

MYTH: The “Helper Tray” used as an effective plate developing aid is an unauthentic invention that John Coffey dreamed up. It is clearly not “cool” and not anything any self-respecting “Collodion Artist” would ever be caught using. Only limp wrists, little girls, and Frederick Scott Archer would use one.

Whoa, Nelley! Rewind!! And Frederick Scott Archer??? Well, that part and the part about it being a very effective developing aid is the truth. Yes, the inventor of the wet-plate collodion process used to good effect, for all intents and purposes, a 19th century materials made “Helper Tray”. Clearly, he must have had a scope that peered into the future. In the first published description of the wet-plate collodion process in the English scientific journal, “The Chemist”, he wrote the following in the last paragraph:

“I have found it convenient to have a trough made of gutta percha, the two sides and bottom of which are about 1/8 inch high and just large enough to hold the glass plate. With this trough, the mixed solution can be poured rapidly over the plate, without fear of any being thrown over the edges.”

Don’t get me wrong folks on this exposé of the Helper Tray’s long and glorious history. I think the very common, then and now, In-Hand method of developing a plate is just swell. Virtually all my workshop students by the end of the class are doing plates 5x7 and smaller beautifully by that method. It’s a smooth transition for them to go from Helper Tray to In-Hand. Think training wheels on your first little bike. All these decades later, I myself still use a Helper Tray sometimes for 8x10 and always for 11x14 and 20x24. If nothing else, it is a lot less messy developing such large plates in a cramped field dark box. Also, under those conditions, the Helper Tray is used as the first rinse tray to quickly stop development at just the right point which is critical for the best positive images. So, at least for large plates our Plexi Glass made Helper Trays are absolute essentials here at “CampTintype”. The hoottee tootees can look down their noses at us all they want.

Us an’ Fred....

