

WILL DUNNIWAY *THE* Collodion Photographer

SPANNING THREE CENTURIES WITH THE WET PLATE COLLODION PROCESS

1ST EDITION.

DESIGNED BY WILL DUNNIWAY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL DUNNIWAY



2008

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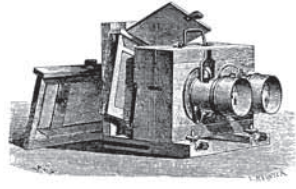
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On a personal note, I would like to acknowledge a few people for bearing with me for more than a decade and a half now in the never-ending learning curve that comes with this craft. Forgive me for not mentioning you here if you are one of those wonderful folks.

In the beginning there was John Coffey, my first teacher and now good friend. I owe him greatly for my knowledge. Even today I still learn from him. They don't come any more talented than John. After John came my Civil War tintypist pard, Claude Levett. Much of what I am today as a tintypist to the Civil War reenactment crowd came from him. Claude is one of the greats in the collodion arts, no matter which century you live in. For over a decade now there has also been Mark Osterman and France Scully Osterman. What an incredible couple. The grass got greener on Frederick Scott Archer's grave the day they started pouring plates. Mark has been my mentor, and between Mark and France they have mentored many hundreds of others like myself.

My colleagues. Where do I start? Each in his or her particular way contributed to this portfolio of my work. Wayne Pierce, my friend and collodion West Coast partner — almost all of my camera equipment has the work of his hand on them. His talents are too many to list here, but he is a skilled artist in many forms of photography. Bob Szabo, one of the best in the collodion arts today. His historical work shadowing Carelton Watkins in Yosemite is as true as rain. Then there's Clovis Davis, another friend and collodion artist from God's country of Oregon, and a master builder of camera boxes. For the past 12 years, many of my props and signage have come from my good friend and assistant in this craft, painter and calligrapher Richard Staley. Richard has artistically and masterfully posed my clients while at events in the spirit of the Victorian way. My "engineer," Larry Moniot, the proprietor of the Belgium Frog

Case Mfg. Company, has engineered most of my camp gear and restored many of the thrashed 19th century cases that I sell. Both Richard's and Larry's years of friendship and back-breaking work on my behalf have not gone unnoticed. I could not have done it without them.

Over the years there have been so many others that have in some way contributed to my journey. There was my former partner Crystal, aka Lady Amberbead. Irreplaceable! We all miss her. And the one and only and extremely gifted Floyd Oydegaard, aka Black Bart. Many more friends have helped, such as: Brian Pace, Henry and Katheryn Mace, Neb Frye, Stephan Jacobson, Janice Staley, Dan Dawson, Ted Roberts, James Burgess, Tony Caltabiano, Lisa Dodge Rowley and Claire Allen to name a few. Then, as always on a moment's notice, were the legions of helpers from the renowned Guild of Wet Plate Photo-graphic Umbrella Holders, Plate Pourers, Image Gilders, Rougers and Roofers. (Local Twenty-Seven. Knights of Labor. Temple One.) Did I mention that we have fun too? I would like to thank Rich and Marianne Reinecke for their continued support since 2005.

Last but not least, there is my lovely wife, Frances. She now stands by my side daily and encourages me in every way to continue my work in this wet plate collodion craft. What a blessed man I am. Saying thank you is just not enough.

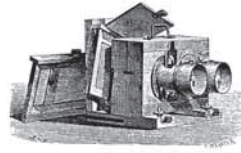
So now, as you, the reader, begin your journey through these images, remember those who came before me. Enjoy these photographs, with an appreciation of all the blood, sweat, and passion that went into creating each one.

WILL DUNNIWAY. CORONA, CALIFORNIA. 2008



*Will Dunniway and Company 2006.
From left. Larry Moniot, Richard
Staley, Will Dunniway and Frances
Dunniway*

WILL DUNNIWAY [3]



A BRIEF HISTORY OF COLLODION

Wet plate collodion was the dominant photographic process used between 1851 and 1880, replacing the daguerreotype. While the daguerreotype was not the first photographic process to be invented, earlier processes required hours for successful exposure, making daguerreotype the first commercially viable photographic process and the first to permanently record and fix an image with exposure time compatible with portrait photography.

With the advance of photography in the mid-19th century, FREDRICK SCOTT ARCHER, an English sculptor and photographer, experimented with collodion in the hope of producing a photographic negative on ordinary glass plates. Collodion is a thick and syrupy liquid, made by dissolving nitrated cotton in a mixture of alcohol and ether. It was widely used by surgeons as a liquid bandage owing to its strength and adhesiveness.

The wet plate collodion process requires patience and precision. Images must be made with a darkroom nearby. Wet plate implies what it is: the plate has to remain wet while it is processed; if the plate is left to dry, it loses complete sensitivity to light — and thus no image will appear.

Practiced authentically today by only a few, wet plate collodion photography was pretty much discarded by the 1880s, when dry plates were invented.



Fredrick Scott Archer



© 2008 Image courtesy of Matthew Isenberg

A Classical example of what a wet plate photographer would have had to have for this collodion photography occupation. Looking closely you can see in this CDV detail: Head brace stand, Jenny Lind table, camera and lens, wet plate holder, CDV burnisher, chemical bottles galore, image coloring pastels with mortar and pestle. At his feet is a frame mat and two large gold gilded oval frames.

On the Jenny Lind table there appears to be a image leather case and on the rear of the camera, some 1/9 case frame preservers.

Will specializes in the 19th century wet plate collodion process that he first came in contact with at a re-enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1988. By 1990 he learned this unique process through apprenticeships with nationally renowned photographic collodion artists, John Coffey, Claude Levet, and Mark Osterman of the George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. In the decades that have followed, Will has become an expert in this historic photographic process.

INTRODUCTION

by Tony Caltabiano



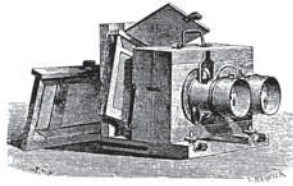
Will Dunniway. Photo by Brian Pace

In the last several years the collodion process has enjoyed a resurgence among the photographic community. Being a master craftsman of the modern movement, Will has had a significant part in this resurgence through his workshops and tireless dedication to the highest standards and subtle nuances of this alchemy. However, Will's talents go far beyond just the technical. He has honed his unique voice through deep understanding of the people who originally used this process. Through his eyes these sublime images reach across three different centuries and tell us about a time past, but newly examined and interpreted.

Now, in the 21st century Will approaches some of these same subjects speaking of another time that is now vanishing, a way of life vanishing and fleeting as the equipment he shoots with.

“This whole interplay of old glass, chemistry, wood, brass, weather, and developing on the spot is a dance, a rhythm, a flow, mixed with luck and sweat, speaking about the past, present - and to the future is wonderful to me. This is a language modern photography for the most part no longer speaks. I am not threatened by digital cameras, as many “traditional” photographers are - I can only think back to a time where others like myself were seeing this thing called ‘film’ and worrying about the end of their craft. ‘Modern’ and ‘technology’ are relative terms that speak more about the society that created them than the actual devices themselves. To me, the dialog between the end of film and digital between silver gelatin, and ink jet is largely irrelevant - what is real to me when the act of pouring collodion on glass comes together with recording an image inside an old box made of wood, glass, and cloth. I feel a kinship with those who have come and gone long before I walked the earth.”

On a personal note, I have known Will for many years, and have had experienced first hand sitters become living windows to our great national identity. The sheer power of the Native American portraits, the honesty in the eyes of the ordinary people transformed, and the mythic wilderness combine to hold up a mirror and reflect back the yesterday and today of our shared psyche. While this book represents twenty years of Will's work, it more importantly could not have existed without two hundred years of American character.



A MAN WITH A MISSION • By Andrea Kahn

(A version of this article originally appeared in the Los Angeles Times, 2007)

“...one’s skill is never complete; one’s knowledge is forever lacking; one’s taste is invariably altered; one’s opinion ever subject to controversy. There is a complete and constant urge toward improvement...”

Andrew Loomis - 20th century painter

There aren’t many who find their passion later in life and then spend most of their waking hours pursuing it. Will Dunniway is one of those lucky few.

For as long as he can remember, Will, 61, has been enthralled with 19th century tintype (also known as wet-plate collodion), a type of early photography he’d seen in Civil War books as a child. When, in 1988, he ran across renowned contemporary tintype photographers John Coffer and Claude Levet at a Civil War reenactment, he felt he’d “found the keys to the kingdom. . . .

“My mother used to get me history and Civil War books so I could look at the photography,” says Will, a lifelong history buff who was born and raised in Colton, in Southern California, but spent 30 years as a graphic artist in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He retired in 2003 and moved to Corona, where he lives with his wife, Frances. “I’d always wanted to do it myself, but I didn’t know how. When I found someone doing it, it was love at first sight.”

Will worked as an apprentice under John Coffer (who is so besotted with 19th century life that he lives in a cabin with no electricity or running water in upstate Dundee, NY), and soon became an expert himself.

Now one of the few authentic collodion photographers in the world, Will began his apprenticeship with John by letter (John had no phone); the only way they could speak was when John called Will collect from the local hardware store's pay phone. After a year of learning this way, Will reached John's former apprentice, Claude Levet in Virginia, and Claude took over where John left off. Soon after, Mark Osterman, curator of historic processes at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, the world's oldest photography museum, and his wife, France Scully Osterman, both high caliber collodion artists, entered the picture.

Will practiced by making and selling tintypes and ambrotypes (same as a tintype, just on glass) of reenactors at historical events — from reenactments of the 1850 Gold Rush to the Battle of Gettysburg. Will continues to work these events, like “a living historical demonstration,” charging around \$50 for a 5-by-7 tintype. Will now also does landscapes in wet plate collodion glass negatives and teaches the process throughout the West.

What is ‘Wet Plate Collodion?’

Will uses only original equipment, choosing from one of his seven original wet-plate cameras and an array of 22 original lenses. These lenses are all handmade with hand-ground glass, giving the wet images a very different look than you would see with modern optics. These old optics tend to have what is called a “sweet spot” in the center of the image — as these images radiate outward, the sharpness falls off. The result is delightfully ethereal, almost dreamlike in appearance.

The process is also color blind. It cannot “see” blue, and it “sees” red as black. This means that if you are a redheaded person with freckles, the tintype made of you will be very harsh. Blue eyes disappear; red hair turns black; freckles become black blemishes. These problems can be corrected with white cornstarch. “You have to work with each person in their individual appearance and dress, seeing each person with trained eyes as if there was a blue filter between you and the model,” explains Will.

Time-consuming, costly and tricky (Will's tools include heavy wooden 19th century wet plate cameras mounted with large brass lenses), the process requires its practitioners to make exposures on glass or blackened-iron tin plates, each one at a time while the plate is still wet. The collodion solution (nitro cellulose in ether with the addition of alcohols) is ‘salted’ days before with iodides and bromides to prepare it for the silver nitrate solution that makes the collodion wet film on the plates sensitive to light. Prior to a one-day shoot, it typically takes another day just to prepare the chemicals and gather the gear. Not a casual affair.

Once exposed, the image is developed using iron sulfate and acidic acid mixed with water, rinsed and fixed in potassium cyanide. The resulting images look eerily like they came straight out of the Victorian age, complete with pathos and intensity.

Wet plate collodion photography was given much attention in the 2005 “Into the West” miniseries, executive

produced by Steven Spielberg, when a character marries a photographer and falls in love with the work herself.

Will is enamored as much with the look and artistic aspect of collodion photography, which he describes as “painting with light,” as by the practice itself. It is a practice he is committed to replicating as faithfully as possible. “I’m not a carnival photographer,” he says. “I don’t dress people up. I’m interested in history, and I

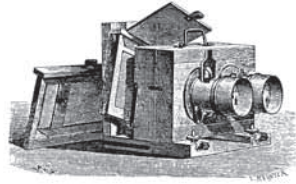


wanted to master the process as the early photographers had. Now, when I read about the early photographers and their problems with dirt, dust, rain or bad chemistry, I understand exactly what they are talking about because, even though I was born later, I have become one of them.”

For Will Dunningway, collodion photography represents the perfect combination of history and art; the perfect interplay between the past, present and future; between old glass, wood, chemicals and the weather; between luck and sweat. “It’s what makes me who I am,” says Will. “When I found collodion photography, I knew I had found what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.”

*Will Dunningway. Ferrotypes
self portrait 2002*

(www.collodion-artist.com)



Tools of the Trade

All the images in this book were photographed with cameras and lenses from Will Dunniway's personal collection dating from the 1855-1885 era.

The 1872 E. & A. Anthony wet plate camera shown below is "one of these cameras". Along with a handful of different size Anthony cameras, he also uses an 1860 whole plate French camera. Used in conjunction with them are a selection of period lenses made by Dallmeyer and Ross (English), C.C. Harrison and Holmes, Booth & Hayden (New York), Darlot and Gasc Charconnet (French), and Voigtlander (German). Each handmade lens and camera informs the subject matter in its own unique way.

Most of the other equipment is also original to the wet plate era. (including such items as; head brace stands, many of his bottles, hydrometers, and developing trays.)



Miss Bowman

GALLERY OF PLATES Portfolio [1] Historic



PLATE 1

Miss Bowman
Mary Bowman
Ardenwood Farms, Fremont, California

2004

TINTYPE

1/6 TH PLATE



PLATE 2

Tinsmiths

*From left: Don Carpentier and Bill McMillen
Eastfield Village, East Nassau, New York
2005*

TINTYPE

5X7 PLATE



PLATE 3

49ers Miners

Old Oak Ranch Gold Camp Staff: Seated at left: Scott Stone, Andrew Quist, Steven Buie. Standing at left:

Cory Dauber, David King, Cameron Pitts

The Diggins, Columbia, California

2006 TINTYPE

5X7 PLATE



PLATE 4

*Confederate private
Mike Killian, Nevada.
At a NCWA event, Nevada City, California
1995
TINTYPE
5X7 PLATE*



PLATE 5

Gentlemen
From left: Edward Sims and Jim Miller
Columbia, California
2004
TINTYPE
1/4 PLATE



PLATE 6

Cowboys waiting
From left: *Cliff Chappell and Brad Bingham*
Roaring Camp, Felton, California
1995

TINTYPE

5X7 PLATE



PLATE 7

CSS Hunley in shipyard. View No. 1
From left: John Nevins, George Taylor, Richard
Staley, Hunley builder, John Dangerfield and Larry
Moniot. Ardenwood, Fremont, California
2005 Richard Staley, Art Director
GLASS COLLODION NEGATIVE
5X7 PLATE



PLATE 8

Orchard battle aftermath
NCWA reenactment group
Kelly Park, San Jose, California
1996

COLLODION GLASS NEGATIVE
5X7 PLATE



PLATE 9

Yankee officer with sword
David Salyer, 7th West Virginia Vol. Infantry
Ardenwood, Fremont, California

2006

TINTYPE

1/4 PLATE



PLATE 10

*Wells Fargo building
From left on balcony: Steve Bechtold, Richard Staley.
Bottom left: Sean Willadsen, Larry Baumgardner
Columbia, California*

2005

TINTYPE

5X7 PLATE