isn't technical but human. How do you approach your subjects?

WAA: There aren't any formulas for how to deal with a human subject. I think the best tactic is to be honest and direct. That doesn't mean you should show all your cards right away and give up at the first sign of resistance. Some resistance in the subject is good, but you have to be willing to be rejected. Nor can you just swoop in, make your hit, and leave. If they feel you don't care about them, then it's going to show in your pictures.

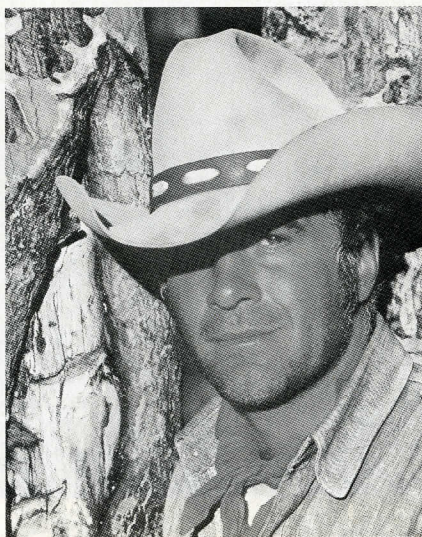
AP: Once you've won your subjects' trust, do you ever pose them?

WAA: I won't say I never direct the subject, because that wouldn't be true. There are times when it's one-on-one and you can direct. But I tend to react more than direct.

AP: Your entire body of professional work is in color. Don't you like black and white?

WAA: Black and white is a wonderful medium, but I have no patience for the line of thought that it's more real, more truthful than color. I've always felt it's easier to make a picture you can hang on the wall and live with in black and white. With color, you're dealing with a whole other set of problems. The red over here may explode and just blow the whole picture apart. In black and white you might have gotten away with that, because the red would end up a middle gray. There's a different psychology to color.

AP: You continue to shoot Kodachrome in these fast-film times. Isn't Kodachrome's low speed a problem when you're working in dim light, as you often do?



Allard, above, spent a good part of 1967 in the French Pyrenees, right.

WAA: With a solid camera, you can shoot handheld at shutter speeds much longer than people think. You just have to know your own threshold. And if it's a choice between doing that or adding auxiliary light, which is going to change the environment, then it's worth the risk.

AP: Do you ever use flash?

WAA: I've been experimenting with mixing flash and ambient light, just feathering it with the strobe at long shutter speeds so you get a sharp image on a softer one.

AP: Do you shoot with a rangefinder?

WAA: I use a combination of rangefinders and SLRs, all Leicas, depending on the situation. But in theory, we should all be able to go out with one camera and one lens and make wonderful pictures.

AP: In practice, then, what lenses do you use?

WAA: Most of my pictures are made with

one of two or three lenses—a 35mm, a 50mm, or a 90mm. But I might use that special wide-angle or long lens on occasion.

AP: What's the longest lens you own?

WAA: A 400mm. I haven't taken it on assignment in over two years. What does a telephoto lens do for you that you couldn't do yourself by moving in physically? Robert Capa said if your pictures aren't strong enough, you're not close enough. It's hard to establish rapport from 25 feet away. I'm not going to find out something about that person from 50 yards behind a tree.

AP: Your photographs of the West led to your being hired to shoot an ad campaign for Marlboro. But the requirements of the ad campaign cramped your style so severely you quit. Are you doing any commercial work these days?

WAA: Rarely. It's good money, but it's just not very interesting. A lot of photographers get the attitude that they can't afford to do editorial work because the pay is so much lower. I feel I can't afford not to do it.

AP: You take a lot of chances with your pictures that a journeyman photographer wouldn't. Don't you risk not bringing home good shots?

WAA: Failure is okay, if the failure is interesting.

AP: What's the most common cause of failure?

WAA: The work of most photographers would be improved immensely if they could do one thing: Get rid of the extraneous. You have to simplify. That doesn't mean your pictures can't be complex. But if you strive for simplicity—if you get rid of what you don't need—you're more likely to reach the viewer.

—RUSSELL HART

