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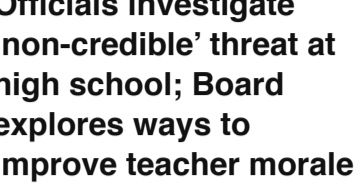
'Too many things to photograph': More than 70 years in, Litten's picture-taking passion still burns

By **Eric Gorton, senior contributor**
Posted in **Harrisonburg Issues**

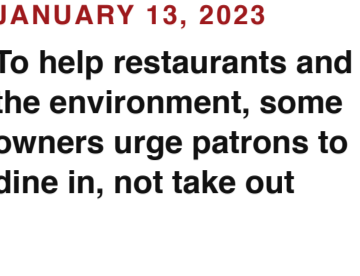
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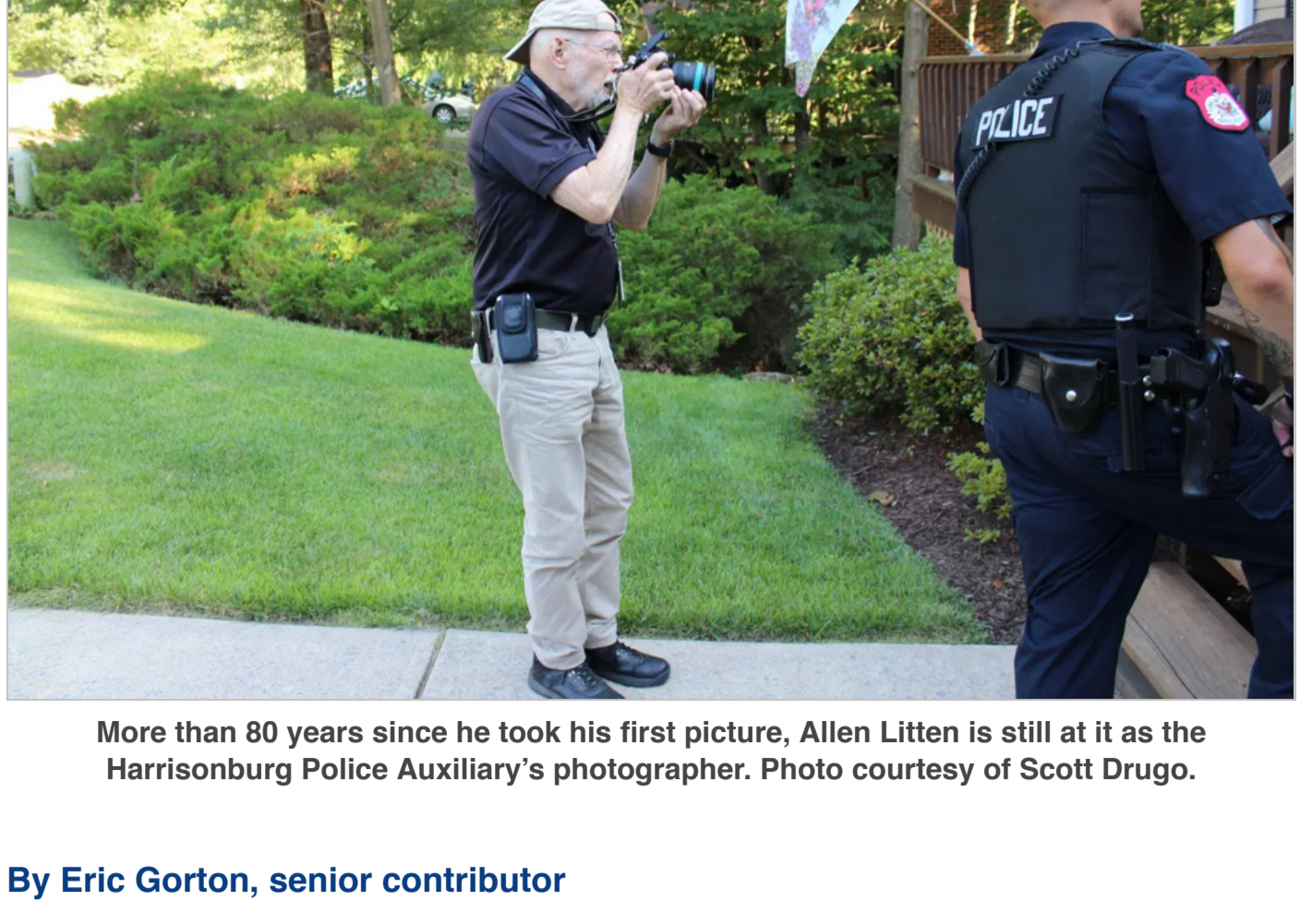
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More than 80 years since he took his first picture, Allen Litten is still at it as the Harrisonburg Police Auxiliary's photographer. Photo courtesy of Scott Drugo.

By **Eric Gorton, senior contributor**

On a routine photo shoot for the Harrisonburg Police Auxiliary, Allen Litten pulled out a smartphone to take the shot. For anyone familiar with Litten's work, the officers' hoots and laughs wouldn't be surprising.

"We got them all lined up and I pulled out my cell phone and you should have heard them," he said with a grin. "It was a big joke."

More often than not, the 87-year-old photographer who took his first photos in the early 1940s and who spent more than 53 years as the chief photographer for the Daily News-Record, can be seen squinting through the eyepiece of a high-end Nikon. But on that particular day, he left the camera in its bag on a nearby chair. The smartphone could do the job.

Litten, who was celebrated Saturday by family, friends and former colleagues at an 87th birthday party at The Dayton Market, has never been one to shy away from technology.



Allen Litten celebrated his 87th birthday this weekend with his wife, Jean Litten (right) and several dozen friends. Photo by Eric Gorton.

Deb Thompson, director of communications for Sentara RMH from 1988-2014 and one of about 35 attendees at the birthday party, said, "He's most interested in quality, but also journalistic integrity, whether you take a photo with a \$500 camera or a \$5,000 Nikon."

Thompson met Litten in 1987 while she worked at *The Valley Banner* newspaper in Elkton. Later, she hired him as a freelancer for RMH publications, events and promotions. "Allen had a healthy skepticism, but also a natural inquisitiveness and the desire to learn and try new things. He embraced the technology and never looked back," she said.

Cynthia Price, a former *Daily News-Record* reporter who worked with Litten from 1988-1992, said in an email, "Allen is a lifelong learner. He always asks questions and wants to understand the 'new-fangled' stuff."



Litten said smartphones have led to a vast improvement in photography overall, especially among casual photographers. "We can't knock cell phones because I think cell phones have made people more aware of photographs," he said. "Before, with a camera, they would go out and take junk, but now with the cell phone they take some really good stuff."

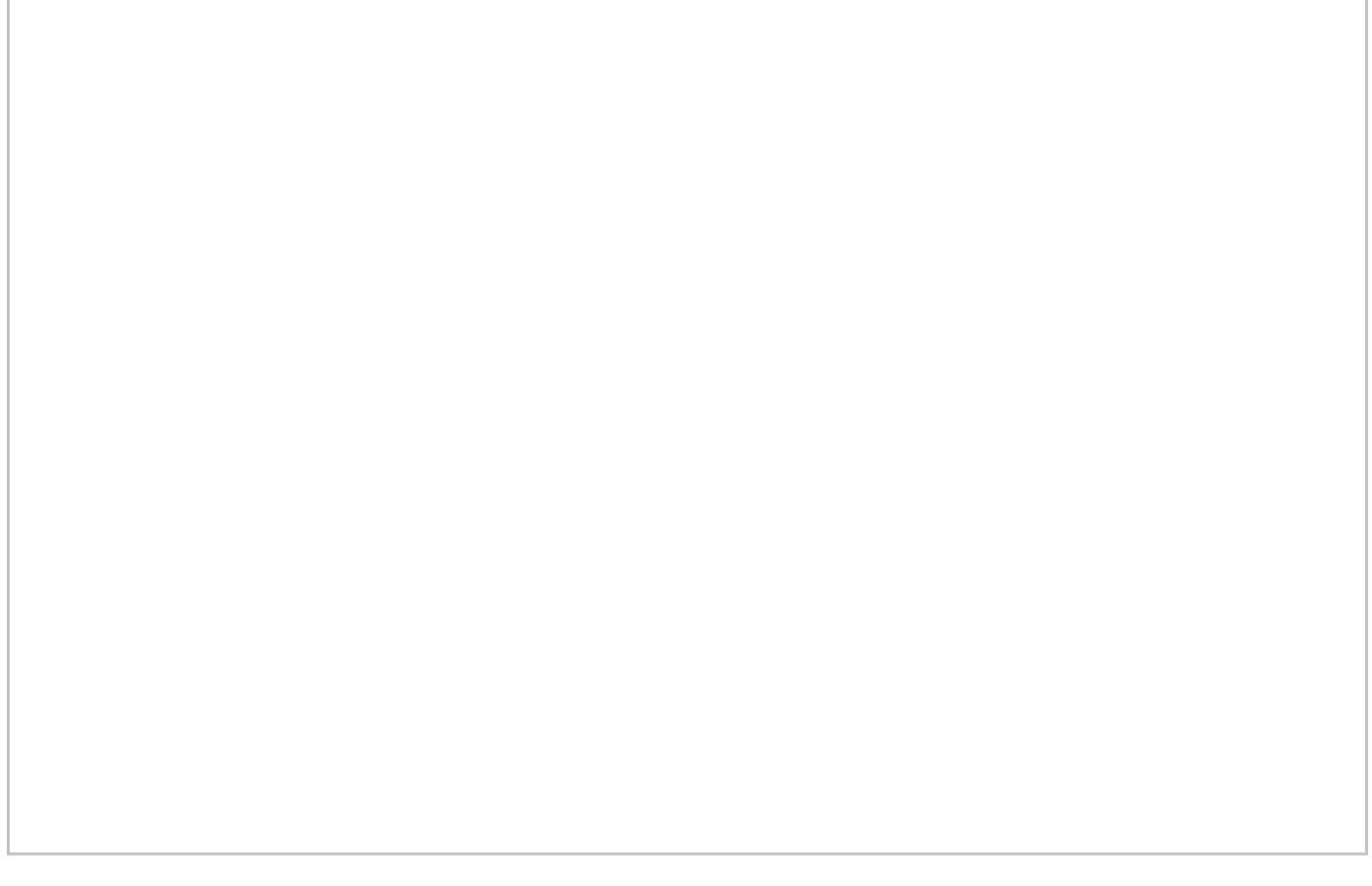
Besides, equipment has its role, but, "I've always felt that what you see is the key to shooting" good photos, Litten said.



Since retiring from the newspaper business in 2004, Litten has kept busy taking photographs for the Harrisonburg Police Department as a member of its auxiliary and doing some freelance work. "I'm just not one to sit around," he said. "There's too many things out there to photograph and to work with and try."

Some of Litten's work is on display on a back wall of The Dayton Market, where he has been a regular customer of Whiskey Valley Jerky for 35 years.

Cindy Tobin, who works at Whiskey Valley Jerky and helped organize Saturday's party, said Litten and his wife of 63 years, Jean, are more than customers, "They're friends, just like family."



While Litten was the subject of the photos being taken Saturday, photography remains his passion, just as it was when he was a 9- or 10-year-old and got hooked. "I saw some people with cameras taking pictures and I don't remember where it was, I just remember seeing them and it just looked interesting. And I must have asked for a camera for my birthday because I got it on my birthday."

The first photos he remembers taking were with that camera, a boxy-looking Kodak Brownie. "If I remember it right, our cat had had some kittens and they were in an apple tree in the backyard and I got my camera and tried to get a picture of them," he said.

Did they come out?

"I don't remember," he says with a chuckle. "I do not. It took a little 127 film, so they were about that big," he says, holding his thumb and index finger about an inch apart. "It was just a little bitty camera. I think it had a piece of glass for a lens."

Litten has not kept all the photos he's ever taken, but there are some he wished he had kept. His next camera was an Ansco that he talked his dad into giving him \$10 to buy. "You know that second camera I had, the Ansco, East Market Street had all these mansions up the street, they're all gone now, and I went up and down the street and took pictures of all these houses and I had a little developing kit in the kitchen and when it got dark I developed my prints and then I made contacts of them. When I got married, I was cleaning my bedroom out and thought, 'I don't need these,'" he said, motioning like he was tossing them over his shoulder while shaking his head in disbelief.

Litten's hobby eventually started earning him some money after he became a volunteer firefighter as a teenager for the Harrisonburg Fire Department. "I had a Foldex 6.3 then, a little folding camera, and I took pictures of the fires and a couple of wrecks and things and took them into the newspaper. They let me into the darkroom to process them and I did little prints and turned them in and they paid me \$5 a picture," he said.

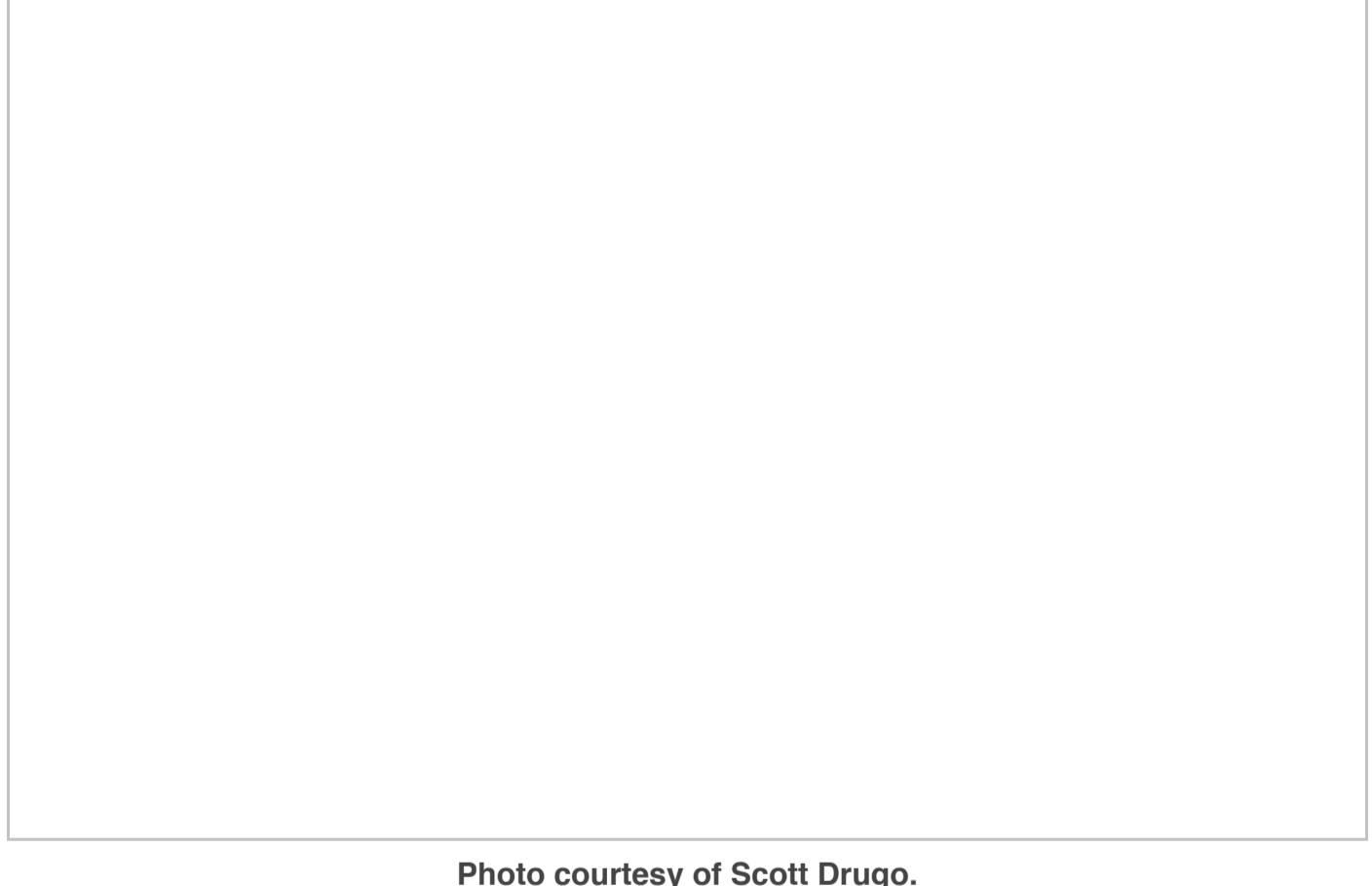


Photo courtesy of Scott Drugo.

Having joined the department when he was 16 and becoming a firefighter for 20 years, Litten has fond memories of those times. The firehouse for Company 4, now on Maryland Avenue, was on West Elizabeth Street, near the intersection with Liberty Street then. "We started a drum and bugle corps down there and we had a pretty good group. Every Friday night there was a fireman's parade. A lot of fun."

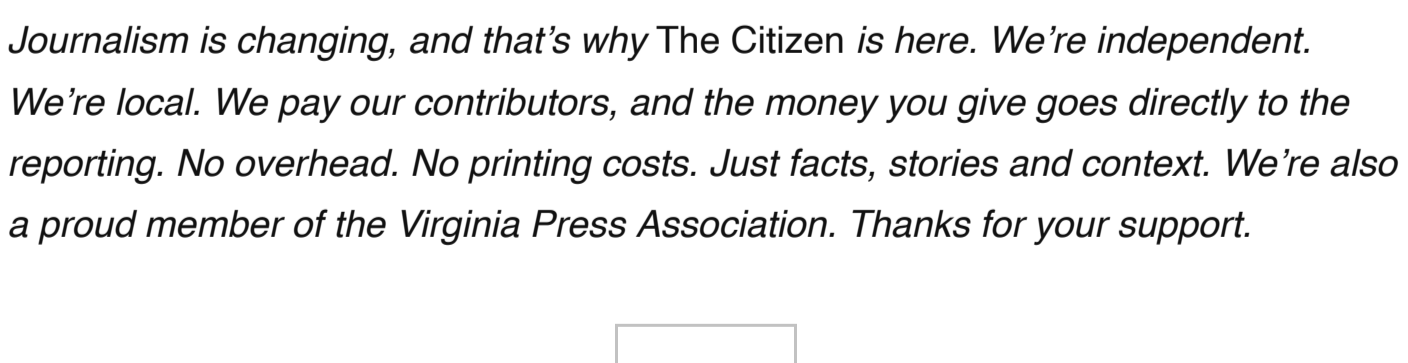
Litten's first job at the *Daily News-Record* was as a "flyboy," an apprentice who caught stacks of paper as they came off the press. He saw an ad for the job while delivering the paper.

"The press they did did not have an automatic stacker. They had to stand there and take the papers out of the folder and then stack them. And they were always falling over," Litten said. "And then I helped with odds and ends on the press. Papers had little labels stuck on them. You had a little hand machine and put labels on the ones to be delivered to people in the county. I did that for a while."

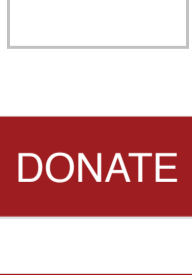
When a photograph job opened up, Litten began what became a decades-long career.

"On January 1, 1957, I put on a necktie and a white shirt and went to work," he said.

Of all the photos he's taken, Litten does have a favorite – one of the many moments he has captured by being in the right spot at the right time. He went to photograph a house fire and captured a teenage firefighter carrying a young girl away from the house.



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- ALLEN LITTEN
- DAILY NEWS-RECORD
- HARRISONBURG POLICE AUXILIARY
- PHOTOGRAPHY
- TECHNOLOGY

Eric Gorton, senior contributor

Eric has worked as a media relations coordinator in University Communications at James Madison University since March 2005. He started working in public relations with the Virginia Department of Transportation in September 2000. Before that, he worked as a reporter and editor at the Daily News-Record from 1987 to 1999 and as a Web content developer for SEI, Inc. in Harrisonburg from 1998-2000.

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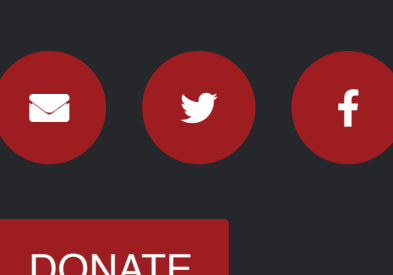
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