

THE BOOKS NOT ABANDONED

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Growing up into photography in the later 1930s was an exhilarating experience. This was a period at least as fundamental to the history of photography as today's "digital revolution". Historians seem to gloss over those days now, but the new enthusiasms generated then have had a profound influence ever since.

There were four basic causes. First was the beginning of acceptance of the 35mm camera as a viable instrument, one with its own advantages and applications. This was the advent of the "miniature camera" era. Second was the application of these relatively new instruments to real-life situations. At first called "candid photography", that application has grown today into the fields of photojournalism and broad-based documentation; in its less desirable aspects, it has led to an infestation of Paparazzi. Third was the rapid generation of new and greatly improved films and chemical processes, which completed the legitimacy of the 35mm camera. Last but certainly not least was the first widespread availability of color imagery: Kodachrome opened new vistas.

My early photographic experience was firmly grounded in this new soil. From the day in 1936 when my parents gave me a Kodak f/6.3 Bantam to replace my earlier Brownie box camera, I was convinced that smaller was better, at least for me. From the Bantam I progressed to an Agfa Karat, whose odd film cassettes made me glad that I had learned darkroom procedures while still working with the Bantam; then a Leica IIIb; and finally a Contax II: all before I became sidetracked for quite a while by warfare. Perhaps Petra and Kenneth will encourage me revisit to those vital 1930 years in more detail some other time: they were indeed formative, not just for me, but for photography, and deserve their own thorough-going history.

Along my early way I picked up books about photography, and about the new incarnation of cameras. Since then I have moved many times, most recently from my home to an apartment, and I have left books scattered behind me as I went: sometimes donated to worthy institutions, sometimes sold, sometimes simply left behind. But the ones most precious to me remain.

The earliest, and the one which in many ways has been most influential to what I have done since then as a practicing photographer, is a small book bound in soft black pseudo-leather. Its young author, Kip Ross, was at the time one of the earliest of what we now know as photojournalists; he worked for New York newspapers and, less often, magazines. *CANDID PHOTOGRAPHY With the Miniature Camera* was issued by the Fomo Publishing Company in Canton, Ohio, in 1934. Its very first sentence – "Candid Photography is one of the greatest sports in the world, and if you are the owner of a miniature camera and have not yet indulged in this type of work you are missing some of the most exciting moments of your life" – states its essential qualities. And its ending is equally inspiring: "Try in every way you can to improve and perfect your photographic technique. . . . you will get the greatest pleasure through using your knowledge. . . . Photography is like that."

In the short 65 pages between these words, Ross defined "Candid Photography" as both fun and a business with special application to news reporting, in the latter case recounting some of his experiences, using his own "candid" news photos as examples. He also briefly discussed the few cameras of those days which had special attributes useful to this pursuit (chiefly Leica and Contax), the films then available and how to process them for maximum responsiveness (the fastest 35mm films available even into the later 30s were Agfa Ultra-Speed and Kodak Super-X, whose film speeds would equate nowadays to about ISO 80), and how best to print the resulting negatives.

After the war, Ross wound up working for *National Geographic*, and eventually became its chief of photography. Many years later, I wrote him a letter appreciating all that his little book had done in influencing my career as a photographer, and he answered cordially; this was my only personal contact with him, and I am glad that I took the time to write him as I did. His book remains fundamental.

The second book, also issued by Fomo but this time in a soft tan pseudo-leather binding, is *The Book of the Miniature Camera* by George W. Hesse; my copy is the "Revised Edition" of 1937. Hesse discussed not only 35mm cameras, but a number of small rollfilm cameras as well; like Ross, he also devoted chapters to film, development, and enlarging: all this in even fewer pages of text and pictures, only 54. He was a highly-regarded commentator on the photographic scene in those days, and his opinions were widely respected.

At the time I acquired Hesse's book I valued it for all his views about then-current camera equipment and methodology; I value it more nowadays because, from it, I think that I learned the first aspects of what it takes to become a photo equipment historian (if I may call myself that): comparison of cameras with their contemporaries, and by inference the development of one camera into its successor, one form of equipment into the form that followed it. Actually, though, Hesse did not himself make many of these comparisons apart from the variety inherent in his illustrations: his writing was informational, not inspirational, and in many ways is typified by this condensation from its opening sentence: "Miniature photography. . . is the modern way of photography."

The third book, of course, was *The Leica Manual* by Willard D. Morgan and Henry M. Lester, with many other equally knowledgeable "Contributors". My own first copy is the "Third Edition (Revised), Second Printing April 1938"; by now I have acquired many versions of this seminal work which first appeared in August 1935, and as I look over my shoulder at the bookcase I note that I have retained five of them including a reprint of the very first edition. Ernst Leitz produced a variety of camera models between 1930 and 1941, and Morgan and Lester struggled to keep up by producing a succession of new editions and revisions. They were their own publishers ("Morgan and Lester, Publishers"); one can only hope their efforts were not financially ruinous.

Essentially, Morgan was the equipment man, devoting himself to cameras, lenses (with the help of others), and accessories. Lester was the film, development, and printing expert, and in his own name he invented and produced several fine-grain and film-speed-enhancing developers that were widely marketed and used. Their Contributors were many and varied, each respected in his field: they were responsible for individual chapters covering their own areas of specialization. Anton Baumann, for instance, wrote about Leica technique in general; Augustus Wolfman about stereoscopic work; Charles Breasted about documentation of archeological research; and J. Winton Leman about working in available light. There was a dentist for dental photography, and a scientist for photomicrography. And so it went.

The charm went out of the *Leica Manual* series about the mid-1950s, after the introduction of the M3. The last traditional one was *The New Leica Manual*, 12th Edition (2nd Printing), August 1951, into which I later inset the "1954 New Leica Equipment Supplement to the 12th Edition": it sketchily covered the advent of the M3. The final version that I retain is *The Leica Manual And Data Book*, to which John S. Carroll and Dorothy S. Gellatt were newly added as "Associate Editors", and in which primary emphasis was given to the M3; the M2 had not yet appeared. This volume was labeled "Thirteenth Edition, Newly revised and reset, September 1955".

The collaborators were gone: the new tone was set by this sentence from the Preface: "Unlike earlier editions, this volume places less stress upon the inspirational part of photography with the Leica camera. Instead, it places before the user a well-organized, practical system." I did buy several of the succeeding editions, but they became more like coffee table books when Morgan and Lester themselves were no longer actively at the helm. My later versions are now long gone.

My fourth remaining prewar book is *How to Use Your Candid Camera*. Written by Ivan Dmitri, who was widely known in those days, and published by The Studio Publications, Inc., New York, this one has no date or copyright notice whatever, but in fact it came out about 1938. It really might have been called "How to Use Your Leica", since that is the only camera that it concerns itself with, briefly overviewing the basic operations a new owner needed to know in order to use a Leica (Model IIIa?), and also demonstrating the different coverage areas of its lenses. Most of its content, however, is devoted to Dmitri's own photographs, reproduced one each to a large page, with intervening pages giving short commentaries on the film and lens, the filter, and the exposure data used for each; taken together, the illustrations demonstrate a number of applications to which one can apply his candid camera. Among them are theater, family, scenic, news, and aerial subjects. From today's point of view there is nothing particularly outstanding here in photographic content, but in those days personal photography with the miniature camera was in its earliest formative period: then, Dmitri's photographs were novel and exciting, and showed what could be done whenever you and your new camera were ready to do it.

With these four books, I was pretty well grounded for a career as a photographer. From them I had learned what cameras do, how to work them (I was also an avid reader of instruction books and manuals), the basics of the photographic process, and particularly from the early *Leica Manuals* I had gained some understanding of all the things that can be done with cameras as well as a glimmering of how cameras – or Leicas, anyway – were constructed. But this latter was a topic that I had not fully investigated; in fact I did not realize that I was missing the bulk of it until some time after World War II.

Miniature and Precision Cameras was written by J. Lipinski and published by Iliffe & Sons, Ltd., London, in 1955; my copy is a "Second impression 1956", which is about when I acquired it. This book was absolutely seminal to my later career as a photo equipment historian. Long out of print, its worth has increased among collectors: the last time I saw a copy for sale, more than a decade ago now, it was going for almost \$300. From it I learned just how cameras and lenses really work, the final facet of the photographic equation.

Systematically, Lipinski discussed such topics as what requirements need to be met to achieve a precision camera, the physical aspects of lens design that are involved, a general overview of the mechanical necessities, a comparison of several specific camera designs, and accessories, testing, and maintenance. I have long treasured his remark on page 163: "there is indeed remarkably little inside a Leica anyway", which follows his very thorough-going

examination of the basically simple Leica shutter mechanism. Like the *Leica Manuals*, Lipinski's is not a book that you sit down and read through; it repays many revisitations, answering new questions every time. And years later, when I acquired Kingslake's book on lenses, I realized that I was already aware of many of his observations because Lipinski had introduced me to them.

For better or worse, these five books were fundamental to my several careers in photography. I have never left them behind; all five are within ten feet of me and my computer right now. They are the books not abandoned.

NOTE:

This personal essay was written in 2005 for the home page of CAMERABOOKS.COM, where Petra and Ken featured it for quite a while. I really enjoy writing personal essays, and make an effort to write my articles and histories in this general mode whenever it seems suitable (which is not so often as I'd like); still, I wish it were possible to do personal essays within the photographic context more often. *Maybe . . .*