

Myth: Pouring the collodion on a Mammoth plate is extremely challenging and is the hardest part of shooting Mammoths.

First, I define Mammoths as 18x22, 20x24 and larger plates. I think my 19th century predecessors would agree.

But, NO! The pouring of the collodion isn't really the hard part. I know as I've single handedly poured many Mammoths over the years on glass and tin. Also, plenty of my beginning wet-plate students have done the Mammoth Plate Option and got a good pour their first try. Even the critical pouring of the developer onto the plate goes pretty easily when the Coffey style Mammoth Plate Helper Tray is used.

So, then what is the hardest part when it comes to shooting Mammoths? It's getting all the gear and chemicals together. To find an original wet-plate Mammoth camera for sale at any price is an extremely rare event. To have a camera custom built for you can be a very expensive proposition as well. High quality lenses that will cover that format are hard to find and if they are from the wet-plate era are usually priced off the planet. Some latter day Mammoth plate shooters have poured tens of thousands of dollars just into the camera and lens part of it. Then there's the Mammoth Silver Bath. Mine holds 2 ½ gallons of Silver Nitrate solution. So, there's another pile of money to come up with if you want to do more than just look at your big awesome camera. Finally, there's the sheer grandiose volume of collodion and other chemicals, trays and such. Clearly what it all comes down to is, if you got the money you have the hard part whipped. But, only and I stress ONLY if you are shooting easily done peel and pour trophy plaque Aluminotype Tintypes like everyone is shooting ad nauseam these days. But, if you are shooting Mammoth Ambrotypes or glass negatives, things become far more challenging. Just the handling, thorough cleaning and processing of a glass plate that big without breaking it is a high wire act. If you are making a salt or albumen print off the negative, the difficulties and steps increase many times more. Finally, the most challenging of the Mammoths is the real Ferrotypes Tintype. Black Japanning plates that big is not work for the timid. There are only two people in the world who have done it.

But, no matter what plate or size plate you use, the great unseen challenge

is guesstimating the exposure time under natural light conditions. There's always going to be some hit and miss with that. Misses with Mammoths can add up to a lot of expense in a hurry. No doubt this is why a lot of wet-platers seem to rely heavily on an artificially lit studio situation. It takes all the guess work out of exposure time.

So, next time you are checking out the latest YouTube Mammoth Plate Pouring Hero, just smile and know that part ain't no big deal. Just takes a lot of collodion and lots of money.