

The Myth of the Oily Legs:

Well, that's the only way I can describe this long running nonsense. It goes like this: If you pull a sensitizing plate up out of your Silver Bath after it has been soaking only a minute or less, the liquid silver nitrate solution will appear oily, beady, and *leggy* on the collodion surface of the plate. This is a sign that it has not sensitized long enough and the plate needs to be put back down in the bath for a longer soak, till such time as it comes up with a smooth sheeting off appearance of the sensitizer solution on the plate's surface. Yes, of course, indubitably. But, why pray tell, does anyone need to be checking anything when the plate clearly hasn't soaked in the bath the prescribed three to five minutes for full sensitization? Believe me, there is no checking necessary. It works every time with a properly prepared and maintained bath. Sensitizing of a plate is not at all something that needs to be done by inspection. None! In nearly forty years of shooting wet-plate I've never had a plate fail to sensitize thoroughly with a soak of three to five minutes. Never seen an oily leg yet. No extra effort, paddling up and down or lifting the plate out on the dipper repeatedly for intense scrutiny is needed. In fact, there are alligators in those waters! You could lose the plate off the dipper into the bath or risk scratching the collodion surface on the opposing side of the tank's edge if you are not really careful. As with so many of these hair brained excursions into the realm of the "unnecessary", there's a reason for the dance and that, namely, is the "Show". Those working before an awestruck audience of neophytes or just their admiring selves, will look, feel, and sound like a true wizard of the craft doing all that awesome checking and analysis. True, one can shave a minute or so off the sensitizing step by staying with the bath in their darkroom or darkbox, agitating the plate in the solution, going up and down and out of the bath with it on the dipper till the silver solution sheets off without legs. And true, that first contact with space aliens might suddenly present itself and you'd need to shoot as many plates as quickly as you possibly can before they run for their lives from the crazy earthlings. But otherwise, "what's your hurry, dude?" Personally, I take the three to five minutes the plate soaks in the bath as an opportunity to double check my camera's focus and tweak my composition. K.I.S.S.