

SIR DAVID

It would be impossible to single out the best photographer in the history of *Arizona Highways* — there have been so many talented men and women over the past 90 years. To name the patriarch, however, is easy. David Muench is in his seventh decade of shooting for this magazine. No one has more tenure and, arguably, no one has a more impressive portfolio.

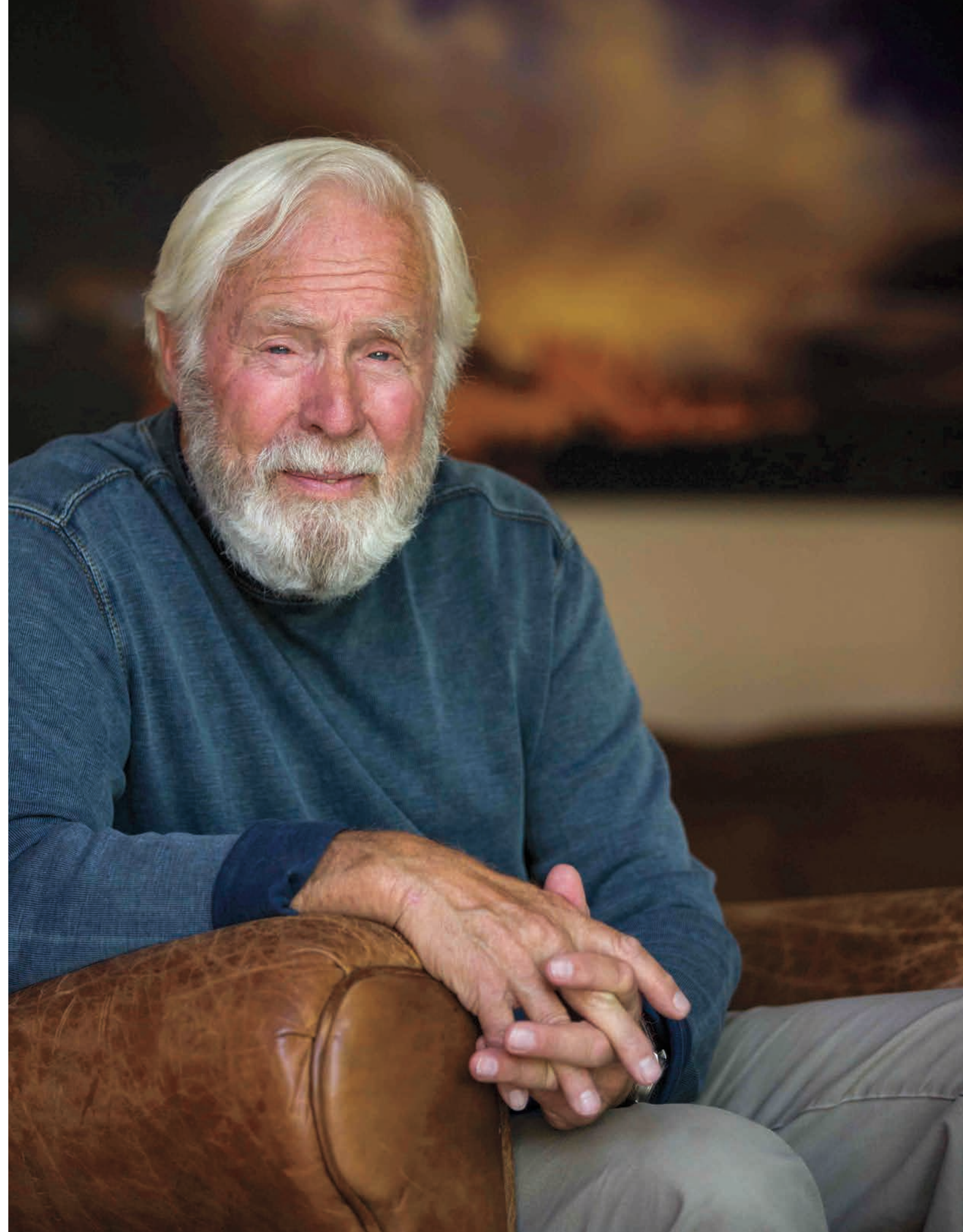
BY KATHY MONTGOMERY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL MARKOW

DAVID MUENCH bends over to touch a small, white flower growing among the grasses and clover of a fallow field near his New Mexico home. A wisp of white hair falls across his sun-weathered face.

“This is a perennial morning-glory,” he says. “A lot of people call it a weed, but I love the things.”

As he says this, Muench’s cornflower-blue eyes light up to reveal the nature boy he remains at heart, the boy whose mother was a botanist and whose father was a landscaper, the boy who grew into a photographer who sees beauty in the smallest things.

Arizona Highways published Muench’s work for the first time in the mid-1950s, when he was still a teenager. Sixty years later, he’s still contributing



to *Arizona Highways* magazines and books. And it's not an exaggeration to say that his images influenced not only the magazine, but also the entire direction of landscape photography.

IN HINDSIGHT, MUENCH seemed destined to become a photographer. His father, Josef Muench, a German immigrant and landscaper who taught himself photography, became one of the world's leading landscape photographers and contributed to *Arizona Highways* for half a century.

As a child, David traveled with his father and his mother, Joyce Rockwood Muench, on photography excursions to Monument Valley and Marble Canyon, places that would come to feel like home.

"We did Colorado River trips and hiked up to Rainbow Bridge," Muench recalls. "I was 12 when I hiked the 6 miles to Rainbow Bridge the first time — of course, before Lake Powell. I have a picture on my wall. I'm 12 years old, sitting on the river and just enjoying it. I was becoming familiar with the country. But I really wasn't thinking of photography."

Muench didn't realize it at the time, but he was picking up his father's trade "by osmosis." For a time, he worked as his father's assistant. But mostly, he learned by being around the process of photographing and marketing images. More than anything, Josef Muench taught his son discipline and seriousness, and instilled in him a love of landscapes.

"He showed me much of the country and got me enthused," Muench says. "It wasn't too long before I had to see some of these places myself."

When Muench and his father visited the offices of *Arizona Highways* in the 1950s, Editor Raymond Carlson told the younger Muench that as soon as he felt he'd made a good picture, he'd publish it.

"He put one on the cover [January 1955] from that very visit," Muench recalls.

At the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles, Muench's formal training focused on advertising and commercial work, but he always felt drawn to wilderness landscapes. He'd get an image of a place in his head and feel compelled to go there.

"There were only four or five photographers like my dad," Muench recalls. "Ray Atkinson, Ray Manley, a group of four or five who were really doing Western landscapes. And I was a young maverick and just bowled my way through."

Muench can't pinpoint the transition, but eventually, "it was wilderness all the way."

"Anything in the wilderness is very exciting to me," Muench says. "When you look at my photographs, I want you to see the wildness — not just glamorous contrast, light and shade, but to actually feel and sense a place. That's what's important to me."

And while his father introduced him to wild places, Muench saw them through his own lens.

"When I was starting, it was 'Take a pretty picture,'" he recalls. "Essentially, it was a nice 'postcard,' is what they'd call it: middle of the day, lots of fluffy clouds, that kind of thing. My main direction has been dramatic lighting, mood storms, mystery — real primal and dramatic."

Arizona Highways Photo Editor Jeff Kida believes Muench developed his unique vision by the early 1960s.

"By then, he was shooting earlier and later in the day, when lighting conditions were more dramatic," Kida says. "By waiting to make photos at the leading and trailing edges of storm fronts, his photos would carry a feeling of change. These things are an afterthought today, but at the time, they were game changers."

That instant of change — between day and night, past and future — Muench calls "timeless moments." But he truly revolutionized landscape photography with what he calls "natural connections."

"It's the subject right at your feet," Muench explains. "You take this detail, that cactus bloom in a great spring just full of blooms. You go up to it, approach it in a natural way, and all of a sudden I wanted to place that with the landscape in the back."

"It evolved a little at a time; I didn't even know what it was. I wanted to get involved with a subject. I'd be at a place, and things would get in the way. I realized I wanted to look *through* these things. I wanted them to be part of the way I was seeing. And then you have the kiss of light, the idea of light defining the image. That's a big part of it."

"The last thing with natural connections is it's a connection for me. I'm connecting with myself and what intrigues me. Making a sense of place and seeing what I'm all about when I respond to these situations or create them."

Perhaps not surprisingly, both of David's children, Marc Muench and Zandria Beraldo, became photographers. And they learned from David in much the same way David learned from his father.

"We'd go on trips when I was really young," Marc recalls. "He'd pull us out of school for a week or 10 days. Summers were the most memorable because they'd be longer trips. Every summer we'd go for a month or six weeks and he would work on different projects. The first one I recall was the Lewis and Clark project, which was a couple of years long."

Zandria fondly recalls getting paid for spotting arches and running through pristine sand dunes after her father had photographed them.

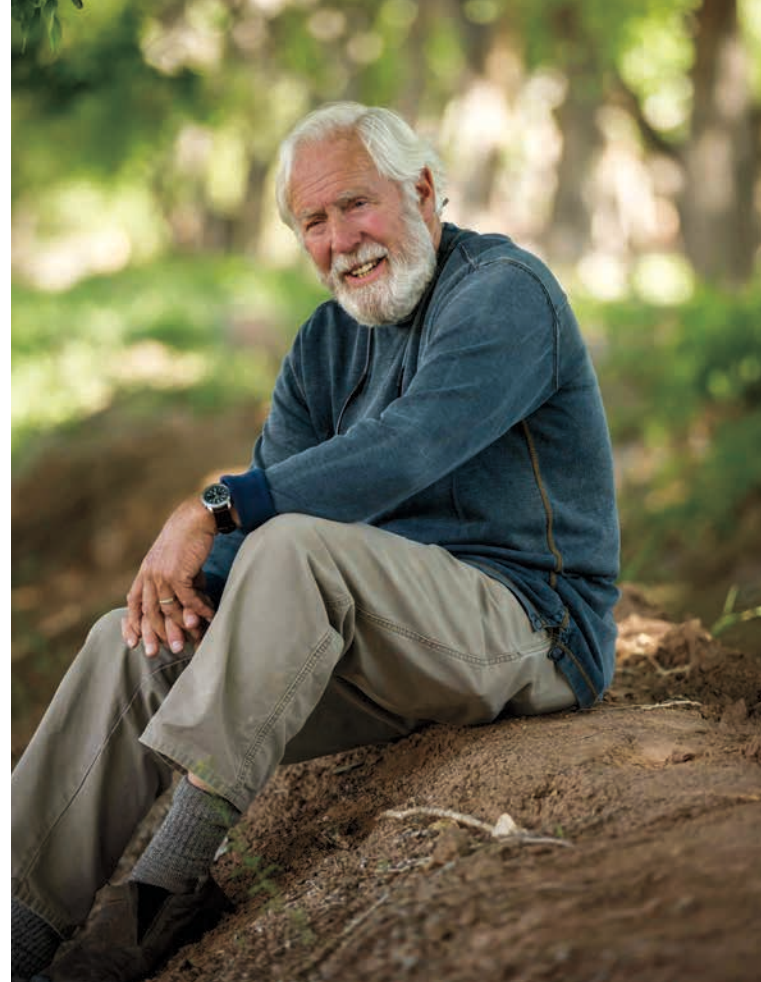
"We'd be in the truck waiting for him, and he would come back from photographing," she remembers. "And he would have the changing bag, this black bag that he'd put his hands in. And we'd have a pillowcase full of maps, and we'd sit there and put our hands in there and jiggle the maps around like we're changing film."

Both credit their father with helping them learn to see as photographers.

"Going hiking, you're sitting on the side of the trail waiting for maybe an hour or two, so you get to explore and see what he's seeing," Zandria explains. "And then, as we grew older, we're like: 'Look over here. This is neat.' We developed our own opinions."

Marc followed David onto the pages of *Arizona Highways* in the same way his father did: by accompanying him to the magazine.

"I went along into the offices and got to meet the editor and publisher," Marc recalls. "Bob Early [the editor] was very encouraging. I proposed a piece on skiing at the ski basin up



David Muench, now 79, lives in New Mexico but plans to continue visiting the Arizona places he loves.

above Flagstaff, and they agreed. [Arizona Snowbowl] didn't get any snow until the very last month of the season, and then they had 8 feet. So I got lucky and went out there and made the cover."

Both Marc and Zandria worked for Muench Photography, the business David created in the 1970s, contributing images and servicing clients. An assignment from a calendar publisher led Zandria to develop her own specialty: photographing dogs and cats. Like his father, Marc focuses on landscapes. But while David's images feature unpeopled wilderness, Marc's typically dramatize adventure sports.

Marc eventually took over the business and digitized the collection, a process that took 10 years. He also launched Muench Workshops. In a bit of a reversal, he now hires his dad to teach.

"When he's out with us on a group, whether I'm there or not, he's probably the first one off the bus and the last one back on it," Marc says. "He just keeps going and doesn't stop. He absolutely loves it. He still has his vision. He still has his lust for the landscape. That's something that hasn't diminished."

Marc also printed the 200 images David selected to be archived at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

"It took him a long time to get to those images," Marc recalls. "It took him a couple of years. And even today, he'll come up with a different collection. He just has so many places he's been, and has a personal relationship with, that it's diffi-

cult for him to leave some out, I think."

Meanwhile, Zandria is in the process of digitizing David's personal collection for www.davidmuenchphotography.com.

"After 50 years, I'm still handling his 4x5 transparencies," she says. "I've gone out and done my own thing, but I've always come back to these pictures. I'm kind of devoting my life to them."

NOW 79, MUENCH lives with his wife, writer Ruth Rudner, in Corrales, New Mexico. They share a Santa Fe-style home surrounded by flower gardens that erupt in spring with hollyhocks, irises and lavender, as well as flowering apple and red-bud trees. They also maintain a home near Bozeman, Montana, adjacent to their own little wilderness preserve.

"We're taking care of 75 acres that are protected in perpetuity so they will not be developed," Muench says. "We have a stream, South Willow Creek. The two Willow Creeks make up the main one that goes into the Jefferson River. I'm enthralled by that because of the Lewis and Clark connection."

Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks monitors the land and restored the stream to its natural state a couple of years ago.

"It was for a mill, prior, and just ran straight," Muench says. "Now the stream twists and winds nicely. We're preserving it; that's protecting it. So we're doing a little part."

Professionally, Muench hasn't slowed down much. In recent years, he moved from 4x5 and 35 mm formats to digital photography.

"Mainly for the spontaneity of it," Muench says, "to catch the spontaneous in things. And it's working. I get moments that are here now and gone in a few minutes. And that is so special. I'd like to see what I can do with digital seeing, because it's a new layer. It challenges me to push the way I've seen even further."

And while his work has taken Muench all over the world, he has never stopped visiting the Arizona places he loves, such as the Chiricahua Mountains, the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley.

"Even the Kofas, there, with the palms," he says. "Fascinating place. Love going there. It's almost like returning home. I'd like to return to Escudilla Mountain. There are some mysteries there I'm a little puzzled about. There are different things [and] places I want to return to, especially because I haven't been there for a little while and I always look at places with a fresh eye."

In May, Muench published his 60th book, *Monument Valley: Navajo Nation Natural Wonder*. *Arizona Highways* published three of Muench's book-length collections of Arizona images: *Eternal Desert*, *David Muench's Arizona* and *Vast & Intimate*.

"There's such power in the landscape in Arizona," Muench says. "And *Arizona Highways* has held on for a long time. It's an honor to have some of my best work in the magazine, especially on subjects that haven't been done that much, and that's why I come back to the magazine. I want it to hold up through time." **AH**

To learn more about David Muench, visit www.davidmuenchphotography.com.