

MYTH: John Coffey is always right, knows everything worth knowing about wet-plate photography and never makes mistakes.

I hope you are laughing out loud with that one! After nearly three decades of doing wet-plate collodion photography and making lots and lots of mistakes along the way, I still count myself as being on the learning curve. Yes, this old dog can always learn some new tricks and sometimes needs correction. So, please, please, if you see anything wrong with what I have written about the wet-plate process, here or anywhere, drop me a line and let me know about it. If something seems ass backwards, well, it just might be and I want to know about it so I can fix it. I have no pride about this. I just want to know and teach the best possible ways to do wet-plate. I am also interested in common sense safety. So, if you see something in my writings or DVDs that seem particularly unsafe, I want to know about that too.

Unfortunately, some of my contemporaries aren't quite so diligent this way. One example which I have spoken up about, to no avail, that is absolutely, slap yourself in the forehead, unbelievable, is a certain ambrotype image that was made by a very well known team of wet-plate artists/teachers. It has proven to be a very popular and captivating image that has appeared in one of the better known alternative photo process manual's wet-plate section and has also been incorporated into the logo for an up coming big budget documentary film about the heavy hitters in the alt photography art scene. This image shows a glass plate, held by the corner, about to be poured with collodion with a fully lit Spirit Lamp only a couple inches underneath it! The caption under the picture reads: the feeling one gets just before pouring collodion on a plate. Like I said before, totally unbelievable! Any of us who have done wet-plate for very long know that the caption should more accurately read: the feeling one gets just before they pour the collodion on their plate and get torched. Bye! Bye! Sucker! And like I said, also before, my pleas to the author of the particular said manual to take note of this and to at the very least cut it from any future printings have gone unanswered for over half a year. The producer of the movie has been recently notified. I sincerely hope she sees the wisdom of replacing the image with something a lot more honest and safer looking. At the very least this image is a very dark and disturbing practical joke and at its worst the prelude to some hapless beginner severely burning themselves, their house or school down. Yet, the alt process manual does not keep it a secret elsewhere in its pages that collodion is highly flammable and should be kept well away from any sparks or flames. We can only hope students will read that warning and take the prominently featured picture and caption as ever so much cow excrement not to be emulated. Perhaps the medicine showman/collodion artist team that made the outrageous image was only going for a much more visually dramatic effect when they

produced it than the ordinary routine, not so flashy actual act of flowing collodion on a plate. Very exciting indeed! But then, where was the disclaimer: children please do not try this trick at home. Personally, I would be mortified to have such an incredibly dangerous and misleading image show up in anything I produced no matter how flamboyant, mysterious, and lucrative it might be.

I will close by saying that this is not a case of petty jealousy or me trying to build myself up by kicking other people's work down. But rather it's a case of wet-plate photography itself taking a hit should somebody torch themselves pouring collodion on a plate over a lit spirit lamp. Some people like to make out how dangerous it is enough already without that added to the record! Sorry, I'm just not going to apologize for being a voice in the wilderness willing to speak out on such things and the heck with nice-nice and kiss-kiss. Maybe I'll save somebody's face, literally.