

MYTH: To make perfectly fine blackened plates in which to make wet-plate Tintypes with, all you have to do is spray paint the plate with any common hardware store or department store grade glossy black canned spray paint. But, you must let it dry thoroughly before use, so it has had time to completely out-gas any solvents that would react with the collodion. Be advised that the blacks from spray painted plates won't be quite as black as an asphaltum based black japan paint that has been baked on in the traditional way.

Wow! That was a long one. Sounds wonderfully easy, doesn't it? The only thing true in this prescription for disaster is that the blacks won't be as black with spray paint as compared to real baked on black japan asphaltum based paint, as was used to put a glossy black finish on 19th century Ferrotypes tintype plates. Just like the blacks are not as black in the cheap Trophy plaque aluminum plates, everybody seems to be stampeding to. But Oh!, the convenience! But, back to spray painted plates. Some might want their tintypes to be more like traditional Ferrotypes, and so they try spray painting real tinplate or plain mild steel plates. It does not work! and I don't care how long you let the blooming paint "outgas". The collodion will react with substances in the paint which will result in stained, dark, blotchy, and or fogged over images. For those of you who think that would be a cool art thing, well, then go for it baby! But, for those of us who strive for a nice clean image, as much as is possible, it just is not a choice! The only real choice for a wet-plate period correct Tintypes is not spray can painted plates or even black Aluminum Trophy plaque plates, but, real asphaltum formula based black japanned Ferrotypes plates. It is truly worth the extra effort to get it historically correct and get those rich deep warm blacks that cannot be had in any other way. That is except for "Photo Shop". If shooting a wet-plate is only an intermediary step to an image and not the final art piece or historic reenactment object but is only an "image", then, I guess, it doesn't matter how you get there.

MYTH: There is no need to use Potassium Cyanide for a fixing agent in wet-plate photography. Ammonium Thiosulfate works equally as well, imparting the same tones, is cheaper and much safer to be around, and is easier to be had.

This is something of a myth not to unlike the Medieval Alchemists claims of turning lead into gold. Of course, there was no real basis to such claims, but, I'm sure some were fooled and swore it could be done. So it goes with Ammonium Thiosulfate fixer. Yes, it will fix an image and, yes, it is relatively cheap and benign. That's all well and good, but, what it cannot deliver is the beautiful coffee and cream tones of a positive image that is fixed in Potassium Cyanide solution. Nor is it as fast an acting fixer. Also, Ammonium Thiosulfate fixer, like it's lead grey for tones cousin, Sodium Thiosulfate, requires a much much longer rinsing time or you risk the image darkening down over time, even if it's been varnished. In the field, access to water may be limited. True, Potassium Cyanide is a very poisonous substance and should be treated with the utmost of caution and especially in its concentrated crystalline form. But, once it has been diluted with distilled water to create a 1.2% solution for use, it is much much less dangerous. To do yourself in you'd have to take a couple long gulps of it. If you splash some on your hands, in processing,

don't worry, it is not going to go through your skin and get you! Just rinse yourself off with a little water and you are good to go. Actually, the most dangerous chemical in your wet-plate darkroom is the Silver Nitrate solution. That is 9% solution. If you drink a couple big swigs of that you better make sure your liver donor is standing in the wings at the ER or you're a cooked goose! But, of course, it is highly unlikely, you or anyone, is going to drink any of your darkroom chemicals. The far more likely thing to happen, somebody would splash a few drops or more of Silver Nitrate solution into their eyes. This could result in permanent blindness. This, of course, is why we wear, at the very least, a pair of safety glasses whenever we are around Silver Nitrate powders or solution. Clearly, the bottom line here folks is that all these chemicals need to be treated with wisdom and respect and kept out of the reach of children and the mentally handicapped or disturbed. Potassium Cyanide is such a superior wet-plate fixer, the extra caution involved in using it over Ammonium Thiosulfate or Sodium Thiosulfate, is truly worth it. Not only is it the best for positives and was used almost exclusively for Tintypes and Ambrotypes in the 19th century, but it also is a superior negative fixer often used back then as well. This is due to its quick fix and rinse time but more so because the coffee and cream tones translate as greater opacity in the highlights. This made it work that much better for negatives used to print Albumen and Salt prints. Sodium Thiosulfate or Ammonium Thiosulfate fixed plates tend to need intensification far more often in order to get the proper tonal range results. Finally, using Sodium Thiosulfate or Ammonium Thiosulfate fixer, either way, you get just grey tones in the highlights of your positive images. If anything, the Sodium Thiosulfate is the more attractive of the two. It is also the most authentic to the 19th century of the two. You virtually never see Ammonium Thiosulfate listed as a fixing agent in the old manuals. Must have been a reason for that, as it existed back then. The one thing the two have in common is that they are both fairly benign, relatively cheap and a lot easier to buy. For that, they may suit beginner wet-platers purposes quite well.

But, for the serious more experienced who as a general rule always strive for the best and brightest image equal to the best of the first wet-plate era, the only choice is Potassium Cyanide fixer. So, wet-platers, don't listen to the fear mongers with their gold colored sunglasses on! None of these latter day alchemists can give you any empirical proof of their glowing claims, as I have done, below, with the non-manipulated straight scans of plates shot one right after the other with all components the same except for the three different fixing solutions. You be the judge. From left to right, the plates go as follows: Potassium Cyanide, Ammonium Thiosulfate, top pair. Sodium Thiosulfate, and Ammonium Thiosulfate, bottom pair.

