

Photography blog post series: what to do if you want to explore the world of traditional film photography.

Title: Discovering Film Photography

The Joy of Film

How Did You Take Photos, Grandad?

... Part 1, Overview

Do you remember the old days, when ‘photography’ meant loading a camera with film? Film that might be in the camera for months before you sent it away for processing! If not, imagine pulling out your smartphone and changing the camera settings so that you don’t see a photo after you’ve taken it—and you don’t look through the camera roll until next week, or next month ... or next year. Documentary photographer Garry Winogrand used to wait a year, maybe two, before developing his films; he wanted to assess the negatives free from the emotion of the shoot. Could you do it? If you’ve only ever used a digital camera, then you’ll have no idea what it’s like to have to wait to see the results of your photography.

My start in photography was around 1970, aged 11-ish. It was school holidays; I was roaming about with a friend when a passing garbage collector gave me a beautiful brown leather case, which he obviously thought too good for the crusher. In it was a Kodak Brownie SIX-20 C—about as old as I was—and I was the proud owner of my first camera.

I used the Brownie probably for a year or two, taking it on family holidays and shooting occasional snaps in between. I would expose each roll of 8 photos, then take it to the local pharmacy to be developed, which probably took a week or so. There was no thought of it being slow; that’s just the way it was for most people until the early 2000s, unless you were using instant film. Around that time, the electronic CCD and CMOS sensors changed everything: suddenly, it was possible to see how your picture turned out, simply by looking at the back of your camera.

This new form of instant photography was a revelation; if you didn’t get it quite right, you could take another pic straight away. And another, and another...

In press photography, this was a Big Thing: in the world of newspapers, where the deadline is all-important, it could make the difference between getting into the first edition or being scooped by another paper—and being second with the news doesn’t cut it. Photojournalists and their darkroom colleagues had found ways of getting photos developed and printed as soon as possible, and quality was less important than speed. In that realm, digital photography was a huge step forward, even if the first digital cameras produced fairly small images and cost a fortune. Oh, how excited we were...

For everyone else, the move to digital was influenced by various factors: the cost of the camera, the size of the final image, the quality of the colour (it wasn’t always wonderful). Move forward a few more years, and along came the smartphone with its built-in camera; digital photography had arrived, and was here to stay.

For some professionals though, digital wasn't better than film, and they continued with traditional methods, shooting film in 35mm cassettes or 120 rolls, or 5x4-inch sheet film—or even larger sizes. But these cases were in the minority, and always will be. Now, digital imaging is more than good enough for most photographers. But not all...

If you're in your teens, the chances are you've never used anything EXCEPT a smartphone to take photos. You've probably never held a printed photo either, unless when visiting Gran. But film is enjoying a resurgence now, and photographers young and old are returning to film photography—or discovering it for the first time. But why bother with this quaint old technology? Well, here's a few questions for YOU:

- how many digital photos have you taken, in the last year?
- how many of those photos are near-duplicates of each other?
- how many of them are really good pictures, that you'd like to have on your wall, as a big print?
- how many of them are looked at a few times after being taken, but hardly ever again?

I'll bet the answers are: thousands, loads, hardly any, and most.

One of the problems with digital photography is that because it's so easy to fire off dozens of shots, at no cost, we tend to take a lot in the *hope* that one of them will be a good one. What if you slowed down, thought more about each photo *before* you took it, and made sure that you gave it your best shot? What if—as at least one digital photographer has done—you turn off image review, and don't know what you've got until you download to the computer? Too scary for thought?

OK, serious film photographers rarely took just one shot—they would usually make a few exposures of important shots, as insurance. BUT, if you really pay attention to the scene before you, to the lighting and composition; if you understand your equipment and materials and what they're capable of, there's no reason why you can't nail it on the first shot, most times. It just takes a bit of practice. But hey: do you want to be a *photographer ...* or just another snapper?

Many digital photographers are rediscovering the benefits of using film and taking a slower, more considered approach:

- you enjoy the process more, as each photo becomes more meaningful
- because you spend more time taking each photo, and you take fewer overall, each one is likely to be more memorable
- you find that you are actually *becoming a better photographer*—and that's got to be worth the extra effort!
- you may also find that the camera becomes less important: you don't feel that because there's a new model out there, your current one is now obsolete and must be replaced.

So, you're wondering what it's all about, thinking you'd like to try it ... but where to start? Here are some pointers.

1... *Don't be scared*. No, really! What's the worst that could happen? You might take a few photos, botch the processing, and end up with a completely clear film. In which case, you're down a few dollars and wasted a little time—and you're not the first! But if you're careful, and follow a few basic

rules, you should get some passable images, and feel a little excited. Better than that, you could find your life's calling.

2... *Find a film camera.* The internet is awash with old cameras, now that people who had shoved them in the back of a cupboard have discovered that there is actually a market for these old classics; if you're lucky, maybe your parents or grandparents still have a camera that they can lend you. Of course, there's a huge variety, and you can pay anything from a couple of dollars to a few thousand. One possibility is to go into your nearest thrift shop, and look at what they've got. You might find a \$2 point-and-shoot job, or maybe something that once cost a few weeks' pay, now going for a few tens of dollars. Unless you've got plenty of money to spare, just get something cheap to start with. If it doesn't need batteries to work, that's good, because there will be no problem with failed electronics. By the way, I'm assuming you will start with 35mm, because most cameras that you are likely to find will use that film format.

3... *Find some film.* This can be a bit harder than finding a camera, but many supermarkets and pharmacies still carry a few rolls of 35mm colour negative film—film intended for making prints. If not, you can buy online. A quick Google search for “where to buy photographic film” will come up with a variety of sources.

4... *But ... what kind of film should I buy?* Well, do you want to develop it yourself, or will you just send it away to be processed? If you want to DIY, then buy black and white film. Otherwise, buy colour. There isn't as much choice as there used to be, but that's OK. If in doubt buy something with ISO-400 speed.

5... *Take some photos.* OK, now it's starting to get tricky... Because you've only ever used the automatic camera in your phone, you haven't had to think about exposure or focusing, or any other techy stuff. But, there are basic cameras that don't need you to think—you literally point, and shoot; there's nothing for you to do except take the photo. But beware: you will need a reasonable amount of light to use a camera like that, so stick to daylight and you should get some sort of result.

6... *“My camera has different settings—numbers on the lens and a knob on top that goes from 1 to 1000. How do I use them?”* Well, this will give you more control, but needs a little more thought. But don't worry—it's not rocket science! To start with, use the “Sunny 16 rule”. It works like this:

- What speed is your film? Let's say you have 400 speed film; then set the shutter speed (usually a knob on top of the camera) to the nearest number—probably 500 (1/500 second).
- What's the weather like? If it's a sunny day, set the lens aperture (usually a ring on the lens that has numbers like 2, 2.8, 4, 5.6, etc) to 16.
- Take the photo, and it should be well exposed.
- If the film is 100 speed, then choose 125 (1/125 second), or it might be 100 (1/100 second)
- Basically, set the shutter speed to the same number as the film speed, and then set the lens aperture according to the weather: use f/16 on a sunny day, f/11 if thin cloud, f/8 if more overcast or in shadow ... and so on.

Of course, if you have a smartphone, you can install a light meter app to help with exposure settings.

7... *What do I do now?* You have to develop the film, or have someone do it for you, so you'll need to do some more searching for suppliers or processors. Try web-searching "how to process photographic film" or "film processing service". Doing it yourself is great fun, and seeing your first roll of negatives coming out of the wash is a great buzz. Actually... I'll let you into a secret: the buzz never goes away; whether it's your first film or your 1,000th, it's still exciting to see what you've caught on film.

But for now, you have enough to get started. Go and take some photos ... don't worry too much about what you're doing, just have some fun with a camera. If possible, take some notes about what settings you use, so you can see afterwards what worked and what didn't. Later we'll look at all these things in more detail.

Until then ... happy shooting!

Next time: tips for choosing your first film camera.