In 1967, Dr. William Podlich, an amateur photographer and college professor, took a leave of absence from his job at Arizona State to work with UNESCO in Kabul, bringing his wife and daughters along with him. It was here that Podlich documented Afghanistan, at a time before the U.S. invasion, Russian war, and Marxist revolution had touched the land with its power and destruction.

The photos expose a place that once looked healthy in its nature, strong in its structure, and flourishing with free people. But soon the Soviet invasion of 1979 would open the doors to the destruction of the country known now for being war-torn — a stark opposition to its past reputation as a thriving and modern nation.

“When I look at my dad’s photos, I remember Afghanistan as a country with thousands of years of history and culture,” says Dr. Podlich’s daughter, Peg Podlich. “It has been a gut-wrenching experience to watch and hear about the profound suffering which has occurred in Afghanistan during the battles of war for nearly 40 years. Fierce and proud yet fun-loving people have been beaten down by terrible forces.”

Peg Podlich also said of her father:

He had always said that since he had served in WWII...he wanted to serve in the cause of peace. In 1967, he was hired by UNESCO as an expert on principles of education for a two-year stint in Kabul.... Throughout his adult life, because he was interested in social studies, whenever he traveled around [in Arizona, to Mexico, and other places] he continued to take pictures. In
Afghanistan he took half-frame color slides [on Kodachrome] and I believe he used a small Olympus camera.

Podlich’s eye-opening collection of photos from the 1960s were honoured by his son-in-law Clayton Esterson, who took it upon himself to revive the message behind the images by putting them on the web. People were astounded by the images exposed: a country with character; with promise.

“I have taken on the role as family archivist and when Bill Podlich gave us his extensive slide collection, I immediately recognized the historical significance of the pictures,” Esterson says. “Many Afghans have written comments [on the website] showing their appreciation for the photographs that show what their country was like before 33 years of war. This makes the effort to digitize and restore these photographs worthwhile.”

Many photos have circulated the web in various forms, while a full collection of Dr. Podlich’s work can be found on a website maintained by Esterson.

When you imagine Afghanistan, you likely don’t envision a place where liberal lifestyles run the show. But as you will see in the following images, The Kabul used to be a bustling capital of well-dressed men, women wearing colourful clothing, and even short skirts, as they walked freely amongst the masses, while foreigners and tourists had the pleasure of exploring peacefully, without fear for their safety, and children had comfortable classrooms, lush land to explore, and adolescences free from the ravages of war.

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