

The Automatic Camera and the Dilution of Effort

The Modern Camera, And the Dilution of Effort.

An Essay on the Loss of Craft in Photography

landscape orientation.

This article should be printed in

IN 1870, Dr. Ferdinand Hayden led an Army survey expedition into the Yellowstone area. He took with him two men he thought could capture the images of the area: artist Thomas Moran, and photographer William Henry Jackson. That Hayden chose wisely is proven by the tremendous legacy left by the men he selected. The collodion/albumen photographs that Jackson showed in Washington D.C. after the expedition were pivotal in the creation two years later of Yellowstone National Park, the first of its kind in the United States. Jackson is remembered to this day in the valley and town that still bear his name: Jackson Hole, and the town of Jackson, Wyoming* (Moran is memorialized in Mt. Moran, the pretty mountain at the North end of the Teton range).

Old Faithful / W. H. Jackson

William Henry Jackson

American, Wyoming, 1870

Albumen print

20 3/16 x 16 3/4 in.



Jackson worked primarily with a 20x24 inch wet-plate camera. He used the collodion process to make negatives, and then made albumen prints from them. The collodion process was by no means rapid. The typical exposure took at least 30 minutes of work

(you can read about the process and see a video at the [J. Paul Getty On-line Museum](#)). First a glass plate was unpacked, cleaned, and then polished. Once the polish was carefully removed, a collodion solution (cellulose polymer dissolved in water with some chloride and bromide salts added to increase the silver activity; the solution needed to be prepared a week in advance) was poured on the plate which was then tilted to spread the thick solution evenly. Before the plate has a chance to dry, it is immersed for several minutes in a silver nitrate bath, and quickly transferred into the plate holder. The sensitized plate had about ten minutes before it began drying out, and once dry the image was useless. The plate holder was quickly taken to the already-focused camera, the long exposure made, and then back to the darkroom for immediate processing. The plate was removed from the holder, and developer was poured onto the latent image. After suitable developing time had elapsed, the plate was rinsed in water then fixed. This is the first place in the process where the photographer could then put the plate aside and start working on another photograph. The negative image embedded in the collodion was very fragile, and the plate needed to be varnished before it was again handled. The varnish was thick, and needed to be poured over the image carefully to not destroy the collodion.

Needless to say, Jackson didn't fritter away any shots. The effort involved in making just one negative was too great to waste on scenes he didn't think had a chance of being very good. He could not afford to just walk up to a lake or canyon rim and set up the camera where he stood. He needed to study the area, spend days there if needed to find the camera locations that gave both the big picture of the area, and some feeling of how vast, how wonderful, and how unusual the West was. When he wanted a shot, he'd need to pack 200 pounds of equipment on a mule, get to the location, unpack the equipment into the tent that served as his darkroom, take the 50 pound 20x24 camera and tripod to the selected site, focus and prepare the camera (provided the wind wasn't too strong to destroy the long-exposure shot; if so, pack up and go back to camp), then back to the darkroom to prepare a plate. By this method he created a collection of wonderful landscapes.



TWO YEARS AGO I was given some advice by a very good painter, "go out to shoot photographs with only one frame of film left." He told me to make one good shot, then come home. If I got it right away, good. If I had to search for three hours to get it, good. Of course, being new at photography, I ignored his advice, but I never forgot it.

So like many young photographers with auto focus, auto wind, auto exposure cameras, I grabbed a handful of 36-exposure rolls, and started blasting away. A 5-roll afternoon wasn't that unusual. I'd shoot ten or twelve rolls a week and thought nothing of it. Film could be had for a couple dollars a roll, could be processed very inexpensively (down to a couple dimes a roll if I did it myself), and my Canon EOS5 camera sure made it easy to shoot film. I'd get a large stack of slides back from the processor (or out of the kitchen when I did it myself) that needed sorting. The sorting process was simple: throw away the bad shots. I'd keep any shot that was properly exposed and focused; dump the technically poor ones. Out of a roll I'd throw out half a dozen, and the rest would be scanned and put into archival sleeves.

PRESENT DAY: I look back at those photographs, and I'm surprised how lousy they are. Of course the reason is obvious: in shooting 180 frames in five hours, there is no way I could be concentrating on making any of them good. I was practicing a form of random photography (the virtues of which are now being touted as Lomography): *the more frames you shoot, the better the chance you'll get a good photograph*. It's the biggest fallacy in photography, but I believe it is the operating philosophy of most young photographers.

You see, present day photographs cost the photographer almost nothing. Consider the cost-per-frame of shooting a 36-exposure roll of slide film: \$6 for the film, \$4 for processing gives us a whopping \$0.28 a frame. Few would deem that an impediment with their finger on the shutter release. Digital photography has made the situation all the worse. Once the camera is bought, each frame shot costs exactly nothing. At that cost, what's to stop an owner from just shooting everything and hope for the best? If you don't like it, delete it. If it's not quite right, fix it in Photoshop.

But you can't fix where you stood to take the picture. You can't fix the angle of the sun. You can't fix a photograph that has no feeling, no composition, no life. It's necessary to prepare for some shots, time the young photographer is loath to spend when he can shoot five frames a second. You can't scout a location in a single afternoon. You need to see the place at different

times of day, different times of the year, different weather conditions. Who's going to do all that standing around looking when they could be shooting another card full of images? Who is going to control the light and the background when they can just replace it in Photoshop? Who is going to spend fifteen minutes framing a shot when there are more shots just around the corner they might miss? Almost no one, it seems.

Okay, there are times when you need to take a lot of images in a very short amount of time. Fires, parades, and weddings come to mind. But good shots are created. They just don't happen by chance. Every bad shot, seen by the public or not, is an indictment against the photographer who created it. It's evidence of the felony of haste, the offence of inattention, the criminal lack of preparation.

The temptation is severe. After paying so much for the equipment, how dare the modern technologist not take full advantage of it? What if Jackson gave in to what was modern technology of his day (cellulose nitrate roll film was invented in 1881)? What would we think of him today if he went back with his new Brownie camera, dashed from viewpoint to viewpoint snapping off as many shots as he could, not hardly pausing to even look at where he's pointing the camera? Yet too many modern photographers do just that. They go back to the very places Jackson made famous and produce photographs that can't even compare to his. Using a car they see in a half day more places than Jackson saw in a week on horseback, and they are snapping pictures the whole way.

WE HAVE SOMETHING TO GAIN by taking our time. Instead of shooting three rolls an hour, spend three hours on one photograph. Think about the scene. Is it really worth shooting? Will your cousin want to see it? [I don't mean will he comment appreciatively when you show it to him, I mean will he pay you to put it on his wall?] Is the light the best it could be? Would a different angle of the sun (either in the day or at a different time of year) make a better shot? Could you get a better shot if the clouds were different? Do you have the right film in the camera to create the look that best fits the subject? Does your framing of the shot and the composition convey the *feeling* of the subject that first made you stop and linger on it? Do you even know how the scene or subject made you feel? If you don't know, how can you expect your photograph to successfully convey it?

There are literally dozens of similar questions that should be asked by the photographer for every scene before the camera is even out of the bag. Will someone with a digital or automatic camera ask them? Not likely. Instead they'll bang off a few shots and see what it looks like then they get the prints back.

And the shame of it is that we are seeing these 'photographs' all over the net.. I have no hard evidence, but I'd hazard a guess that at least half of the images we see on "photo" websites are posted by photographers who have never in their lives *intentionally* composed an image. Sure, they've framed a lot of them, thousands perhaps (some seem to wear this like a badge of honor), but the composition was just what happened to be in front of the lens then the shutter was pressed. And after a few repairs in Photoshop, up the Internet they come.

AND SO WE COME TO IT: the **DILUTION OF EFFORT**. Photographers have only so much time to take pictures. Jackson would spend days getting one negative. That's a great deal of effort packed into one image, but what extraordinary images he made! We spend fifteen seconds or less and

what do we create? Cascades of snapshots! Piles of photographs that even our mothers won't hang on the wall. Yep, we are creating nothing more nor less than *snapshots*, created in an instant, and just as interesting as those Aunt Josephine shot when the family went to that Jersey beach last summer. Shooting fast is diluting our efforts, spreading one hour of our talent into dozens of worthless shots.

There is only one cure: Go out with only one frame left, and try not to waste it. Spend half a day finding the one subject or scene with enough emotion, feeling, interest, or beauty to justify using all the film you have to shoot it. It isn't easy. The temptation to move on because something out there might be better is strong. But it must be ignored until you are certain that where you are has no possibilities. If you stopped, *something* there must have attracted you. Stay there until you know what it is. And when you know, start thinking like a photographer and figure out how best to capture that something on film. It isn't easy, and there will be many false starts. The images you get from this process are the ones you should be letting us see.

And how do you tell the difference between a snapshot and an intentional photograph? That too is hard to do, and it's likely we'll all make some miscalls. Generally the intentional photographs will convey in some way the intent of the photographer. We'll have an idea what he was after, what he saw, or what meant something to him. And to us. Snapshots are usually nothing more than disconnected scenes from the life of the photographer, with no meaning to the viewer at all.

WE PHOTOGRAPHERS, especially those amongst us who have some inkling what a good photograph is, must find the intentional images amongst our own portfolios and more importantly in the portfolios of young photographers. Look at them for a time, think about them, sort out our feelings about them, and then tell the young photographer as best we can what we really think of their work, and how we think it might be improved. It's okay to say what we think of the color, and it's okay to say what we think of the framing, or equipment and film choice. But what we really need to tell the photographer is what we felt about his or her image, what did it do for us, and what didn't it do. Viewing an image is a very personal thing. There isn't a standard to which all photographs are compared more reliable than your own meandering experience. Use it to tell the photographer how you felt about his work, or how you expected to feel but didn't. Then he can compare how he felt to how his photograph made you feel and decide what to do next.

Bruce Wilson, Provo Utah, July 4, 2002. (edited slightly 14 August, 2002)

*Note added Feb 2005: Jackson Hole was known as Jackson's Hole long before the arrival of Hayden's survey group. The Hole, the lake, and the mountain are named after David E. Jackson, an early fur trapper who helped found the Rocky Mountain Fur Company [link](#).

Revision #1

Created 3 October 2023 13:40:17 by bruce

Updated 3 October 2023 13:41:17 by bruce