

# Ojai photographer keeps eye on America

TEXT BY NANCY GROSS  
PHOTOS BY JOE SOHM

Before yielding to malaise about U.S. politics, it might not be a bad idea to listen to Ojai's celebrated historian and photographer Joe Sohm talk about democracy. He is very well read about the founding philosophies of our country and many of the ways these have played out; Sohm keeps a keen eye on the big picture.

Listing Sohm's photo credits would require a ridiculous amount of paper and ink. His photographs have appeared more than 50,000 times in publications including Time Magazine, The New York Times, National Geographic, Smithsonian magazine, and The Washington Post, and have been featured by the major news networks CNN, NBC, MSNBC and The History Channel. At least 10 embassies around the world have Sohm's work on display, and both Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" and Bill Clinton's memoirs "My Life" rely on some of Sohm's shots.

Importantly, Sohm's overall project is much bigger than party politics; it is an exploration and documentation of the experiment of a radical new form of government. Hearing him speak, and viewing his work, is likely to lead to some sincere reflection about whether many Americans have come to take an awful lot for granted.

"Before America, the central organizing principle of Western civilization had been monarchy and the feudal system," Sohm writes in the prologue to his resplendent and award-winning coffee table book, "Visions of America." "After America, people stopped believing in kings and queens and started believing in themselves. With the birth of the Common Man, civilization reordered its affairs, replacing its top-down hierarchy with a bottom-up citizen model."

Earlier this year Sohm's book took the gold medal for best coffee table book in the 13th annual Independent Publishing Awards, with a ceremony in New York City. More than 4,000 books were judged in the competition.

Democracy as a form of government, which Sohm is quick to acknowledge has had its pitfalls, is with us, "in our DNA," he says, and right before our eyes, but are we seeing or appreciat-



**Joe Sohm's photos capture a particular image of this country, one in which guaranteed freedoms lead to unlimited creativity and self-expression, as witnessed above with sunglasses, and below, with Ojai's famed and extinct dinosaur sculpture.**

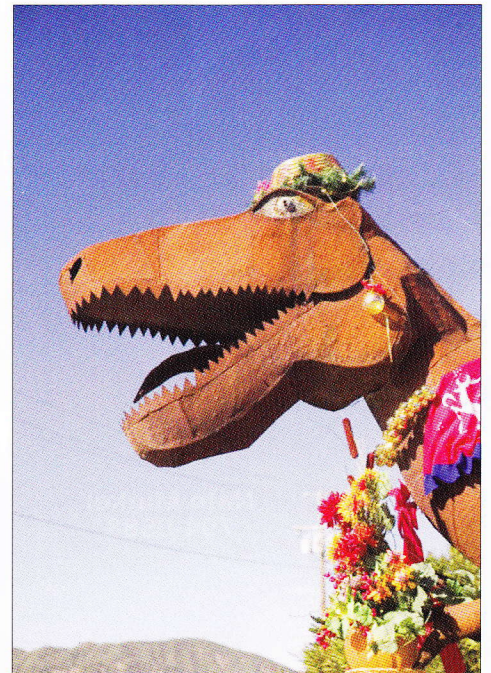
ing it?

In the Ojai Valley in 2009 there were many packed auditoriums, rooms overflowing with civic exchange and debate. These included two town hall meetings on gang violence, where motorcycle vests and jackets, and red shirts memorializing stabbing victim Seth Scarminach, speckled a crowd full of parents, educators, psychologists and others.

The valley also held a number of public hearings on scenic resource protection, and in one eloquent evening in September a Watergate lawyer, an Austrian-born high-end cult wine maker, a Green Coalition representative, a building contractor and a rancher were among the locals who spoke from the same podium. And in October, a large chunk of time at the City Council meeting was allotted to a non-agenda item: hearing out residents who were discouraged by the euthanizing of a black bear that treed itself downtown.

This list supports Sohm's form of thinking man's optimism, in light of how easy it is to forget why we are free to assemble, to speak, to publish, in short: to work for change and consensus.

Well, the bear's demise led to another com-



munity meeting which birthed a group attempting to find alternatives for dealing with wild animals in town. Martin Luther King Day and Living Peace Day allowed for civil free speech gatherings in Libbey Park. And one would have

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**Sohm puts his focus on both America's natural beauty, as shown here in this aerial shot of the Channel Islands just off Ventura County's coast, and its architectural treasures, such as the East Bay Bridge, enveloped in fog.**



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to check the records, but there may have been a meeting about a partridge in a pear tree.

These were all moments of democracy in action, and they are certainly enough in terms of examples to show that Ojai participates as a molecule in the larger democratic body of the United States of America. Renowned photographer Sohm is not jaded, and he takes both telephoto, and wide-angle views on a country he says has embarked on a relatively successful undertaking

Sohm, who has been photographing democracy for 30 years, is fond of quoting J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who published essays in 1793 under the title, "Letters from an American Farmer," "What then is the American, this new man?"

"How do I photograph democracy?" Sohm, asks in the "Visions of America" prologue, adding, "How do you photograph an idea?"

He writes, "Image by image, location by location, season by season, I have systematical-

ly assembled enough puzzle pieces to form an American mosaic." In an interview he remarks further on this conceptualization of the "National Work" he has created: "If a picture is worth 1,000 words, 1,300 pictures is an entire photo-thesis of what makes America tick."

Chapter headings in the book include, "Native America — Peoples, Landscapes and Animals," Avenue of the Americas — Building Castles in the Sky," "Song of the Open Roads — Roads, Rivers and Railroads," "Amer-Icons — The Pursuit of Happiness," "Town and Country," and "We the People — Becoming Jefferson's Thirteenth Generation."

Sohm was raised in the Midwest, "Jefferson County, Missouri, basically on the dividing line of East and West on the Mississippi. Our high school was determined to be the quintessential United States' high school, and CBS came out and did a special about us."

He studied history at the University of Missouri and taught history for a short period of time before he took one photography class,

prompting him to hit the road with camera in hand. He has become one of the foremost, if not the foremost, photographer of American political icons, and the American way of life.

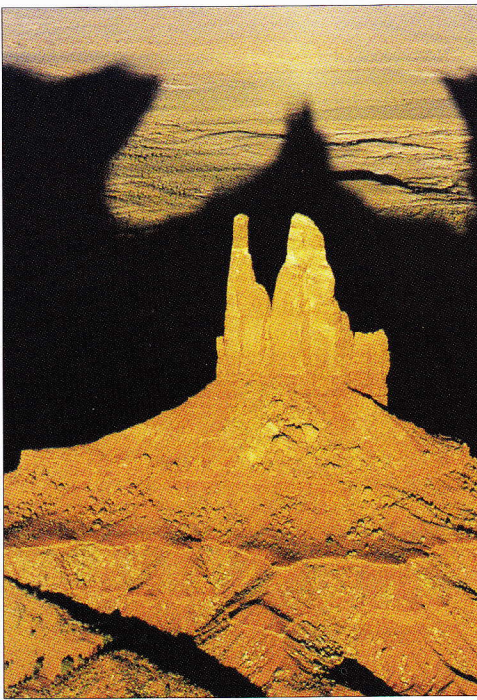
"If you're interested in what makes America unique, who else would you want to take on the project of trying to figure that out but someone who is kind of the common man?" he asks.

Sohm continues to read about and study history, fascinated by the founding fathers, and attentive to the present time. He's been engrossed in "The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World" by Jay Winik, and an area of deep-felt interest to him is the relationship between Thomas Jefferson, the first U.S. secretary of state, and Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. secretary of the treasury, and their differing views of what was happening and what should happen in this new political system.

"We stand historically in a new period where

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**Left: Among the photos in “Visions of America” are ones of Monument Valley in Arizona, above, and a Revolutionary War re-enactment.**

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the people of the world are trying to reinvent the way things are done. If we understand what happened before, we probably have a better chance of succeeding with something,” Sohm says. “America invented the modern world. The birth of the U.S. changed the whole era. In the second millennium the significant events were Gutenberg’s printing press, and Columbus” making a whole new world available to European exploration and settlement. “Into the third millennium it was democracy, or republican democracy, that changed everything.”

He explains his thinking about the founding fathers and America in general like this: “We reached within ourselves and looked at what was the shortcoming of the human experiment. We make a gazillion mistakes, but we’ve created a system that self-corrects.”

Sohm has also been watching as things unfold in his lifetime, and his eyes are fixated on the way that China has become a player on the world scene again. “The oldest country in the world is interacting with the newest country, and between the two they — we — are going to figure out how to create the world. Cultural bridges are being built.”

Sohm lives up on Saddle Mountain ridge and shot “my favorite nature shot just right out on Highway 33. It’s the only time in my life that I’ve photographed a white rainbow.” He has taken pictures of Ojai’s Fourth of July parade, and of our voting booths as they line up in our local auditoriums. He muses about Ojai that “democracy is alive and well here too, and it is frequently kind of unpleasant. But if you see

what the alternatives are ...”

He continues, “Ojai is kind of like Jefferson’s enlightened countryside, farm-based, rural, drop-dead scenically beautiful.” His respect for these great 18th century thinkers comes through as he peppers a conversation with observations, “The founders read every book on how different societies screwed up.”

“John Adams and Jefferson wrote letters and they suggested to one another that the best thing their generation may have left behind for future generations is the peaceful transition from one ruler to another. The ways power was transferred in the past, well, usually it was by violence, war. Louis XVI was beheaded. But George Washington walked away from the presidency saying he would not serve any more terms. When Adams left office, Jefferson took over. It was the first time in history that one ruling party peaceably shifted to another ruling party.”

Sohm also does speaking engagements where he distills his journey through the 50 states. He has been creating music videos, fairly short and each made up of jewel-bright photos in a series that illustrate some facet of democracy in America, narrated by Clint Eastwood. Eastwood also performs the voice for Sohm’s “Photo-Symphony Concert for America,” which premiered in Philadelphia shortly after Barak Obama was inaugurated as our 44th president, under the baton of two-time Grammy Award-winning Peter Nero and The Philly Pops.

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— Joe Sohm

Of his photography career, Sohm says, “What really put me over a threshold was when I focused on shooting panoramic landscapes 12 years ago. I needed expensive cameras and had to use a tripod, which made me commit to these jobs of getting whatever photo I was trying for. The more I did it, the more I threw myself into it, and the better I got. This is how it is with most anything, and this is very much an American belief, that people can improve themselves.”

Sohm sends an e-mail: “Confirmed: I’ll be speaking Dec. 12 and 13 at the Newseum Museum in Washington, D.C., the new \$500 million museum on journalism on Pennsylvania Avenue. I’ll be interviewed for TV and live audience.” Other national and world events are in the works for Sohm, and here in Ojai he just became second in a series the Ojai Valley Museum created to honor our local art luminaries, beginning with Mad magazine cartoonist Sergio Aragónés.

Like Ojai, Sohm is both ordinary, and then at the same time marvelous, and not so ordinary. Nevertheless, his greatness is grounded in small-town mystique and happy humility. Visit [visionsofamerica.com](http://visionsofamerica.com).