

Alonzo James “Lon” Hanagan
1911-1999
 by David Chapman

Lon Hanagan, one of the greatest physique photographers from the golden age of American bodybuilding, died quietly in a New York hospital on December 4, 1999. He had been in failing health for a long time. Lon’s photographic work, however, will remain his most enduring legacy to the world of bodybuilding.

Alonzo Hanagan was born in 1911 and he spent most of his professional life in New York City. He was trained as a musician and for a time was an organist at Radio City Music Hall. It was physique photography, however, that increasingly came to occupy his creative powers. After John Grimek came to New York to have his picture taken, Lon’s photographic career took off with a shot [see “Immortalizing Grimek” in *Iron Game History*, Volume VI #1, April 1999]. Soon every major

physique star (and those who hoped to be) beat a path to his studio.

Along with the established stars, Lon enjoyed championing the cause of minority athletes. It was rare in the 1940’s to see Puerto Rican or Black men treated with the respect that they deserved, but when these bodybuilders came to Lon, they were photographed with care and consideration.

Lon’s most famous hallmark was his use of Greco-Roman motifs in his work. As he hearkened back to a classical past, Lon wanted to make these muscular men appear as beautiful as the statuary of the ancients. “You’re there because you’re an object of beauty,” he would often tell his models as they struck a pose. “You’re supposed to think, ‘I must be beautiful or I wouldn’t be standing here.’ Keep that in your mind, and it’ll come through in the pictures.” [interview in *The Village Voice*, Feb. 24, 1999] This was probably a message that few of his models had heard before, but it helped both subject and photographer create great pictures.

Many could not see the beauty, however. To some authorities Lon’s pictures of muscular men were merely examples of insidious smut that threatened to corrupt the youth of America. So because of advancing years and a particularly brutal police raid in the early 1960’s, Lon chose to give up photography.

Thanks to an exhibition of his photographs at an upscale New York photo gallery earlier this year, Lon had recently experienced a great upsurge of interest in his work. It is gratifying to think that despite the years of virtual neglect, he lived to see a renewed interest in his photography.

