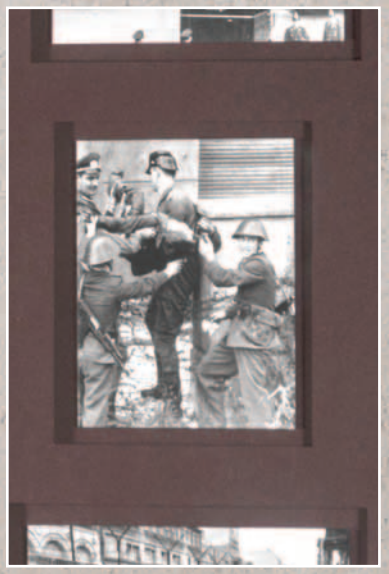
FRAMING A SMALL PIECE OF HISTORY

By John Ranes II, CPF, GCF

Historic photographs, LED lights, and a rotation stand add drama to a Berlin Wall shadowbox that won First Place in the 2016 PPFA International Framing Competition Open Category



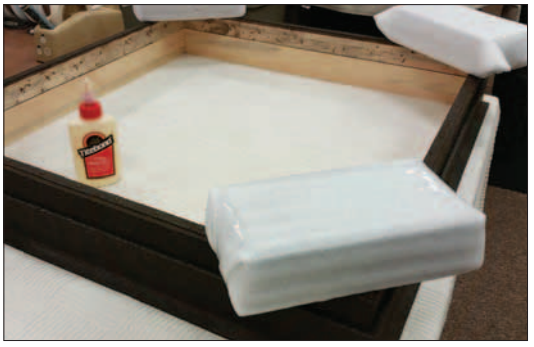
Deciding which historical photographic images to use was challenging but also enjoyable. They included well known images and events as well as lesser known ones that portrayed the human story of everyday life. Starting with a pool of about 16, I narrowed the images down to 8 for the project.

When a business associate from Hamburg, Germany, asked if I would like a piece of the Berlin Wall in 1990 soon after the wall came down, I naturally accepted this kind offer. He had been doing business in former East Germany at the time and brought back several large pieces of border wall that showed some of the paint and graffiti. I had lived in Germany twice in my lifetime and had visited West Berlin once in 1972 while the wall was still standing, so I was quite excited when I was presented with this small piece of history. I had every intention to frame this in our shop for my own personal enjoyment and perhaps hang it in my home office.

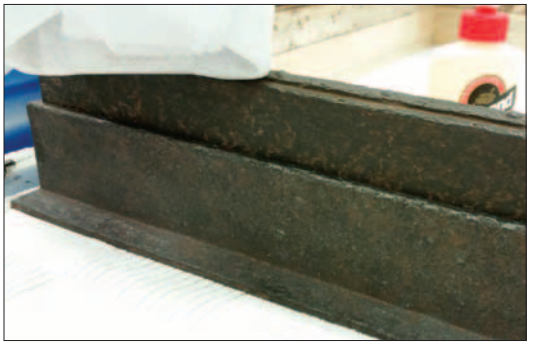
However, like a cobbler's children without shoes, this small piece of concrete sat in a box of good intentions for a number of years. Sometime in 2014, I had a vision of a potential framing design that would incorporate the small piece of rock along with an array of historical images in a shadowbox presen-

tation. Finally, in 2015, I took on the task of actually getting around to working on this framing project. My waiting (or procrastinating) had paid dividends for me in that the frame selection of a Larson-Juhl moulding, Aged Steel in the Anvil Collection, was a relatively new creation and would fit the mood for this design perfectly! Had I framed this earlier, I would not have had this moulding as an option. Also, within my frame design, I wanted to incorporate lighting and a small motor that would turn the rock to allow all sides to be visible. This added an element of drama to the presentation.

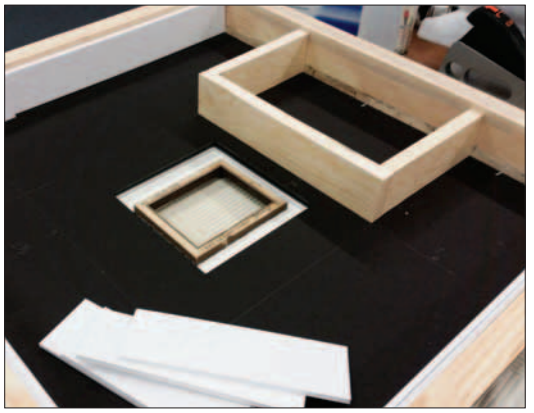
Before the frame was selected, I had to dig through the many historical images of the Berlin Wall to decide which images to include. I wanted a variety of photos that captured the human element–those of interaction with the wall from its inception on August 13, 1961, until its fall on November 9, 1989. Eight photographic images were selected to surround my piece of the wall–most were taken during the early years when escapes were more numerous. Some are well known, while others are more obscure. Two that were incorporated are still images from famous videos like the bottom center shot of Conrad Schumann. The 19-year-old East German soldier jumped across the 3' barbed wire barrier just two days after the border was closed; this photo became an iconic Cold War image.



Four padded bricks provided weight to hold the two completed frames in position as they were glued together.



The base frame has been turned on its side, ripped to create an extender for the top capped moulding to rest upon.



The Interior opening has been accented with a complementary moulding from the same LJ family but cut in reverse with the rabbet on the outside to create a fillet around the opening. The small wooden frame at the base provides stability for additional internal components.

Several other selected images were obvious choices to include in my presentation, such as the photo of the Brandenburg Gate and Checkpoint Charlie during the Soviet tanks standoff with United States tanks in October of 1961. The two lesser-seen images are in the bottom corners of this presentation and show the children who grew up in this environment accepting it as normal life. The West German children in the bottom left image are photographed playing "building a wall."

It is estimated that 137 people died attempting to cross the border during its 28 years of existence, including 18-year-old Peter Fechter, pictured being carried away by East German border guards in the middle right image. He was shot while attempting to flee to the West and was lying for 50 minutes in no-man's land before he was taken to a hospital where he died shortly after his arrival.

In this framing presentation, I mounted each of the eight photographs to foamboard with reverse bevels floating above a background of Artique 4934 Chestnut matboard. The same dark-brown sepia toned matboard was cut with reverse bevels to create the matting around the images, where we finished with a completed size of 24"x26" (61x66cm) without the frame.

For the moulding, we selected Larson-Juhl's Aged Steel frame to finish this project–it is a wood moulding but has the texture and feel of rusted metal and was perfect for the mood of the framed project. Unfortunately, none of the profiles within this Anvil family were tall enough to create the depth required to house the small motor and Berlin Wall piece, so we had to improvise. We took the 3" wide LJ572620 Shell profile and turned it on its end, flipped it upwards, and ripped it on a table saw creating a thinner but tall base. To this base, we added the traditional ¾" cap moulding LJ291615 from the same family and glued these together to provide the needed depth.

A similar profile from the same family (LJ288615) was used to create a fillet around the center opening for the rock itself. It was mitered in reverse to place the ½" rabbet to the outside.

Once the frame was built and the matting with mounted photographs was completed, it was time to work on the internal construction. Stability and reversibility were always considered in this construction. We began by creating a small wooden platform screwed to the base (bottom) rail of moulding that would hold the motor in position and create an area to secure the transformer for the LED lighting.

Once this was built and screwed into the frame, adding the other components was relatively easy. I cut foamboard strips, all of the same width, to create wall segments that interlocked, creating stability for the backing board as well as a chamber around the rock to attach the LED lighting. This entire assembly can be removed in segments.

Reversibility is important, so all of the supporting segments of foamboard slide out puzzle-fashion for cleaning or repair. LED lighting components today make these types of illuminated projects less challenging than they might otherwise seem.

Adding LED lighting to a framing design is so much easier today because it generates virtually no heat and is lightweight and easy to install (self-adhesive). I have previously created lit framed projects that have involved small mini-lamps, from Christmas lighting with transformers to Rope Lighting. Although these functioned as designed, they were much more complex. When illumination is called for today, the custom framer should be able to add LEDs easily and safely.

Turning the small rock slowly for viewing was a slightly more difficult challenge, as most electrical motors I found either turned too fast or, if geared down, had so much torque that the grinding sound was a distraction. They were much too powerful for this application because they were designed to turn much heavier items. I finally found the answer in a small 110v motor designed specifically for German Candle pyramids that we sell in our shop. Small, lightweight, and geared to rotate slowly (3.5 revolutions per minute), they were perfect for this application. Ironically, they were produced for a firm from the Erzgebirge, a region in former East Germany.

Once the motor was secure, we used the original capstan and modified it to hold the rock in place with a small dab of silicone adhesive. We also painted this wooden holder with a mix of paint colors to mimic the finish of the frame. Mounting an extension cord within the wooden housing provided an outlet to plug in the LED light transformer in addition to the turning motor.

A back wall of black foamboard finished the backing and Tru Vue's Museum Glass was used to complete the project. The frame was fitted with Hook-Ups, a style of strap mirror hanger that allows for level adjustment once hung; these would hold the finished frame close to the wall and keep it stable.

Like many framed projects of significance, this one was personal, emotional, and historic. I was able to complete the project in time to enter it in several framing competitions. But its real significance to me is that it will now hang in my home! **PFM**

John will be conducting several seminars and workshops at the 2017 National Conference.

John Ranes, CPF, GCF, is an instructor of framing workshops and seminars worldwide. John teaches for the Professional Picture Framers Association and the National Conference and consults for The Fletcher-Terry Company and Tru Vue. John was awarded the PPFA Lifetime Achievement Award at the Las Vegas Convention in January 2015. John, with his wife, Sarah, own The Frame Workshop of Appleton, a frame shop and gallery in Appleton, WI, which has won over 100 framing awards, including two successive awards from the Fine Art Trade Guild in the UK as well as a National Australian Framing Competition award. His shop which opened in 1978 expanded in 2009 and was featured in PFM in 2010.