

Heroes and Entrepreneurs

Bill Jay

This special issue of Shots on landscape photography gives me the opportunity to reminisce on my favorite topic and period in the whole history of the medium: the wet-plate adventurers of the 1850s-1870s.

I can vividly remember the actual day, now 20 years ago, when wet-plate landscapes were transformed for me from a subject of merely historical interest into a personally felt passion. I had been asked by a television production company to demonstrate the making of a collodion negative. "For authenticity's sake," said the director, "we want you to dress in Victorian clothing and actually make a wet-plate landscape photograph, without any interference or help from the crew. OK?" "Great idea", I rashly said, "No problem". At that point I should have been committed - to an asylum.

The actual day was hot and windy but when we arrived on location I was still ridiculously cocky. Sure, I had made wet-plate previously, but only in a well-ventilated darkroom as an historical exercise. I did not imagine that the outdoor location could be much different. I soon changed my mind.

The first problem was encountered as soon as the crew dumped all the equipment we had amassed according to my instructions from the back of a van at a hillside overlooking a pastoral view. "Just carry it up the track about 100 yards and set up," the director said. "And look natural." What I looked was not natural but aghast at the mound of equipment.

The wet-plate landscape photographer needed to transport not only his camera, lens and tripod but also a chest full of chemicals, glass plates, a bucket for water or even the water itself, and, above all, a darkroom in which to coat, sensitize, develop, fix and wash his plates. Even for average size pictures this added up to a considerable load. From one photographer's list of the late 1850s we find that he needed to take on every field trip:

One 9x11 inch brass-bound camera - 21 lbs.

Silver nitrate bath - 12 lbs.

A box containing a dozen 9x11 inch glass plates - 12 lbs.

A box for extra lenses, chemicals, measures, etc. - 28 lbs.

Heavy wooden tripod - 5 lbs.

Darkroom tent - 40 lbs.

The total weight was 118 lbs. which had to be carried on the photographer's back for 10 to 15 miles before the picture location was reached.

By the time I had arranged and packed the outfit and walked a mere 100 yards, the stiff collar was biting into my neck, the woolen 3-piece suit was a steam bath, and the only sounds I could make was the wheezing for breath and the pounding of my heart. I sat down on the chemical box for a long rest before setting up the tent, arranging the bottles and erecting the tripod, with the camera unfolded and focused on the view.

By this time the temperature inside the little black tent had soared and as soon as I opened the collodion bottle the stifling air was full of ether fumes. This was a crucial part of my commentary: how to coat a glass plate and sensitize it. In retrospect it was the most comical part: giddy with fumes I was alternating between fainting, throwing up and giggling hysterically.

At last the plate was coated, sensitized and loaded into the holder, dripping silver nitrate everywhere. Hey, but who cared by that time. . . ? Dopey, but satisfied, I emerged from the tent to find the camera had blown over in the wind, with the crew anxious to film my expression while stifling its laughter. Panic. Back in the tent to store the plate, hoping it would not dry out before I could retrieve it, and a mad scramble to reset the camera, check focusing, replace lens cap, collect the plate holder - and make a 20 second exposure.

Back in the tent, I was just feeling a resurgence of confidence when I heard myself say, "After development and fixing, I will wash the plate. . ." and stopped. Water! I didn't have any. I reemerged to find the crew all pointing down the steep hill towards a river, half-a-mile away. The last shot is of an insignificant dot (me) drunkenly tramping across the field with a bucket in my hand, muttering incoherently.

After that disastrous day I found a new respect and admiration for the wet-plate landscape photographer. In my inability to cope with even one plate, I marveled at those who would then repack their equipment and hike to the next location in order to submit themselves to such abuse all over again. This was the heroic age of photography when photographers performed herculean tasks in their pursuit of pictures. As enlarging was not yet practicable, all plates were printed by contact which meant that the desire for large prints demanded ever larger cameras, with the consequent increase in the weight of

equipment. Many wet-plate photographers of the period used plates size 16 x 20 inches, including Roger Fenton, Robert MacPherson and Francis Frith. Several photographers, including Carleton Watkins, secured views in the Yosemite Valley on plates 22 x 28 inches and William Henry Jackson took a 20 x 24 inch camera into the Rocky Mountains in 1875.

Photographers solved the problem of transporting such heavy loads of equipment in a variety of ways, depending on the circumstances and location. Louis and Auguste Bisson photographed from the top of Mount Blanc using porters to carry the equipment; Francis Frith chugged up the Nile in a little steam vessel brought from England for the purpose, and then transferred his gear to the backs of camels; William Henry Jackson burdened pack-mules with his 20 x 24 inch camera; Francis Bedford had built a luxurious caravan fitted out as sleeper and darkroom; Timothy O'Sullivan used a small boat which he named "The Picture" to sail up the Colorado river; other photographers used all and every means of carrying their messy and cumbersome wet-plate outfits to every corner of the world.

In their insatiable quest for pictures these wet-plate explorers braved every conceivable difficulty and danger, and sometimes did not survive. They fell off mountains and were attacked by brigands, scalped by Indians, pursued by robbers, and harassed by "heathens" of every color in every country. They were charged by bulls, elephants and rhinocerosii; mauled by lions and tigers; attacked by alligators and wild dogs. They were shipwrecked at sea and fought for survival in jungles, deserts and blizzards, and faced battles with armed and irate natives. They faced bullets, deadly snakes, swarms of insects, "jealous husbands and angry customers". They resourcefully reset and splintered their own broken bones while alone in the wilderness, and turned tragedy into vaudeville by confounding hostile savages with the 'magic' of photography. The above catalogue of difficulties could be endless and it is not a fanciful list of fictional possibilities; each case of hardship, tragedy or survival refers to a specific event in the life of a 19 century photographer. In pursuit of pictures, photographers bravely and recklessly risked, and sometimes lost, their lives.

Why did they risk so much? I would like to think that all of them were suffused with the same nobility of spirit and pure idealism as expressed in these lines, written in 1858:

How many a puny limb and flaccid muscle might become tough and brawny, how many a contracting chest and failing lung might experience for the first time the invigorating influence of the pure oxygenation which is only to be found 'over the hills and far away'? Nay, may we not even ask how many a purposeless life, by assuming this 'shadowed livery of the burnished sun' might thus find an object, and in its health-bestowing soul-expanding service realize the fact that 'life is

earnest', and progressing always Excelsior, excelsior, go on to discover aims even higher and nobler than those which are to be found in the atelier of the sun.

But the truth was often more prosaic. Most of these photographers were peripatetic professionals, giving the customer what he wanted. And that goes for the expeditionary photographers of the American West whose prime concern was often to "prove" through their images the geological theory held by the leader. For example, many of the great images made in Yosemite during this period were designed to support one side or the other in the urgent controversy of the age: was the Valley created by volcanic upheaval or by the scouring of ancient glaciers? Form was subservient to function.

For others, the rewards of landscape photography were less academic and more financial. There was a lot of money to be made from exotic views during the Victorian Age. A few of these wet-plate explorers and landscape specialists did indeed make fortunes from their pictures.

Eadweard Muybridge is reputed to have earned \$17,000 from the sale of his views from a six-month expedition in Yosemite. This was a colossal fortune by any standards, and represents an average wage for 40 years, when most Americans were lucky to get a dollar a day.

Francis Frith was typical of the entrepreneurs who saw in photographic views a lucrative market. Frith made three expeditions to Egypt between 1856 and 1860, taking with him wet-plate outfits. The sale of his views on his return to England settled the course of his life from that time on. The print sales exceeded his wildest dreams. For example, one set of prints was issued monthly in 25 parts, each containing 3 views for 10 shillings. This was a very reasonable price in comparison with usual print costs of the time, but Frith's profits were immense due to the quantity of prints sold. He made over 150,000 prints. The income from this one project (the Egypt views were also issued in other sizes and presentations) was 25,000 pounds, in an age when 50 pounds *per year* could house and feed a family of four. The most expensive of Frith's books from these expeditions was a Bible containing his views of the Holy Land. It was issued in limited edition of 170 copies at 50 guineas each, each book costing therefore the *annual* income of the average worker of the day.

Incidentally, a quick calculation will show that the prices charged for landscape albumen prints in the 1860s (about \$7-10) are almost exactly the same as for average gallery prints today in terms of purchasing power or percentage of average annual income. Unfortunately, for my friends who are trying to earn a living as landscape photographers, the market has dwindled dramatically.

My guess is that Frith, Muybridge et al. , if they were alive today, would still be making lots of money, probably selling digitally printed posters through retail stores in malls and supermarkets.

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