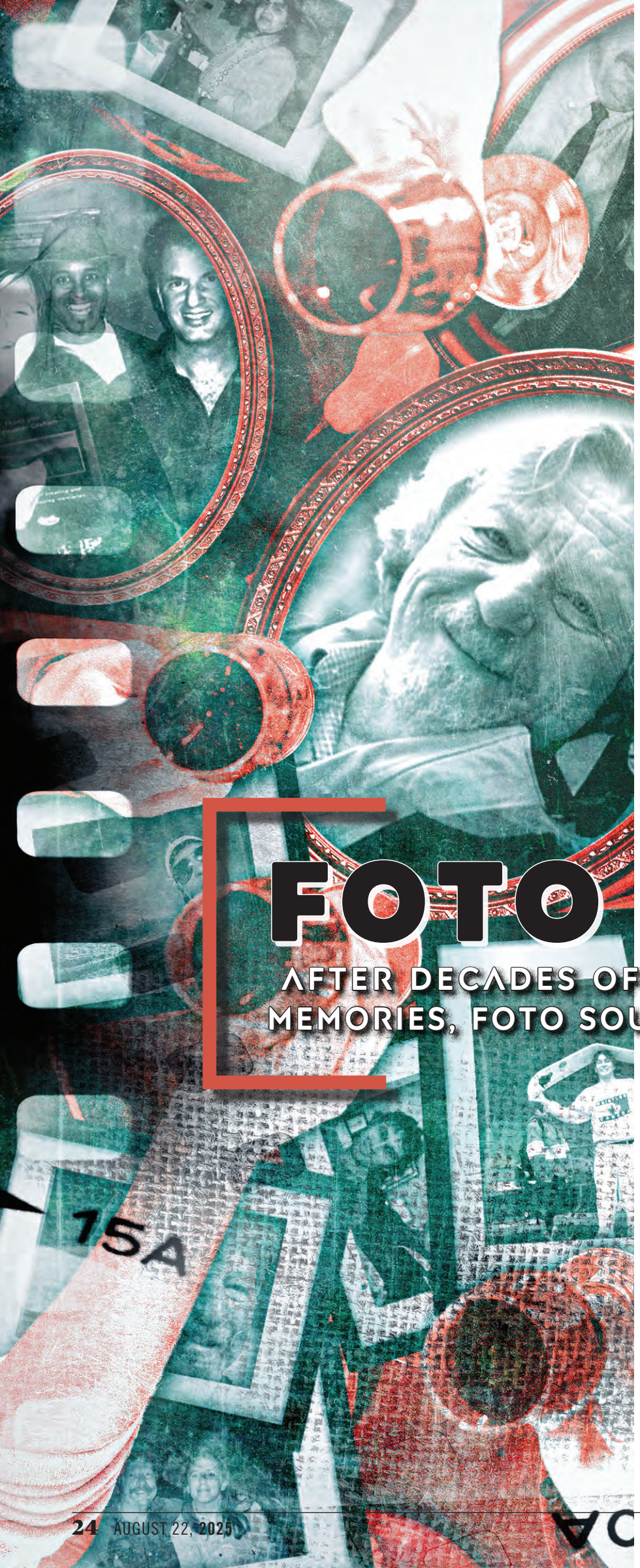

FOTO FINISH

AFTER DECADES OF FRAMING WHISTLER'S MEMORIES, FOTO SOURCE CLOSES ITS DOORS

BY LIZ MCDONALD

[J]ust like it's impossible to capture an entire event within one photograph, it is impossible to fully capture the almost 40-year history of Whistler's Foto Source and the impact it has had on the local photography scene.

First opened on Friday the 13th in December of 1985, the shop filled a need for printing film photos from visitors, families, and up-and-coming photographers. Originally called Whistler One-Hour Photo, it was born before digital photography, when Whistler held promise for hard-working entrepreneurs from near and far. Owner Rick Clare was one of those dreamers, hailing from Toronto. The musician arrived on the scene thanks to his former spouse, and here he raised his son, businesses and countless employees.

From the beginning, the shop offered more than quick prints. It offered reassurance. Travellers arrived windburned and smiling, clutching canisters from a day on the hill or a week of family milestones; locals dropped by with rolls from a powder morning, a birthday, a wedding rehearsal. In a resort built on moments—fast, bright, exhilarating—Foto Source became the place those moments were made tangible. The door opened, the processor hummed, and the village's daily story revealed itself, frame by frame.

"When film was more available, before digital, people were nervous of leaving Whistler with their film. [Back then], you'd hear all the horror stories about going through an airplane or airport and it would destroy them. It could, but it wasn't as bad as people thought. I wasn't going to argue with customers, not when we'd be going through 150 rolls of film a day," Clare says with a laugh.

The formerly red-headed Clare, now silver, took care and a humorous approach not only with the process of developing and printing photos, but with his staff. Despite many former employees moving on to different endeavours, anyone *Pique* contacted about the closure picked up the phone to hear the news that their friend was shuttering the shop and share the impact Foto Source had on their life and career.

The outpouring of support from former employees is a testament to how he went about business in town, growing his relationships as the soon-to-be world-renowned destination expanded. For four decades, as the village densified and technology changed, Foto Source remained a constant: the shop you could find with your eyes closed, the one that would still be open at the end of a long day, the doorway where a kid in a snowsuit or a pro with a pelican case felt equally welcome. In an industry that prizes speed, Clare invested in patience—teaching, troubleshooting, and letting people learn by doing.

'THE BEST BOSS I EVER HAD'

Lauren Tetreault moved to Whistler right out of high school in 1991, working three jobs to make ends meet and pursue her photography dream.

Today, she lives in Squamish and runs Howe Sound Photo and Imaging.

"Rick was the best boss I ever had," she says. "I would show up an hour late after working nights at Tommy Africa's, he'd be there––not even mad. He'd be like, 'it happens, people sleep in.'" Aside from offering her compassion, she recalls Clare loaned her money for a ski pass so she could quit one of her three jobs and rented her an apartment, making Clare her boss and landlord at the same time.

"I left for a year, went to Australia and came back. The manager said I had a bad attitude, and he made her hire me back," she laughs. "There were so many transients, he was a father figure to people. A guiding force."

When reminded about his giving nature, Clare comments it is part of his ethos.

"I'm cheap, but I've never been a selfish person," he says. "I've always held the belief of the 1960s ethic that my money has a lot more power in the street. So rather than saying, 'Oh, I can get two-per-cent interest on my bank account with my money,' I can help that young lady with a ski pass. It's the right thing to do."

Riley Smith echoes Tetreault's perspective. The Nova Scotian came to snow land for shredding, but he found his career in professional and commercial photography from working at the shop.

"I was a person with no experience. I knew I liked to make pictures and capture images," Smith says. "Working at restaurants, I had strong customer-service skills. Rick was a business guy—I would upsell people and he liked that."

Clare's patience with Smith allowed him to develop his craft, and the East Coaster recalls learning to believe in himself because Clare saw something in him. That belief allowed Smith to pursue a craft that became his full-time career, and a staff discount made the barrier to entry low enough Smith could continually improve.

"I started shooting rolls as fast as I could. You see progress and feedback and get to see work of great photographers who were getting rolls developed," he says. "I didn't know I could be a professional photographer, but then I had a photo printed in the newspaper, on a hotel website, and I just kept going."

Each year, Clare calls him on his birthday, was ahead of the curve on recycling, and to Smith is "the King of Whistler."

Shea MacNeil has known Clare for 11 years and worked with him for six of those. A photographer now living in Squamish, MacNeil says the most important business lesson he learned from Clare was relationship building.

"I learned about gear and photography, but when you were with him, you would meet countless people who have lived here for years. It was like stepping into a time machine," MacNeil says.

"We'd walk between Foto Source and Coast Mountain Photography and wouldn't make it far without someone knowing him. As a manager, he was happy to let you be yourself, and he'd have your back if need be. Learning about the shop closing made me realize it's been too long since I've reached out. He's the only boss I've ever had who I'd happily share dinner with."

Dinners are something Clare is well known for, with annual five-course meals prepared by Clare at his home, open to all his staff.

"His dinners spoke to the way he treats people. He thanked us by doing staff dinners and creating incredible memories," says Mike Mills, who worked with Clare at Coast Mountain Photography, another business venture he co-founded.

One former employee recalled seeing fellow staff smoke marijuana at these gatherings, a move that at the time was still somewhat taboo in workplace culture. But as Clare told *Pique*, he had no issue with his staff letting their hair down.

What employees remember most about those evenings is not the novelty, but the care: the way the table was set, the way the sauces were finished just before plates hit the table, the way conversation turned from lenses and light to life plans, rent woes and new babies. In a town where many jobs felt transactional, those dinners said: you're part of something.

A GLIMPSE INTO PERSONAL LIVES

When the shop was in its former location at Glacier Lodge in the Upper Village, only two people could fit in the storefront. "You'd have to cover the printer if there was weird stuff being developed, because people walking by could see what was on the photograph," Tetreault says.

Employees would see all kinds of images when qualifying negatives, from a couple who was very into body-modification shots, to intimate images and even the occasional affair. And since the team needed to do colour adjusting and watch out for dust to ensure the shots were to the customers' standard, that meant they would sometimes see photos that weren't intended for their eyes.

Clare recalls a young lady coming in to pick up her photos, but he told her he needed to redo a couple because of dust bars.

"She said, 'Did you see the indoor shots?'" Rick imitates in a tentative voice. "She was making a roll of film for her boyfriend for Valentine's, and she got a little carried away. We both went beet red."

The intimacy of film demanded trust. Prints came out warm from the dryer, and with them came secrets: a new tattoo revealed before a winter jacket, a proposal rehearsed on a frozen lake, a goodbye party that was also a beginning. Staff learned to move quickly and discreetly—hands steady, eyes averted when needed, small talk ready for awkward moments. In a digital world where images vanish into clouds, the tactile ritual of envelopes and contact sheets made memory feel weighty. It also meant the people behind the counter became witnesses, however briefly, to the private lives of a growing town.

There was a softer side to that window into people's lives. Clare offered free printing for a mother's first roll of baby photos—an act that was equal parts community service and smart business. "When my son was born, his mother would take a roll to the drugstore, and 33 of the 36 pictures would be him," he says. "We wanted to help people with that."

For years, he also printed school photos for free and gave teachers a 50-per-cent discount for any school-related prints. Customers, in turn, saw glimpses of Clare's own life: his young son Garnet curled up sleeping behind the counter when daycare fell through, or his dog ambling off-leash through the village streets.

Those snapshots of everyday life became a kind of village archive: the first day of kindergarten, the last day of a beloved trip, a team photo honouring a hard-won win. In a resort famous for postcard views, Foto Source specialized in the smaller, but no less important, frames—the squinting smiles and frozen mittens that told people where they truly belonged.

DUPLICATING THE SCENE?

Aside from providing a job for countless employees, Clare's shop was an incubator for up-and-coming photogs in the Sea to Sky. John Scarth was one, and while he would go on to become a photo editor for *Snowboard Canada* and today works in commercial production, the four years he spent in the Upper Village and Crystal Lodge shops were integral to immersing him in his craft.

"You were shooting more and seeing more work. Sitting at the printing machine, you'd see everyone else's take on Whistler," Scarth says. "It was a huge inspiration. If photography was



your thing, you were getting paid to study, basically."

And while photography has become exponentially more accessible with the rise of digital cameras, Scarth thinks the model he learned under isn't easily replicated today.

"Everyone is a photographer because everyone has a camera on their phone," he says. "Where before, you being a photographer, that was like, that was your skill set. You showed up with your special equipment, and that was the way it worked."

A question *Pique* asked former employees was whether there is still a viable opportunity for a photography shop in Whistler given the shift in consumer behaviour—from phone and Single-Lens Reflex, to websites that print photos from elsewhere and ship them to a customer's door.

While Smith hasn't lived in Whistler for many years, he thinks recreating the magic of Foto Source is unlikely because of the cost.

"While Whistler looks the same, its unsustainable because of the cost of things. A lot of people have been pushed out," he says. "In my city, there's one commercial printing place, but a lot of them have fallen by the wayside. And the one that I worked at, they don't even sell cameras anymore. And I think it's all that sort of online thing that spelled the end of it."

He guesses if a shop were to take its place, the model would need to shift to predominantly cater to accessories. Another former colleague, Mills, agrees something could be borne, even if it could never replicate what Clare created. They could also take on passport photos, an important resource in a town whose labour is built off immigration and temporary foreign workers.

Clare did shift his model over the years to accommodate changes. Photos were printed onsite, but in the last few years, film negatives were sent to Vancouver with Sea to Sky Courier for chemical processing after Clare's machine became faulty. Now that he's closed, he has set up an agreement with Whistler Hardware where people will be able to drop off their film and have it sent to Vancouver for processing. The hardware store will also offer passport and government ID photo services in his absence.

"I feel bad about leaving people without their hobby," Clare says. "We're the only place between Lil'wat and Squamish that does passport photos. I don't want to leave a hole there for everybody."

One factor which allowed him to keep the shop going for so long was being part of the Foto Source cooperative, which Clare is a chairman for. The alliance has 125 members of independently owned photo retailers, providing buying power without a top-down approach that franchises have.

Despite adaptation, there is one thing Clare decided wasn't worth staying open for any longer.

Here is where the practical realities of a mountain town meet the romance of a darkroom. Commercial rents rose; seasons stretched; online shopping grabbed the impulse buys that once paid for chemistry and maintenance. The shop's strength—time-intensive, person-to-person service—became a liability on spreadsheets. Clare kept saying yes anyway: to reprints, to rush jobs, to the kid who wanted to see his first black-and-white roll. But even the most generous businesses need a ledger that balances.

CLOSING THE ALBUM

"We weren't allowed to buy a space, and maybe that's not the right phrasing, but it wasn't an option at that time, whereas now because of the financial risk, they want people to buy these spaces," Clare says. "But if I owned that space, I would have paid for it by now. It would allow me a lot more flexibility to say, 'OK, well, we're gonna step back. We're gonna run a smaller thing.'"

When his lease ran out, he was permitted to go month-to-month at his current rate on a short-term agreement. But if he were to renew, his rent was set to increase by 20 to 30 per cent.

"I don't want to sign 20 per cent or 30 per cent more for five more years at my age and [level of] responsibility," he says. "Last couple years, I couldn't go to the Lil'wat Rodeo because I had to work. And it's selfish, but I live here for a reason."

But the decision wasn't easy. He pushed back the closure date multiple times this year, until finally shuttering the shop at the end of July.

He received an outpouring of farewells online when announcing the end of Whistler Foto Source's era, and as Scarth puts it, the loss hits home.

"It's losing your favourite brick-and-mortar shop. When these Whistler institutional icons go away, it's weird. It makes you feel old," he says. "Then you remember you're recalling an old, bygone era."

A WELL-DEVELOPED LIFE

Aside from running the photography store and Coast Mountain Photography, Clare has sat on countless boards, with 12 years as a chairman of Tourism Whistler; he's been involved in task forces with the Whistler Chamber of Commerce and the Resort Municipality of Whistler. He was part of the 2010 Winter Olympic Bid committee and VANOC.

In 1990, he was named Whistler's Business Person of the Year, and twice topped the list of *Pique's* Best of Whistler readers' poll in the Favourite Whistlerite category, in 2004 and 2006.

"I keep putting it off," Clare said in an interview before the store closed. "When I think about it, I almost start to cry. It'll be an interesting time to lock that door and walk away."

Clare wants to acknowledge 40 years of staff and how they all contributed to his businesses' success, and gave a special thank you to Nick Vail "and his loyalty over the last 18 years. His research of products that people will need and ability to source them has helped to keep us profitable."

Despite the emotions involved, Clare imagines he'll get to appreciate slow mornings again, and travel more internationally with his partner. While he won't wake up early for a powder day, he'll try to get in a few days on the mountain.

"It will be mixed emotion. There's been a lot of good memories," he says. "We won't have our



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

Christmas Eve ritual where we serve rum and egg nog"—which one year included giving it to a forgiving undercover policeman.

And yet, even as his days open up, a part of the village will keep operating on his old rhythm. A roll of film dropped at the hardware store will trace back to an agreement he set up so there wouldn't be a gap. A former staffer will prepare for a paid shoot and still hear his voice: check your batteries, clean your lens, be kind. Photo albums will hold physical memories created by staff with deep care for the artform, always available for friends to flip through and remember the seasons that were. That's what happens when a business does more than sell a service. It changes how a place remembers itself.

Clare's departure will not erase the frames he helped build. Alumni of his shop now run studios, lead teams, and teach the next wave. They carry forward the discipline of good exposure and the stubborn belief that a picture is not just captured, but cared for. They also carry forward the softer lessons: that a boss can be a mentor, that a staff dinner can turn colleagues into friends, that the right gesture at the right time—a loan for a ski pass, a spare room when housing is tight—can alter the course of a life.

For a town that measures winters and construction cycles, four decades is a long time. It is enough time for a red-headed newcomer to turn silver; enough time for a one-hour photo lab to become a guardian of memory; enough time for customers to become friends and for friends to become family. Whistler Foto Source's sign will come down, and another will go up, as signs do. But the habit of ducking inside to make a moment last will be hard to break. ■