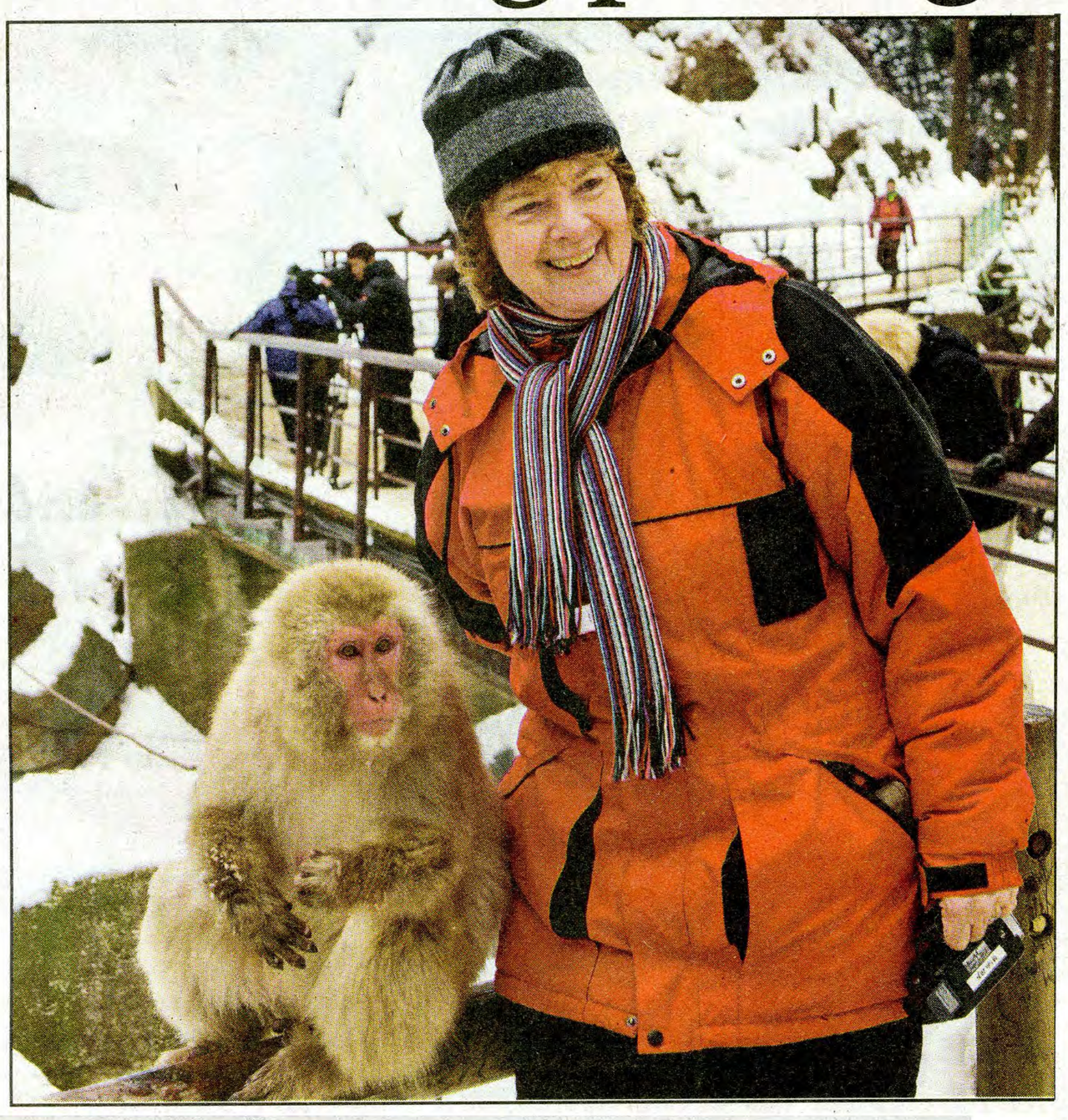
A globe trotting photographer's story

By REBECCA JACKSON
Smith Mountain Eagle

With a stunningly human expression spreading across its bristle-studded crimson face, a Japanese macaque (snow monkey) peers back at the camera lens of Smith Mountain Lake photographer Jesse Salwen, who captured the animal's visage on a recent journey to Nagano prefecture in central Japan.

"They're not aggressive, and docile, unless you stare them in the eye," recalled Salwen of the primates he encountered on the sojourn to Japan, where he and his wife, Marty, a videographer, waded through deep snow to capture some 8,000 images during the couple's 17-day trip.

Snow blankets the Jigokundani Valley, where the snow monkeys dwell in a national park, for four months out of the year. Tourists, including city-weary Japanese and international travelers like the Salwens, indundate the region annually to catch a glimpse of the territorial primates, who descend the surrounding steep escarpments for a communal "onsen" in the pools of abundant geothermal mineral springs. Like human hot tub bathers, the monkeys wade, dive, and squirt through the water, obviously enjoying respite from temperatures that can dive to minus 15 C.



Courtesy photo

The photographer's wife of 53 years, Marty Salwen, is pictured with a Japanese macaque (snow monkey) on the couple's recent trip to Japan. The Salwens have covered a lot of miles together, including four trips to the African continent, one to Antarctica, Brazil, Iceland and Norway, Hawaii and the Midway atoll, with a journey planned in the future to Canada and Alaska during the annual salmon run.

The Salwens stayed in a 400-year-old ryokan, or bed and breakfast, in the region, noted for its ancient hostelries, quaint shops, well-kept Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, as well as a number of public baths. As is the custom there, the couple slept on futons on the floor and removed their shoes when entering a room from outdoors.

"I only lost 10 pounds while there," said Salwen, who could not tolerate the spices used in some of the meal preparations.

Japan is but one of a host of countries worldwide that the camera-toting, globe-trotting Salwens have traveled. They've been to Antarctica once, quite an arduous trip by anyone's estimation, the continent of Africa four times (Kenya, South Africa, Botswana and Egypt), the Pantatal region of Brazil, Iceland, Norway, the Midway atoll and Hawaii, and in the future, plan to go to Alaska and Canada during the annual salmon runs.

"The Galapagos Islands are on my bucket list," mused Salwen, who obtained a degree in industrial engineering in 1960 from LeHigh University in Bethlehem, PA.

"That was a busy year, 1960," Salwen, also an avid boater and angler, remembered. After graduation, Salwen entered the U.S. Navy officers' candidate school, and married his sweetheart, Marty (Martha) in the middle of that year.

Courtesy photo

A musician in traditional Japanese costume plays an instrument for the Salwens during their stay in a 400-year-old ryokan, or bed and breakfast, left. While there, they observed the old traditions of sleeping on a futon on the floor of their accommodations, as well as removing shoes upon coming in from the outdoors. A highlight of that trip was spending time with Japanese snow monkeys, who, like their human counterparts, enjoy taking a dip in warm geothermal pools.

"She worked for the FBI, a U.S. Senate subcommittee and flew (as a flight attendant) for American Airlines. She was preparing to return to Washington, and I was in a barracks in Newport, Rhode Island, a barracks with 120 men and only two telephones."

When it came Salwen's turn to make a call, he telephoned Marty and proposed. Within three weeks, the couple wed in August, 1960 in the U.S. Navy chapel on base.

Salwen to this day carries a black and white photograph in his wallet of he and Marty on their wedding day.

They'll celebrate 54 years of marriage this summer. The Salwens have a daughter, Cindy, 51, of Staunton, an equestrienne and employee of Graham Packaging, and a son, Barry, 50, of Raleigh, North Carolina, a building contractor and race car driver who competes in his own vehicle.

After a stint in the Navy as a Polaris Missile officer responsible for assembly of re-entry systems (1960-1963), Salwen went to work running a family paper mill, the Joe Salwen Paper Products company near Philadelphia, after the death of his father. One of the company's most popular products was the heart-shaped boxes confections come in on Valentine's day. When tax rates and other expenses skyrocketed in the northeast, Salwen relocated the company to Claremont, NC.

"The company closed five years ago," due to competition in the heart-box market from Chinese manufacturers, said Salwen, who obtained his pilot's license, and with 7,600 hours under his belt, has airline and instructor's ratings.

"I covered the United States and Canada in my plane, in pursuit of selling boxes," he added.

A now-vintage Brownie box camera piqued Salwen's initial interest in photography back in the 1940s. He credits the sport of skeet shooting with training him to anticipate shots and lead with his camera.

"The concept is the same," he noted. "It wasn't hard to adapt to a camera."

"For many years, I've taken a picture, but since 2002," when he purchased his first digital camera, "I've worked on not just taking a picture," said Salwen, whose images of animals, people and landscapes arrest, surprise, captivate and excite. Salwen said he simply learned the art, as well as the technology of photography, "by simply doing," and is self-taught. His first digital was an Olympus, which he deemed too slow, and then purchased Nikons, which he has used for many years. Today, most often, Salwen uses a Nikon D3-X and D-600, with a multitude of lenses.

"Now, you'll find one camera on my neck, and one on my tripod," said Salwen, who estimates he has taken hundreds of thousands of photos.

Of all the places he has traveled, Salwen noted none have the abundance and incredible variety of animals and bird species found on the African continent.

"I'm finding more and more birds on trips, and I like my lions, jaguars, leopards and other big cats," he said. "They're fun to photograph."

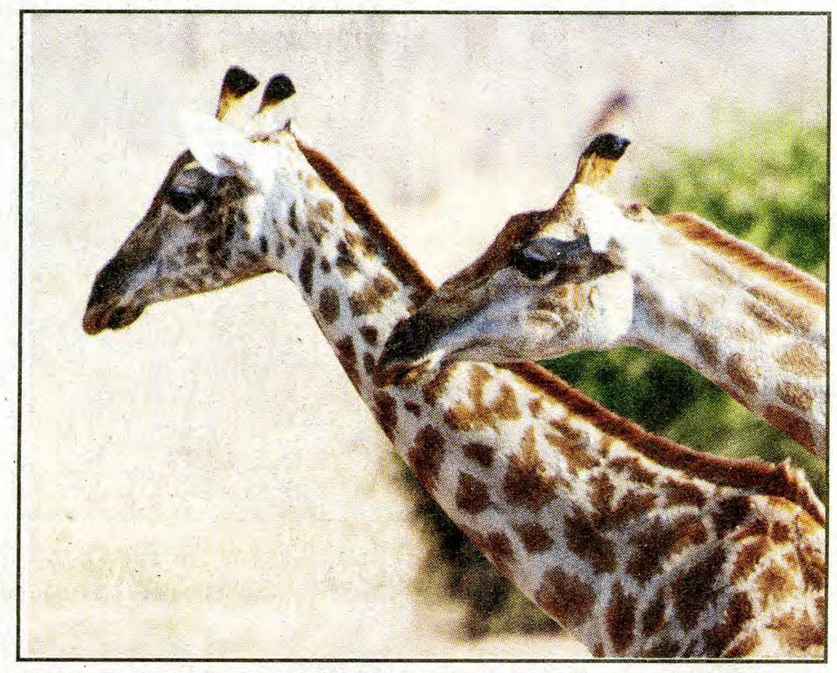
On one photo safari, Salwen encountered giraffes, hippos, birds, crocodiles, 10 different kinds of antelopes, monkeys, and elephants immersing themselves in river mud, seeking its coolness and a buffer against voracious insects.

Salwen, who divides his time between Claremont, NC, and a wedge of lakefront nirvana on the Bedford County shores of the lake (his older brother, Harvey, whose primary residence is in Pennsylvania, found neighboring lake properties for the two several years ago and they come to the lake every month), set up a vestpocket photo shop at the end of a Claremont shopping center four years ago. There, he pursues an interest in family and children's portraiture.

"I went from a 180,000 square foot box company to a 180 square foot photo shop," where he also creates greeting and post cards, noted Salwen.

The Salwens plan to continue their zeal for travel and adventure.

"Seriously, I don't want anything to happen, but if it does, I don't want to miss out," he said. "We have a good time."



Courtesy photos

Photographer Jesse Salwen of Smith Mountain Lake remarked that the African continent has an incredible diversity of wildlife and birdlife, such as the creatures pictured above. Their photos were taken while the Salwens were on a photo safari of a game preserve.