

Vincent and Ethel Simonetti's

HISTORIC TUBA COLLECTION

A Labor of Love From a Lifelong Tuba Enthusiast

by Matthew Shipes

f you are reading this article, bias aside, then you already know that tubists and euphoniumists are proud of what they do, and certainly of the instruments that they make music with. The intrigue of these instruments owes to many qualities; there is the financial investment, the Rube Goldberg complexity of all the fascinating tubing, and the fact that they are constantly changing and improving. The tuba and euphonium are both young instruments, evolving almost day-to-day right before our eyes. This very contemporary shaping and reshaping is documented in no better way than by Vincent and Ethel Simonetti's Historic Tuba Collection, located in Durham, North Carolina.

Durham is one of the vertices of the Research Triangle Park, which also encompasses Raleigh and Chapel Hill. It is the home of Duke University and North Carolina
Central University. However,
driving down Chapel Hill Road
in central Durham, few would
realize that the small, unassuming
yellow house with the sign reading
"Historic Tuba Collection" is
currently the home of not just the
largest collection of tubas and
euphoniums in North Carolina,
but one of the most expansive and
diverse in the entire world.

This historic museum is operated by Vincent and Ethel Simonetti, longtime Durham residents. The story starts with Vince's unique education and career, and how he and Ethel were able to complement each other over time. Walking into the museum, one is immediately struck by the "all-star" collection of instruments directly inside the main entrance. You can see the enormous variety, complexity, and extremity that our instruments

have endured in their short (roughly 180-year) history.

Vince and Ethel are extremely welcoming. They spent the better part of a day speaking with me about their lives inside music and out, showing me some of the highlights of their collection, and even taking time to give a tour to some last-minute tuba enthusiasts who found their way to the collection. Vince is noticeably excited to talk about their instruments and is a wonderful story-teller. His career as a tubist is worth an interview of its own; he studied with Bill Bell, Harvey Phillips, and Joseph Novotny in New York City. During this time, he toured with various musical groups throughout North America and played with the North Carolina Symphony before ultimately creating the Tuba Exchange, and now the Historic Tuba Collection.



Matthew Shipes: First, thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I know that this will be interesting for our ITEA members to read about in the Journal, and to watch online.

What is your background with music? What brought you to playing the tuba?

Vincent Simonetti: I started on piano when I was five, and when I went to grade school my uncle gave me a trumpet. I played trumpet in the grade school band. In those days there was no middle school, you started in grade school and went through to high school in the 9th grade.

When I got to high school, I presented myself to the band director and said, "Here I am! I play the trumpet!" He said, "We already have a lot of trumpet players—what I really need is a tuba player." He pointed to a sousaphone on the floor that looked like it hadn't been played in about 100 years (laughs), but I said, "Ok, sure, why not" and started messing around with the instrument. I became obsessed with it. In study hall I would draw pictures of tubas. By my senior year I was first chair all-state in New Jersey.

What led to having a career in music?

V: A friend of my father who was a professional musician when I

was a senior in high school said, "Well, who's the best teacher in the area?" I said, "Mr. Bell, Bill Bell! The principal tuba in the New York Philharmonic." I thought Bell would never take me as a student, but this fellow apparently contacted Mr. Bell, so I went there and played for him. I studied with Bell as a senior in high school, which turned out to be the last year he played with the Philharmonic. He was also teaching at Juilliard, Manhattan, and two or three other universities in the NYC Area. He suggested the Manhattan School of Music for me; he said, "I think that this would be the best fit for you."

So, I auditioned there and got a full scholarship (the tuition was only \$900 a year). But then Mr. Bell said, "I'm retiring from the Philharmonic...I hate it!" (laughs) He'd been in it 35 years and complained that Leonard Bernstein would always ask for "More tuba! More tuba!" After Bell left, I decided to study with Harvey Phillips, who was the top freelancer at the time in New York City.

In those days, musical groups would come to New York City and audition musicians to go on tour with them nationally. The first tour that came in was the Mosaic Ballet Orchestra, when I was a senior at Manhattan and now studying with Joseph Novotny. I

auditioned and got the job, then took a leave of absence from Manhattan to do this 27-week tour. They flew us to Montreal, we rehearsed in the new Place des Arts, we went across Canada on trains and planes, we went down to LA and went across to play in the Madison Square Garden. It was the best job I had, and paid decent money.

After that I did the Martha Graham tour thanks to Harvey Phillips's recommendation, which was the first time I ever came to Durham. We played at the Duke University Page Auditorium. Then I toured with the Paul Lavalle Band of America; that was 17 cities in 20 days. We would get on a bus at 8 in the morning, drive eight hours, get to the next town, have supper, go to the hall, play the gig, and then repeat the next day. That kind of fried me from tours. While I was on that tour I had already auditioned in NYC for the North Carolina Symphony.

When did you to stop playing professionally?

I played in the North Carolina Symphony from 1967 to 1975. I loved the music and I loved playing the tuba, but I sort of got bored with it. I wanted to do something else. In 1975 I was the chairman of the orchestra committee, and we were fighting to get rid of our conductor. He was not happy that we were trying to get rid of him, so he fired all of the principal players, including me.

Everybody else fought and got reinstated but I had had enough and left. I was lucky because the season at that point was 26 weeks in. I had three children and had to do something else during the other 26 weeks to support my family. Every off-season I would build up a big piano tuning business and let it crash and go back to the symphony. So when I left the symphony I went into that full-time. I stopped playing tuba completely which was a big mistake, and I missed it terribly.

How did you start the Tuba Exchange?

V: I missed the tuba, and thought about what I could do to possibly get back with tuba in terms of a business. When I had my piano business in this building, I sold several lines here, and would go the NAMM show (National Association of Music Merchants), which was a national convention for dealers only. Dealers and manufacturers would come from all over the country and world, and I would go to these as a piano dealer, but in 1984 NAMM was held in Chicago. I went, and I saw a tuba music booth. They had Hirsbrunner, Rudolph Meinl and other fine makers.

I picked up a tuba and started playing. This person comes up to me out of the blue, and his name tag says Rudolph Meinl, Jr. I was shocked because I thought Meinl was exclusive with a certain dealer at the time. It turns out that Rudolph Meinl had been exclusive with said dealer, but the dealer was marking them up 150% above wholesale price. I wondered why they were so expensive. When I found out what the wholesale price was, I asked him, "will you sell to me?"

The idea of the Tuba Exchange formed right at that moment due to the happenstance of meeting Rudolph Meinl at the NAMM show in Chicago in 1984.

I had a really hard time giving up my piano business because I had developed relationships with my tuning customers over decades. I was at a lady's house tuning her piano and she said she had a

WE WOULD GO TO ALL MAJOR CITIES IN CANADA AND THE U.S., AND I DECIDED THAT WHEN I WENT TO EACH CITY I WOULD TRY TO FIND INSTRUMENTS. I FOUND [OUR FIRST INSTRUMENT] IN BOSTON IN A MUSIC STORE.

call for me on her phone. It was a band director from Texas who wanted to buy \$10,000 worth of Miraphones, and here I was tuning a piano for \$50. I thought, "This is nuts." I reduced the tuning from five days a week to four, three, two, one. After that, I told my employee here in the piano shop, "I'm sorry but I'm closing down the tuning business. I'm going to go exclusively with tubas," and that's how we were able to develop the Tuba Exchange, especially with Ethel's help. She took care of all the books [leading] to a successful business.

Ethel, what is your background with music?

Ethel Simonetti: My background is with the ordained ministry. Vince and I met in a church, I had a background in choral music as well as being in a family with grandparents who taught music. I had a deep appreciation of music, but I was not aiming to become a music professional, although I studied at universities in the communities where I lived. My dad was a college professor and everywhere we lived I had access to the piano faculty, so that was my main interest. I appreciated the standards of the university, piano recitals, and also enjoyed choral music as an amateur. In Durham I joined the civic choral society, which is an audition-only ensemble, and continued to

do some performing or some music leadership wherever I was conducting a worship service. When I had my own church he was the music director.

Can you tell us about how the two of you started working together with the Tuba Exchange?

E: When the tuba business was getting off the ground, we decided to actually start working together. We had many opportunities to have a business with an outreach component to schools in the community, and we could fill a niche with low brass instruments that other U.S. companies didn't seem prepared to fill.

My early years in work had been in state civil service, outreach, employment, law, regs, and emto where younger people were congregating (young people who needed instruments). We offered high quality instruments at a lower price.

Vince has a unique ability to design instruments and to work with price points with manufacturers that he discovered throughout the world and I was there to try to make the finances, the PR, and the logistics work. It was pretty much behind the scenes, but sometimes it takes two people to keep something going if one is an artist or an entrepreneur.

V: Playing the tuba was my forte. I had a leg up on my competitors, although they hired people who played. I was the owner and I could play, though I wasn't playing professionally anymore. But Ethel did a tremendous job with the finances of the business; our credit rating was great!

What led to the Historic Tuba Collection—what made you interested in collecting?

V: I was interested from a young age. The first instrument I actually collected is that helicon up there, that Cerveny I was on tour with the Moyseev ballet company. We would go to all major cities in Canada and the U.S., and I decided that when I went to each city I would try to find instruments. I found that in Boston in a music store, they had a pile of parts-a mountain. I looked through and there was this one instrument. It has some very unique design features; it's one of the few instruments in the collection that is conical throughout the valves. Every valve is a different valve bore, and that's unusual.

When we had our business, some people would want to trade instruments. Some of them were very interesting and I didn't want to sell them, I just wanted to keep them! We started to build the ambiance of this collection as part of the business, and that attracts a certain customer profile to the business. It did take up most of this building but fortunately we had other buildings as part of The Tuba Exchange.

We obtained most of the collection during the 27 years we had the Tuba Exchange. We started out



be interested in the civic life of Durham.

How did you and Vince meet?

E: I was reading about this community orchestra in Durham that Vince founded and conducted and I thought, "well those are noble goals." Later we found ourselves in the same church. I heard that he was singing in another choir, and I had joined a small choir. My choir director said, "We hope Vince comes back because he was our main tenor. Meanwhile you can limp along with us!" But it was a situation that I enjoyed. When we met we began to complement each other, because he would

ployee-satisfaction, social-work, then the ministry. I was able to supplement those interests of mine by getting some accounting training, which helped me to do things in a standard way here that really needed to be done if we were going to deal with importing, design work, sponsorships, and endorsement.

I guess our idea was to elevate our profile and do some things like newsletters with a pedagogical emphasis, sponsoring programs with ITEA, attending specialized workshops where instruments were being showcased, going to the Army Band Workshop, getting







Photo 8



Photo 9

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with maybe 10 instruments in that corner (points), and then it got up to 20. I would take them to ITEA conferences. There was one here at the UNCG (Greensboro) in 2002, and I took some of the instruments. I remember Rogo Bobo came and he was impressed with the instruments I took. I took this (the helicon). The collection attracted customers. They were interested in the history of the instrument.

The collection grew and got quite large. Fortunately, the people who bought our business in 2011 (Luc and Betty Kerkhof-Black) did not buy the building; they were renting from us. They were kind enough to let me keep the collection here. Luc really liked the ambiance offered by the collection. They decided to

leave the building in 2014, so in March of 2016 we had our grand opening for the museum. It's the newest museum in Durham as far as I know!

How many pieces are there in the collection?

V: It's over 325 instruments. I don't know exactly because we've gotten so many donations recently that were missing a lot of parts. I'm not sure if they are all going to be included in the collection.

What are some things you are working on right now? What are some goals that you have for the future with the collection?

V: We want to make it accessible to as many people as possible. It is a private collection—Ethel and I own the collection—we don't

get any other funding. So it's up to us to maintain the building, maintain the collection. Funding is not an issue yet, but right now we have limited hours. It's Tuesday to Thursday 3:00-6:00. We've recently gone to appointment only because sometimes I would come here (we recently had a curator that we hired) but no one would come. Sometimes we had many people arrive all at once. We wanted to try to control the flow of people into the collection.

Do you charge an entrance fee?

V: We do not charge. We have a donation basket, but we do not charge for admission.

So you see this museum as a service to the public?

V: Exactly. And because of our history, and my history with the instrument, I love to educate folks on the history of the instrument. People are excited by that; they like learning. I try to keep it light and not get too serious about it.

Is there anything else you would like to share about the museum?

V: Well, we've had folks from all over the country come.

E: Yes, and we've had some visitors from Durham, England, which is one of our sister cities, and this was one of the big draws for them. We had quite a group of people from Durham, NC to shepherd them through and it was a big attraction for them too. People tell these stories about how this a recognizable entity because it's

unique. We thrive on that because everyone who comes in for a tour is a spokesperson and a disciple of how important the history of the instrument is and what a job we have done documenting it. Vince does a good job of pointing out and highlighting the main takeaways.

It's wonderful when we people say, "my granddaughter insisted that we come here from Michigan" and "this is the best thing we did... we went to the beach, went to the mountains, but being in the middle of all those tubas with a tuba enthusiast was the best."

And there you go. How's that for validation?

V: We have a book where we ask them to sign in. They will write comments like "Fantastic!" "We enjoyed it!" "Can't wait to come back!" That's the joy that we get from the collection. Maintaining it at our age is no easy feat; at some point we won't be able to do it. But right now it's here, we've built it up, we've gotten national recognition. We've been on NPR's Atlas Obscura twice, the website. We're second in Durham to the Lemur Collection (laughs). Maybe somehow, we can combine the two. I'm just joking of course.

We enjoy it. I'm just so happy that we have been able to open it up to the public, because when I had my business and the collection was here, it really wasn't open to the



Photo 10



Photo 16



Photo 19

public as a collection. It was sort of part of the business.

How many people do you think have visited the collection since opening?

V: I would say two to three hundred—one group alone was 64 people from a junior high. As you can see we have limited floor space; I tell people only 15 at a time. When we had our grand opening, Ethel did a wonderful job trying to coordinate; we had over 200 people show up. We had food at our garage out back for the folks that came. Ethel handed out numbers and 15 people came in at a time for the tour. I think I gave over 10 tours that day. I was hoarse for a while.

We would love to see and hear about a few of the instruments in your collection!

Couesnon "French Tuba" C tuba, 6 pistons, c. 1985 (Photo 7 –Couesnon French C Tuba)

V: Close to 10 years ago, the phone rang at the business and a woman said, "I'm Carol Jantsch; as you might know I play in the Philadelphia Orchestra." I hadn't met her. She told me that they were doing a special concert of *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The first half was to be multimedia—a screen above the orchestra with the score, a narrator, ballet dancers, you name it. For the first

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half they were doing that, then for the second half the orchestra was doing *Pictures* straight through. Their conductor was Charles Dutoit, and he "wants me to play it on a French single-C tuba, the Bydlo solo, and you're the only one that has one." she said.

I said, "great!" Actually I have two. There's one above your head over there (points). So she said, "would you rent it to us?" I said, "No...I'll give it to you! All I want is tickets." So Ethel, I and one of my daughters who happened to be in town went up and heard the performance. Carol is a wonderful player. She had to play it twice in one concert (laughs).

I found this particular instrument online in the late '90s. Apparently it's one of the last six-valve instruments they made. When I had the business we used to go to the huge convention in Frankfurt-it is called the Frankfurt Musikmesse (music fair). Manufacturers all over the world come for dealers all over the world. Couesnon had a booth there and they had about 20 of these, but they were three, four, and five-valved. I asked them, what do you do with all of these? You know, this was the tuba in a French orchestra until around 1965 or so. They said that the military buys a lot of them.

We are very fortunate to have this beautiful example of a French single-C tuba. I don't believe anyone makes them anymore except possibly Wessex, the English maker. The owner of Wessex has been here twice with his chief designer taking pictures and measuring instruments. He likes to make unique instruments for his customers.

BB-flat sousaphone, C.G. Conn, 46K, "Jumbo," 3-Piston, 1924 (Photo 8 – Jumbo Conn 46K)

BB-flat sousaphone, Lyon and Healy, "Mammoth," 3-Piston, ca. 1904

V: Here we have an example of the C.G. Conn Company's largest production model sousaphone, the Jumbo model 46k, this one dating from 1924. I guess back in those days people were a lot stronger than today because this thing probably weighs close to 50 pounds! It has a substantially large valve bore, as it should for this size instrument. In general, the larger the valve bore, the bigger the tone, the freer-blowing the instrument is; other factors play into that too. This valve [bore] is .750 inches. That's considered large and a very good valve bore especially for a large contrabass tuba.

However, this instrument with the Lyon and Healy name—that is a Chicago company—we are pretty sure that this was made in Europe, probably France. This has a much larger valve bore, .865 inch. That is the largest piston-valve bore in our collection. For this size piston, this is the absolute largest

valve-bore you can have. (Photo 9 – Mammoth vs. Jumbo)

F tuba, J.V. Schmidt, 5 Berliner Piston valves c. 1845 (Photo 10 – Schmidt F tuba, 1845)

V: The tuba is the only member of the brass family for which we know the exact birth date because in 1835 a patent was filed by Wilhelm Wieprecht, a German inventor, conductor and player. He was the first to call his instrument a bass tuba. His tuba has five piston valves. These early types of piston valves are called "Berliner-Pumpen" valves. We are very fortunate to have this instrument that is only 10 years younger, from 1845, and you can see it's very similar in design to the very first bass tuba.

Interestingly, when we were asked to be on NPR a couple of years ago, they wanted to hear the oldest instrument and the newest instrument in our collection. My son, who is a monster player, came to demonstrate the instruments. He put his mouthpiece in here and it fit (laughs); for some reason it fit perfectly. I hadn't played this horn in decades, and it sounded fantastic. When he picked up the newest instrument, it sounded almost the same.

BB-flat tuba, King 1280 "Symphony," 4-rotary, c. 1933 (Photo 16 – King 1280 "Symphony")

V: This instrument was made by the NHY company known as King.

They used King as their main name for their instruments. King was the only American manufacturer that made rotary-valve tubas in any number. And it's interesting they had been making a horn with rotary valves, and in their catalogs they say that they pattern their tuba rotor system after their horn. They took their horn valves and just blew them up to fit a tuba. It is string linkage just like a horn. The interesting thing about string linkage is that you can adjust the height of the spatulas to fit your individual hand. You can't do that on a mechanical linkage instrument unless you bend the key.

This particular model was called the symphony model, and it was designed for string bass players who doubled on tuba. They could play the tuba without having to lift the instrument and put the bass down.

They only made these in the 1930's. We actually have two of these. They came in two bore sizes. This one is .750 and there is also a .687.

F/BB-flat double tuba, York, 4-piston, 2-rotary, c. 1918 (Photo 19 –York Double Tuba)

V: Here is a very strange instrument. As you probably know, a rotary valve on a tuba is about an inch and a half in diameter by 2 inches long, but here on this instrument is the world's largest rotary valve used

on a brass instrument. (Photo 17 -Double tuba rotor) And the reason for this is because this is a double-tuba. Now, a piston valve on a tuba, on a larger tuba, is maybe six, six 1/2 inches long, but this instrument has some interesting specifications-here we have six inches, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, almost 12 inches in length (Photo 18 - Double tuba pistons)! It's because there are two sets of tubing coming off each piston. People might want to know, "why do vou have two tubas combined into one instrument?" It has to do with the history of the instrument.

The early tuba was 12 feet long, pitched in F. The first bass tuba-built in 1835-had five piston valves. Twelve feet is not that much longer than a euphonium or a trombone. The music that it played was not that much lower; it was lower but not that much. By the beginning of the 20th century they had gotten down to 17 1/2 feet long. The music got lower and lower, so an orchestral tuba player had to be able to control close to five octaves on his instrument. To do that on one instrument is difficult. Attempts were made to combine the smaller, shorter instrument and one of the longer, contrabass instruments.

The way it worked is you have this gear shift here. It turns this very large rotor which deflects the main tubing from the long 17 ½ foot length to the shorter 12-foot F length. Plus, you have this smaller rotor here that works

in conjunction with the big rotor so that it diverts the leadpipe from the front set (the F set) to the back set (the BB-flat set). The problem with all this is that it is very heavy. It probably weighs close to 70 pounds, which makes it difficult to deal with. But, it is a very interesting example of an attempt to create a double tuba.

BB-flat helicon, Borgani, 3-rotary, c. 1920's (Photo 20 – Borgani Helicon)

V: This is an example of a marching tuba. The larger ones were called helicons, from the Greek word helix, which means spiral. Many helicons, especially American ones, are round. This one is more tear-drop shaped. This one was made in Italy and has another unusual feature. On large tubas, you can get an idea of what the valve-bore diameter is going to be by the size of the bell. A smaller bell will normally indicate a smaller diameter valvebore. This bell is only 13 or maybe 14 inches, but the valve-bore is huge. It's .908 [inches], which is the largest valve-bore in the collection. I don't think anyone is making brass instruments today anywhere near [this] .908 inch valve-bore. It works on a rotary valve but would not work on a piston valve instrument because if you had a piston valve [instrument] with .908 valve-bore ports, the stroke of the piston would probably be over 3 1/2 inches, which would make it unwieldy. The way rotary valves are set







Photo 17 Photo 18 Photo 20

WE'VE BEEN ON NPR'S "ATLAS OBSCURA" TWICE, THE WEBSITE. WE'RE SECOND IN DURHAM TO THE LEMUR COLLECTION.

up, this stroke is not bad at all. It makes it more practical.

B-flat euphonium, F. Besson, 5-piston, c. 1897 (Photo 21 – Besson Euphonium, c. 1897)

V: Here we have an example of a beautiful English Besson euphonium with five piston valves, made c. 1900. It's in mint condition! We obtained this in 2008. It is not a compensating instrument, which means it doesn't have extra tubing between the valves. I assume they wanted to have five pistons to get more combinations for intonation purposes and to allow the player to play in the low register easier.

E-flat tuba, Buescher, 3-piston, c. 1890 (Photo 22 – Buescher E-flat tuba, c. 1890)

V: This is a very interesting Buescher-made E-flat tuba. This says c. 1890 but it was later than that—I will explain why. It has a very interesting valve system. With 99.9% of piston valve instruments, the lead pipe goes into the first valve. This one goes into the third valve; it works through this very complicated system of tubes called the Epoch valve system, which Buescher patented in 1901. This was featured recently on our collection's "Tuba-Tuesday" quiz on Facebook, and several people knew about the Epoch valve system. Buescher used it on all their instruments that had piston valves.

BB-flat tuba, Moennig, 4-rotary, c. 1875 (Photo 23 – Moennig BB-flat tuba, c. 1875)

V: Here is an example of an older American-made instrument by the Moennig company of New York City. We've talked about the development of piston-valve brass instruments and that certain countries preferred piston valves over rotary valves; the US was one of those. But in the early days of American manufacturing, most makers made their instruments with rotary valves, and here is an example. This instrument has four rotary valves, but if you look there are no keys. The keys are missing right? No they are not missing, they are here. (Photo 24 – Keys) This is the system used on early rotary valve American-made instruments up until about 1890.

This is a very rare example of this type of double BB-flat tuba. The famous civil war brass instrument collector Mark Elrod-when I contacted him about this instrument, he said he thought this might be one of the earliest double BB-flat tubas made in the U.S. It was on eBay. Because it didn't have the normal rotary keys, people thought it was missing the essential parts of the key-mechanism when actually they're here. I was the only bidder on eBay for this instrument, and I was thrilled to get it. It's from 1875, making it one of the oldest instruments in the collection.

MORE INFORMATION

For information about more of the unique instruments in Vince and Ethel's collection, or to watch the video interview, please visit the ITEA website at https://www.iteaonline.org. You can also see more about the Historic Tuba Collection, including additional photos of these instruments and

others in the catalog, or to schedule an appointment for a tour, by visiting their website at https://simonettitubacollection.com.

Special thanks to Vincent and Ethel Simonetti for their hospitality in Durham and for spending the day with me. Also, thank you to the ITEA for sponsoring this interview project.

Dr. Matthew Shipes is the Assistant Professor of Low Brass at Angelo State University, where he teaches the low brass studio, conducts the low brass ensemble, and teaches brass methods and music appreciation courses. Matthew was previously a member of The United States Air Force Band in Washington, D.C., where he had many opportunities to perform for former President Obama, several foreign leaders. and for hundreds of ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. Dr. Shipes is currently an associate editor for the ITEA Journal. writing articles and managing the "Experts' Excerpts" recurring column.

Originally from Dallas, TX, Shipes received a Bachelor of Music Education degree from Baylor University, a Master of Music degree in euphonium performance from the University of Arkansas, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in tuba performance with a minor in trombone performance from the University of Georgia.



Photo 21



Photo 22



Photo 23



Photo 24