

Lugging piles of camera equipment from Mexico to the USA on the back of a tiny motor bike marked the start to the Robert Bignell brand of photography.

The USA was then and is today, one of the greatest influences on the Abermain photographer's novel approach to wedding and portrait photography.

Thirty-two-year-old Robert has been established as a photographer in the Hunter Valley about four years, and he owns The Everglades Garden Studio at Abermain.

He began his career by taking photos of rodeos and motocross meetings, then national parks while on a round Australia working holiday, and he then left for Panama. When he arrived in America he travelled around photographing national parks. People soon began ordering his prints for postcards. "In many of these out of the way places there were no photographers and people began asking me to do weddings. My interest in photography

Have camera . . .

was being fired all the time," Robert said.

Robert took a part-time job in New York and attended night school at one of the colleges, to learn more advanced photographic techniques. He began managing a motel and tourist complex in the Rockies and about this time, won second prize in the 1972 Kodak international newspaper photography awards for a photo he took of mustangs being herded in a snow blizzard.

"When I came back to Australia, it still hadn't dawned on me that I could make a living from photography, so I took a part-time job at a vineyard, to subsidise my interest," he said.

"The American college had given me a great insight into more advanced photographic techniques. The Americans want good photos at any

cost. "I was accepted into the Institute of Australian Photography which recommends me for wedding photography and portraiture. As far as I know I am the only person in the Hunter Valley with such a classified recommendation," Robert added.

What makes Robert's photos different? "I strive for naturalness, through simplicity and elegance. Too many photographers strive to capture the unimportant things — pretty flowers and gardens — but portraiture must be about people. All other things are secondary and musn't compete for the viewer's attention in the photo," Robert said.

To achieve the best photo, Robert concerns himself with the personality of the subject. "It's crazy to do anything too romantic with people who get embarrassed and shy. I put these people in a natural pose and

then 'eavesdrop' from a distance with a telescopic lens.

"I won't do a wedding unless I can spend an hour or two interviewing the bride and groom, to find out the style of photo they like and what will suit them. This is basically an American idea.

"Young people today are placing greater emphasis on the type of wedding photos they want. After all, they'll probably be looking at these photos for the next 50 years, and they are prepared to go to a great deal of trouble to get exactly what they want."

"On the wedding day there is no guarantee they will get the weather and setting they want, or that they won't be under tremendous stress. As well as that, the photographer has to compete with 100 or so other people on the day who want to speak to the bridal couple.

"So about 30 per cent of the couples I work with now will come out with me a couple of days before the wedding, in gown and suit, so we are totally uninterrupted and can achieve the best result."

And results he gets, if the popularity of Bignell photos is an indication.

