A towboat pushing barge-loads of fuel approaches loading piers at the former Pittsburgh Bulk Plant on Herrs Island, 1948. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Bridge is in the foreground, with the 31st Bridge beyond.
In April 1948, photographer Todd Webb came to Pittsburgh on assignment to take pictures of the "smoky city" shortly before work began on Pittsburgh's post-war urban renewal, Renaissance I. An accomplished photographer, Webb led an artistic double life. His documentary photography supported what he called his real work, art photography. With the eye of an artist, he captured the charm and character of the city.

Webb spent April in Pittsburgh taking pictures for a Standard Oil of New Jersey project, part of the company's ambitious public relations campaign to document the role of oil in industrial society. He was one of a team of professional photographers who travelled all over the United States and other countries taking thousands of pictures for 'Jersey Standard.'


The story of Webb's involvement in the project is part of an interesting chapter in Standard Oil's corporate history. The company funded the massive photographic shoot as part of a campaign to improve its image, which, in 1942, was that of a corporation with a poor sense of civic responsibility. This reputation hit an all-time low when the U.S. Justice Department accused Standard Oil of precipitating the synthetic rubber shortage during World War II. In 1943, after a series of widely publicized hearings in which the government was unable to prove its case against Standard Oil, the company hired a Madison Avenue firm to help it retreat from its long-standing reputation as the quintessential corporate behemoth.

The public relations firm theorized that worldwide distribution of hundreds of outstanding photographs credited to Standard Oil of New Jersey (made available free for public and commercial use) would create a positive association between superb images of America and the integrity of the company name. This was an early example of image advertising used to influence public opinion.

To direct the project, the company hired Roy Stryker, the best visual documentary consultant in the country. He was best known for his work with the Celebrated U.S. Farm Security Administration photographic project of the 1930s. That project, which documented the agency's work, was administered by Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Rexford Tugwell, Stryker's former teacher and mentor. Stryker's Standard Oil collection is more industrial, more optimistic and probably less familiar than those haunting images of hunger and hardship of American farm families in the Depression Era. But under Stryker's guidance, Webb and the other photographers produced pictures of immense diversity, despite their mandate to simply document an industry. (Stryker would also direct, in later years, an important photojournalism project exclusively about the Pittsburgh Renaissance.)

Stryker directed photographic projects, but he was not a photographer. He began his career as an economics teacher at Columbia University, where he became an early advocate of visual images as educational tools. Standard Oil tempted him with a generous budget so he could hire the best photographers in the country. He was able to give them unlimited supplies of film at a time when film was rather scarce, and carte blanche to document industrial America as they saw it. Besides Webb, some of the other photographers involved were Charlotte Brooks, Harold Corsini, John Collier, Lisette Model, Gordon Parks, and John Vashon.

Between 1943 and 1950, the photographers produced a remarkable 70,000 pictures, the largest such project ever funded by a private corporation. However, after seven years, company executives grew tired of the expensive undertaking, particularly since there was no way to measure the benefits to the company's name. When the project shut down, all of the photographs were deposited at the University of Louisville's University Archives.

Todd Webb was strongly influenced by his teachers Arthur Siegel and Ansel Adams. He was close friends with Stryker, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and painter Georgia O'Keefe. He knew many of the post-war photographic luminaries, including Edward Steichen and Cartier-Bresson.

Born in 1905 in Detroit, Webb spent his life working and living in New York, Paris, London, and Santa Fe. Exhibitions of his work were mounted in America and Europe, and several books of his photographs were published. To support his career in art photography, he established himself as a commercial photographer, working on assignment for Fortune, Life, and other popular magazines.

During his 1948 Pittsburgh assignment, Webb took 115 pictures. Typically, project photographers sent the unprocessed film to the home office to be developed, and they rarely saw the prints. When Webb and his wife, Lucille, both 88 years old, came to Pittsburgh from their retirement home in Maine for the opening of the exhibit at the Historical Society, they saw his Pittsburgh pictures for the first time. Most of Webb's Pittsburgh photos were never published and none were shown in Pittsburgh.

With its run completed at the Historical Society, the Todd Webb exhibit will travel to other galleries in the area. Watch for announcements in the Society's newsletter, Making History.

For Further Reading
- Todd Webb, Georgia O'Keeffe: The Artist's Landscape/Photographs by Todd Webb (Pasadena, Ca., 1987).