

A NATIVE SON'S PHOTO-JOURNEY, CALIFORNIA INDIAN STYLE: Dugan Aguilar Biography

Dugan Aguilar, son of Virginia (Mountain Maidu, Washoe, and Pit River) and Robert “Bob” Aguilar (Walker River Paiute), born in 1947, was raised within a loving family and small Indian community in Susanville, California. Susanville and the Susanville Indian Rancheria is home to Mountain Maidu, Pit River, Paiute, and Washoe people. The town and Rancheria are located in the northeastern region of California with Mount Lassen, a sacred mountain to the Maidu and Pit River peoples, looking over the valley.

Virginia and Bob taught their children (Dugan and sister Joleen) the meaning of being California Indian from the cradleboard. The Aguilar family were active members of the Indian community, attending sports events, the annual Bear Dance, and Bob's and Virginia's Stewart Indian School (Nevada) reunions. The Aguilars taught their children by example; when Bob taught Dugan to hunt jackrabbits, he also taught his son to take the jackrabbits to elder women in the community—respect and generosity were the lessons.

These teachings are seen in Dugan's approach to photography. There are no “stolen” moments in Dugan's photographs: he doesn't use photojournalist tricks to photograph a person without his or her knowledge. He solidifies his relationships with the people in his photographs by presenting them with large, high-quality prints of their images.

Dugan's photo-journey did not take a direct route; he acquired his skills and experiences as opportunity knocked. After serving as a marine in Vietnam and on the G.I. Bill, Dugan studied industrial technology and design at Cal State Fresno, earning his degree in 1973. He wanted to take photography classes, but these classes were reserved for art and journalism majors. However, after school he was hired by the Desert Research Institute in Nevada to run their publication print shop. The Institute sent Dugan to the University of Nevada, Reno, to take photograph classes for a photo project on cloud seeding. Following this, his wife, Elizabeth, sent him to an Ansel Adams workshop. Dugan, like all of us, took photographs of his family. This circle of family grew to include his uncles' American Indian Veterans Association Susanville meetings and other veterans. This circle expanded to include Susanville's annual Maidu Bear Dance. Then he moved to other California Indian gatherings and events. He enjoyed being part of a large California Indian community.

Dugan's journey solidified when he visited a Denver museum and saw an exhibit of Native American cultures. The exhibit was organized by regions (e.g., Plains, Southwest, Eastern Woodlands, and California). The California display gave little indication that California Indian people were a living people with living cultures. Until this moment, Dugan's dream was to travel across the United States and photograph Native people—a quasi-Edward Curtis photo expedition but from a Native (insider) perspective and not weighted by an outsider's interpretation of Indian cultures. After seeing the Denver exhibit, he knew he needed to show the world that California Indians have, as he says, “their own regalia, their own dances, and their own songs.”

Dugan's path gained momentum when he met painter and curator Frank La-Pena (Nomtipom Wintu) and art curator and collector Carla Hills, and reconnected with printmaker Jean LaMarr (Pit River and Paiute), also from Susanville. Together, Frank, Carla, and Jean encouraged Dugan to exhibit his photographs. In these early years (1970–1980s), they and others broke ground for contemporary California Indian artists by organizing and curating exhibitions. Mainstream museums and art galleries had not opened their eyes to contemporary Native American art, outside of Native American artists from the Southwest. Exhibitions of contemporary Native art are found mainly in the small number of museums dedicated to Native American art (e.g., National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC, or Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ). One cannot expect to see contemporary Native American art in the collections of most large metropolitan museums in this country.

In the late 1980s Dugan joined a core of Native photographers from across the United States which included Pena Bonita, Jesse Cooday, Shan Goshorn, Zig Jackson, Carm Little Turtle, Larry McNeil, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Hulleah Tsinhajinnie, and Richard Ray Whitman. Dugan joined this alliance of Native photographers who created photographic imagery that was meaningful, self-determined representations of Native people, by Native people, and for Native people.

From the early starting point of exhibiting with a close circle of friends, Dugan Aguilar ventured out and exhibited his work in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Santa Fe, New York, and London. His photographs are in the permanent collections of Princeton University, the Southwest Museum of the American Indian and the Autry National Center of the American West, and the British Museum. He enjoys exhibiting his work close to home at places such as the Stewart Indian Museum (Carson City, Nevada), Chaw'se Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park (Pine Grove, California), and the California State Indian Museum (Sacramento). Local venues allow community members to see his work. He contributed photographs for the books *Weaving a California Tradition: A Native American Basketmaker* by Linda Yamane (Lerner, 1996) and *Deeper Than Gold: A Guide to Indian Life in the Sierra Foothills* by Brian Bibby (Heyday, 2005). His images have been featured on the cover of *News from Native California* many times over the last twenty years. He was staff photographer for the California Indian Basketweavers Association for over thirty years, the California Indian Storytellers Association, and the National Indian Justice Association.

Forty-some years of photography must have passed like the click of the shutter button on his camera. Dugan Aguilar accomplished all of this and more while working full time for the Sacramento Bee newspaper. After retiring from the Bee, he traveled with his wife, Liz, around the world. Dugan passed away in 2018.



Joleen Aguilar in cradleboard with Dugan Aguilar, 1950



Bob and Virginia Aguilar, Stewart Indian School Reunion, 1996



Lassen, Plumas, and Modoc Veterans, 1997