

# Opinion: What's Good and Bad About LVCC

I have a love/hate relationship with the Livermore Valley Camera Club. I find it an enjoyable—and frustrating—organization to belong to, and I'm probably not alone in feeling that way. But the only way to know is to take the risk of actually putting in writing how I feel about the club—both the good and the bad—and see if other people recognize some of their own feelings here, even if they haven't spoken them out loud.

I'm writing this not because I'm hoping to prod the club into making big changes that address the Bad; that's not realistic. If enough people share my opinion, though, we might be able to make incremental changes.

One more comment: Don't read this and react only to the Bad section; the first section lists all the good things about the club. I'm trying to be even-handed by praising the club for the things it does right while calling attention to the things I think it does wrong.

## Good Things About the Club

- Joining the club gives you a chance to meet and talk with other people who are as passionate about photography as you are, or more. Friends and family members are usually mildly interested, at best.
- If you're a photo newbie, the first six months or so of hearing the judge's critiques of your photos and other members' photos educates you about what makes a good photo, and applying those lessons helps you improve more rapidly than you would otherwise. Intermediate and advanced photographers can also get useful advice from critiques.
- Knowing you have a chance to share your work with other photographers every two weeks motivates you to get out and shoot. Different categories give you a reason to shoot different types of photos rather than the same thing all the time.
- Seeing other members' work gives you new ideas about what and where to shoot. You get ideas for capturing better images, processing them more skillfully, and presenting them more artfully.
- Attending meetings where you spend time looking critically at high-quality photos, regardless of the critique or where they place, can be inspiring and enjoyable.
- People in the club can become your friends outside the club.
- You can learn from other club members by talking with them on field trips, or during the short breaks in meetings, or on outings with them.
- Competing and losing can motivate you to learn more and try harder to improve.
- Competing and winning can give you a sense of accomplishment and motivate you to learn more and get even better.

## Bad Things About the Club

- The principal activity of the club is judging photos and picking winners and losers according to photo-judging dogma. If you don't want to sit silently and watch for two hours every other week while an individual comments on other people's photos, you might think twice about becoming a member.
- After attending meetings for about six months, you've pretty much heard all the rules judges use to evaluate submissions, and heard them multiple times. For advanced photographers, who are as knowledgeable as the judge, a negative critique is just a difference of opinion between experts and usually not a learning experience.
- The judge makes or breaks each meeting. If he or she is articulate, perceptive, knowledgeable and tactful, the meeting can be enjoyable. If not, it's not. Even with a good judge, you still have to sit and listen passively for two hours. You don't leave the meetings energized by having participated in a lively discussion; you leave feeling like a student who's sat through a stultifying two-hour lecture, often delivered by a not-very-engaging teacher.
- The competition and judging rules promote a homogeneous style defined by a narrow range of possibilities that one needs to adopt to do well in competition. "Shooting for camera club" can limit a member's motivation for developing an original, rule-breaking style and for taking photos that will never be submitted to competition.
- Making competition the core activity of the club creates an unacknowledged undercurrent of rivalry and even resentment among members. This is made worse by relying on the opinion of a single judge, which makes an already-subjective process even more capricious and arbitrary.
- Competition categories (Travel, Journalism, Pictorial, etc.) throw together images that are entirely different in subject matter, making the judging even more arbitrary than it would be in categories defined by subject matter (People, Action/Sports, Architecture, etc.). It's often unclear even to long-time members which category is the right choice for an image.
- When you submit a photo you're proud of and the judge doesn't like it, it's hard for you not to think less of it yourself. When that happens enough, it takes some of the fun out of the club and photography.
- Club competitions are about single images rather than collections of photos exploring a theme or subject in depth. Because only single images are judged, members get conditioned to shoot (or at least show) images that try to represent an entire event or place or person, rather than a group of images that together tell a story or give the photographer a better chance to express a unique point of view on the subject. (The Sequence category is an exception, but even then, it's almost always about a sequence of images separated only by time rather than by subject matter or style.) We don't share portfolios, books, slideshows or photo essays, which give a photographer a chance to shoot images that make up part of a larger story but that, taken alone, wouldn't stand a chance in club competition.