

MYTH BUSTERS!!!!

Introducing! An ongoing column to help dispel the various “myths” that have come to plague today’s wet-plate collodion photography scene.

These myths or untruths or even half truths have often served only to make the process more difficult to impossible, limited, less fun, more expensive, and, in some cases, downright dangerous! They are often furthered along by well meaning forums, some contemporary write-ups, manuals, videos, and even some 19th century works on wet-plate collodion photography. Now, on with the myths and may they soon be recognized as just that!

MYTH: When problems occur it is usually the Silver Bath’s fault.

No!, quite the opposite! It is usually not the fault of the Silver Bath. The silver mining industry must have lobbied hard for this one, for all the perfectly good Silver Baths that have been tossed, as a result. In all my years of doing and teaching the wet-plate process, I have yet to have a Silver Bath up and go on the fritz. Yes, with long and hard use they do gradually weaken and need sunning and replenishing. But, never is it going to produce a fine image one minute and then the next go bonkers. Nor even good ones one day and then funky ones the next. It just does not happen that way with normal use. Only way it would suddenly crash on you is if you did something real foolish like accidentally pour your developer or fixer or beer or what ever into it. Never drink and do wet-plate! Properly mixed up, seasoned, and with normal use, your Silver Bath is going to work fine time after time for a very long time.

Beginners often panic because of the sub-myth that the ph must be very precise, that they add acids and bases back and forth till the bath is totally annihilated. Or, they decide more must be better and add too much Silver Nitrate. That would not destroy the Silver Bath but would cause improper sensitization of the plates placed in it. In other words: a lot of fixing what is not broken!

Usually, where the problem lies, and especially with beginners, is with simple things like: wrong camera exposure times, light leaks or glare in the camera, light leaks in the darkroom or dark box or Silver Nitrate Bath box, a hot over active developing solution, over development of the plate, just plain bad development technique, or improper balance between the salts in the collodion and the silver nitrate concentration in the Silver Bath. This, actually, is just a partial list of all the things one can do to achieve a poor to nil image with the Silver Bath being totally right and doing its proper job.

So, don’t mess with the Silver Bath unless you are absolutely sure the problem could be no and I mean no where’s else! It’s a very expensive chemical to foul up!

MYTH: Your freshly mixed up Collodion Solution must be “perfectly clear” before it is ready for use.

Not exactly so! Yes, new, properly mixed and seasoned collodion must be set aside for a couple days in order for the inevitable precipitate to settle out, leaving a white cake of material at the bottom of the glass stock bottle. But, if the solution is still abit hazy or cloudy looking, don’t sweat it! You may go ahead and decant off a portion into your

pouring bottle and go to shooting plates. It will work just fine. Eventually, though, it will become perfectly translucent with its characteristic straw yellow to reddish hue.

In recent years, however, there has been practically a cult spring up around "clearing the collodion". They keep a constant vigilance on their bottle of fresh mixed collodion to see if it has "cleared" yet and thus, they think, be ready for use. Some have suggested putting the bottles in very warm water or out on a sunny warm window sill to help speed clearing up via the heat. A few neglect to "burp" the bottle before it builds up such pressure inside to burst it as a result! All wholly unnecessary, not to mention quite dangerous!!

So, get out there and shoot some wet-plate and stop worrying about whether the collodion has "perfectly cleared" or not!

MYTH: Temperatures below 40 degrees F cause all sorts of problems. You can't do wet-plate in the snow and cold of winter.

Phooey! The fact is you can shoot perfectly fine images in the great outdoors right on through the winter without any problems. But, you must keep your chemicals around 50 degrees to have them function properly. "Things like the developer are going to work best in the mid 50's and above. The Silver Bath and fixer can be down in the 40's, actually, and still be fine to use. You just give the plate a little more time in them. Collodion can be in the 40's and perform as it should but may take a bit longer to set up on the plate. But, most of us that shoot in cold and snowy landscapes have our darkroom or dark box in the warm indoors, so our chemicals are at a nice room temperature. We go out and get the camera set up and focused on the snowman, frozen waterfall, what have you and then go back to the house and prepare the plate and bring it out in the plate holder to the camera, do the exposure and then back to the nice warm darkroom to develop it. That little trip the plate makes out to the camera and back, in even single digit temperatures, has absolutely no deleterious effect on it! And, yes, this could be why Sally has no interest in doing deep winter wet-plate! But, for the rest of us there is no reason other than, maybe, the personal comfort and convenience may not be so inviting when shooting in the winter. Now, Mush! You Huskys! Back to the dark box!