

Every Camera Tells a Story!

Photos and Story by Ed James.

My first introduction to collecting cameras started in Halifax, when I was taking a photo course from Sherman Hines, a well-known Nova Scotian photographer. In his small studio on Brenton Street, just off of the very busy Spring Garden Road that leads to the city's famous Public Gardens, was a wall filled with antique cameras. To this day he still has a great historic camera collection in his combination studio/museum in Liverpool, Nova Scotia. Among his collections are cameras owned by the late Wallace Mac Askill, a world famous marine photographer, and cameras owned by Yousuf Karsh, a world famous portrait photographer.

But I digress! After seeing Mr. Hines' collection, I knew I wanted to do the same thing and that was over 40 years ago, and I have lost count of my collections after I passed the 1000 camera mark. My collection includes items that date from 1880 to the early digitals of the late 90's, and in size they range from a spy camera in the form of a Zippo Lighter to a very large brass, wood and iron studio camera that takes an 8 x 10 negative sheet. In between these two extremes, I have panorama cameras that take a wide photo of 180°, stereo cameras, aerial cameras, gun camera, watch cameras, Art Deco box camera, Kodak folding vanity cameras that came in pastel colors, with matching lipstick holder, powder compact and mirror, a street vender post card camera, several of the earliest Polaroid cameras and a great number of special commemorative cameras for organizations and national and international events such as the Olympics. In several of my pre 1900 cameras, the shutter button for the camera was your lens cap that you took off, counted the time, and replaced. In others, your choice of aperture involved selecting a thin brass plate with a round hole in it, which was fitted into a slot on the barrel of the camera lens.

I find these cameras at flea markets and garage sales and over the past 30 years, many just arrive anonymously at my back door, with months going by before someone will stop me in the Village to ask if I got the camera they dropped off. While in my travel overseas and around Canada, I always discover one that I don't have in my collection, or should I say accumulation, or hoard? For the last several years I have been

buying a lot of high end SLR, 35mm cameras and point and shoot models that have been dumped, when the digital format photography took over. I just can't bear to see these technical masterpieces left on the dust pile of photographic history when they still work very well if you have patience and skill.

For my work with the newspapers I use a digital camera, but I always take a few safety shots with a real film camera using B&W film. I still operate my home photo lab, with its carpet, sound system, lounge chair, and a small fridge (with a red safe light inside) with soft drinks and treats, while I work developing film and printing photos. One of my biggest joys in the past was finding old B&W film in cameras, and developing it, always with the hope of perhaps finding some lost photos of the Titanic or the Loch Ness monster. No luck yet! However, I gave it up when I would get a colored film, not because of the cost, but because I might have sent a film in with criminal activity on it, which I might be held responsible for!

Since photographers cannot live on cameras alone, I also have a large collection of related photo items, such as advertising film, flashes, including the magnesium powder flash guns of old, light meters, filters, lens, images and on, and on. For educational and entertainment purposes, I give a presentation in turn of the century costume of a 100 year history of photography, and how it changed our world and still is doing so. The presentation includes a large selection of cameras and related equipment, to share the progression over the years. Recently one of my older brass and wood plate cameras was used in the making of a short film in Brandon. The project also included an antique wooden tripod and the mandatory black drop cloth that covered the photographer's head as he looked through the ground glass in the back of the camera at an upside down image to focus. When all was set, he would put in the wooden film holder that held a glass or celluloid film plate.

Not known to the general population is the fact that there are camera-collecting groups in Canada. The largest group is the Photographic Historical Society of Canada, which is located in Toronto. The group publishes a number of journals each year and holds antique camera sales, auctions and seminars.

In all my years of collecting I've had a similar event that always amazes me and it goes like this. I'll get a call or a visit from someone in the area who comes by with a

camera I have never seen before in my life, or have only seen pictures of it in research books, that they want to give or sell me. It does make the collecting of cameras interesting. If there is a downside to collecting antique and unique cameras, it is that they are hard to dust, and I have not done it in many years, and next year is not looking too good either!