W. Eugene Smith preparing to make black-and-white prints in his Manhattan loft-darkroom. "My formula for successful printing remains ordinary chemicals, an ordinary enlarger, music, a bottle of Scotch, and stubbornness."

When I go out to shoot, I never change lenses on my camera. I change the camera. If I'm working at full strength, I usually carry two sets of them, different makes for black-and-white and color film, so that I know by the very feel of the camera which film I'm using.

I work with five cameras and drape them three down the front and two on my shoulder. The lenses I carry have shifted a bit as the ultrawide-angle ones improved. When I did "Country Doctor" (1948), the fastest available wide-angle lens was the 35-mm Biogon f/4, and it was a wonderful lens. So I use the 35 and the 85 as my two basic lenses. The only lens I usually leave out is the so-called normal 50- or 55-mm, unless I need an extremely high-speed lens. When I did "Nurse Midwife" (1951), the rooms were so small I couldn't relate the midwife and patient in the same picture with a 35-mm lens, so I bought a 28. I think it was f/8, and with those dark rooms it represented one hell of a problem. (I had to use a small strobe.)

In a delicate story such as "Nurse Midwife," you'd think you'd have to be very discreet. You just don't want to move in on some backwoods person, clanking equipment. But I found that the shock of seeing me, a white person, walking around with five cameras on me, was no worse than if I just carried one.

I try to overcome the noise of the shutter and equipment clanking by sheer acceptance. When people are very nervous about a camera, I often go through a roll of film, shooting as fast as I can. If they're trying to pose for me, I try to catch them off-guard, to the point where they give up on all that, get bored with me, and go about what they were doing. Then maybe I can get this close to someone, and even with a loud shutter they won't be aware of me.

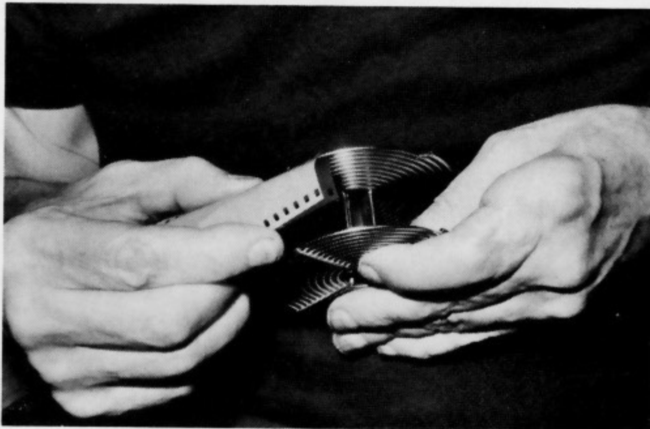
In spite of all the cameras and loud

MASTERS OF THE DARKROOM

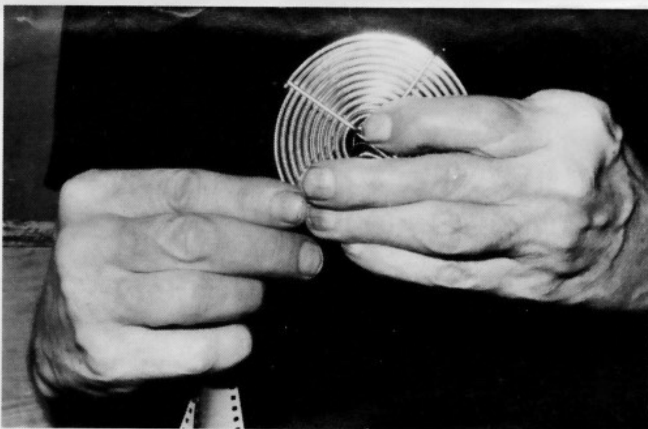
How W. Eugene Smith shoots and prints

BY W. EUGENE SMITH

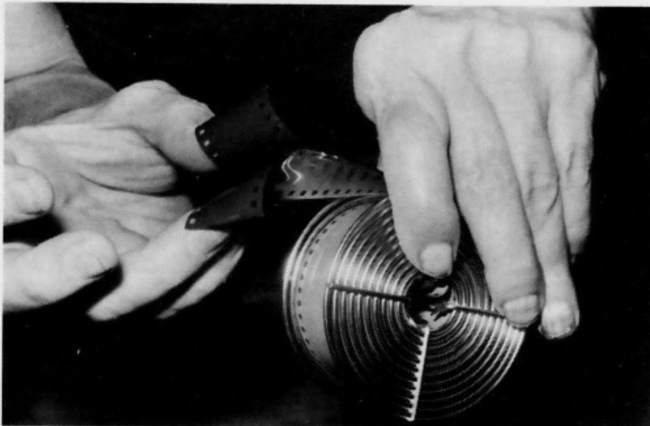
I'll often develop two rolls of film on each reel. I put the film tails together so that they curl away from each other.



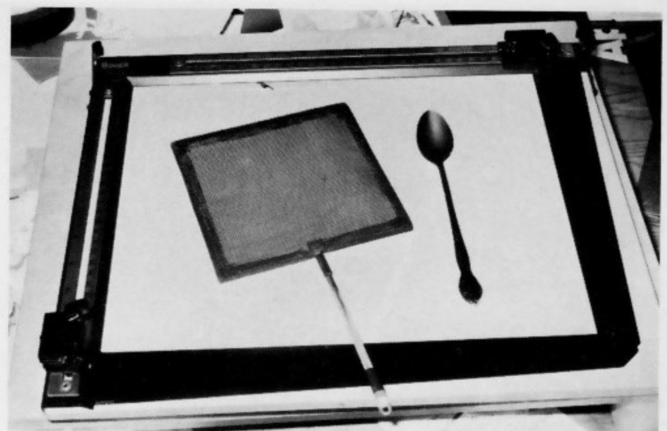
I curve the pair slightly with the thumb and forefinger of my right hand and insert them into whatever reel I happen to be using.



As I thread the film, I try not to drag tightly on it. I always run into trouble at the end because there's always film that doesn't fit.



By shooting four blanks at the head of the roll, I can cut off more from the tongue. I also leave three frames unexposed at the end.



I use a piece of black wire screen held near the lens for diffusion. One handy tool I use for dodging my prints is an ordinary spoon.

Basically, I bleach to bring back what is not held strongly in the film or paper. I can emphasize skin tones with ferricyanide.

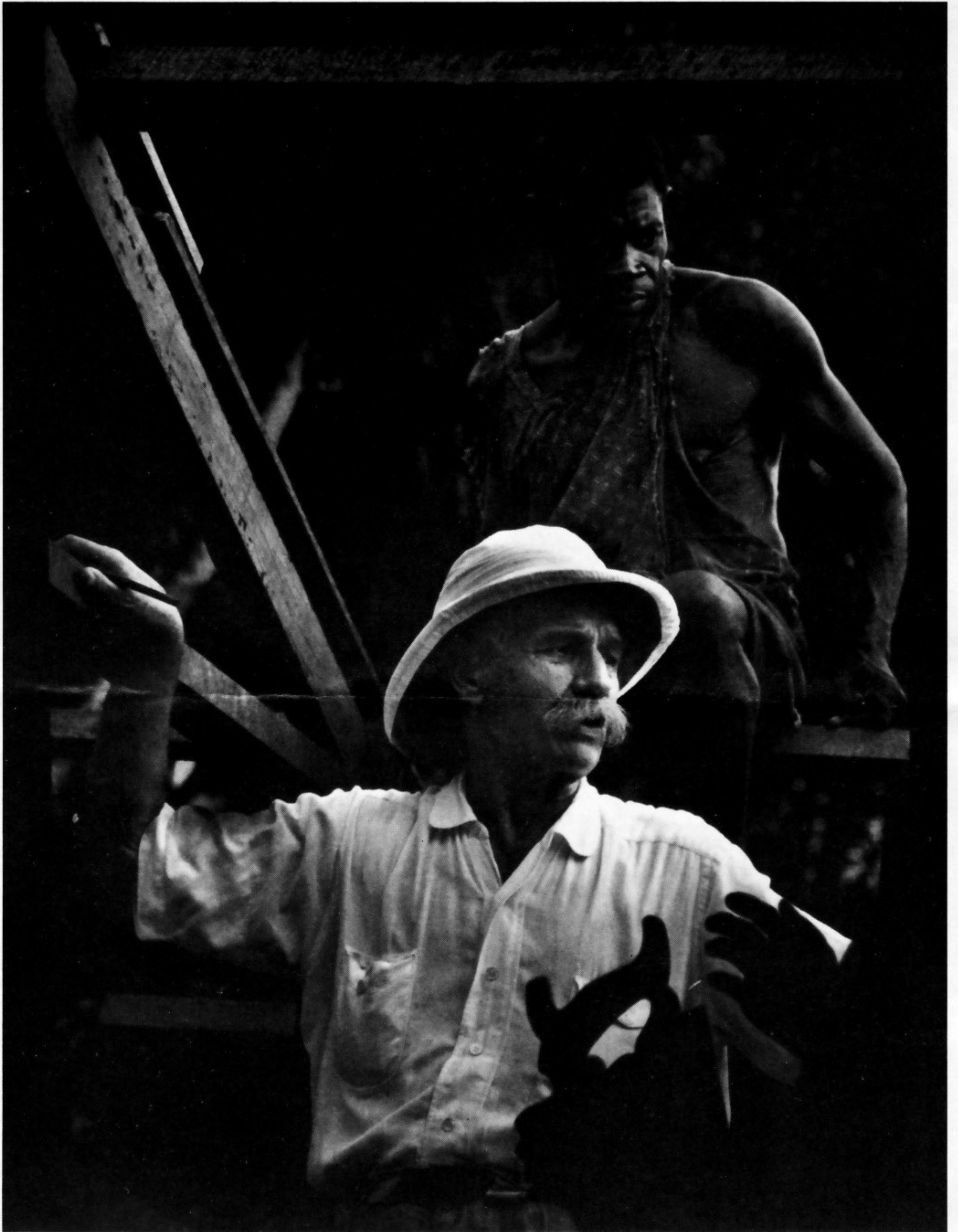
“People think I make dark prints, but a good Smith print is not dark. You get a feeling of darkness, but you will see that all the important detail is very accessible.”

shutter, I try to move with great quiet and never project myself into the room if I can possibly help it. I prefer to stay back in such a way that I'm not noticed and not interfering. I think my very shyness is one reason why I have become so intimate with the subjects of some of my essays. If they accept me, then I'm not pushing a camera into their faces.

For the "Nurse Midwife" story I was using mostly Leicas, but now I use single-lens reflexes—Minoltas, Pentaxes, Nikons. Although I'm still fond of the rangefinder camera, I do love that ability to edge in for an extra fraction of an inch and have something absolutely lined up. I think the single-lens reflex gives you the best control.

If the light is difficult, I sometimes take a meter reading. But then all I do is give the longest exposure possible under the circumstances, and develop the film by inspection.

Once in the darkroom, to cut down on time I'll often develop two rolls of film on each reel. This turns a four-reel tank into an eight-reeler. I open up two film cans, cut the film off the spools, and put the two tails together so that they curl away from each other. This tells me the films are back-to-back, emulsion side out. Then I curve the pair slightly with the thumb and forefinger of my right hand, and insert



"The longest time it has ever taken me to make a print (this one of Albert Schweitzer) was five days and five nights. I went nuts trying to print it. I had to burn down every bit of detail to get shadows under the hat, detail in the face, etc., etc."

"The walk to Paradise Garden is printed from a Polaroid copy negative. This is a straight print from it. Someone lost the original negative, which was very difficult to print from because some of the leaves were overexposed and some were too dark."

them into whatever kind of reel I happen to be using. As I thread the film, I try not to drag tightly on it. I always run into trouble at the end because there are a couple of inches of film that just don't fit on. I've discovered that by shooting four blanks at the head of a roll, I can cut off more film from the tongue. Actually, I try to leave two or three frames unexposed at the end of the roll, too, just so there won't be any hanging accidents when it is dried. I'm happy with a 30-exposure roll, but sometimes in an intense

W. Eugene Smith

"The death scene from Spanish Village was an impossible negative . . . I wanted to shade off to the right . . . But I wanted to shade off very gently, and still hold detail."

W. Eugene Smith

situation I keep right on going. I've been known to tear the end of the film off the spool.

When processing my film, I used to use D-76 with 10 times the normal amount of Borax and run the film up to 10 minutes—12, if I really had to push it. I would never use raw D-76 but always added a little of the old, just to take the edge off the grain.

With the Minamata pictures I went back to plain D-76 (two parts developer to one water) and developed from 12 to 12½ minutes. Sometimes I'd get up to 13½ minutes. This has no relation to Kodak's instructions. The kind of negatives I get are full of guts in the shadows, so that I can always print them down if I want. I'm of the old school which exposes for the shadows.

In the early days, it was easy to develop by inspection. You had these "blind" films you could hold up to a bright safelight and just look through. Now you turn on the dim green safelight a couple of minutes beforehand, so your eyes get used to the light. Then you take the film out of the developer, hold it 1½ feet or so from the light, and turn it until the light reflects off the surface of the film for just a few seconds. It's a question of judging the blacks and grays. Usually a certain tone of charcoal is satisfactory to me. But you've got to know what's on the film. A black man standing against a black background is a more difficult inspection problem than if he were standing against a white wall. I always try to mark rolls as to what kind of light they were exposed at and as to general subject. This can be done with tape, grease pencil, or whatever. Then I try to develop the films in groups so that I have an idea what the problems will be.

But I'm not as good at it as Bernie Hoffman was. He used to have a pair of scissors there, and as he was going through a roll of negatives, he would start clipping it up and developing this section more and that section less. I don't carry it that far, but inspection certainly comes in handy.

In the Minamata story, I think there were only two rolls that were developed by inspection, simply because the situation was so difficult. It's interesting to know that in winter we used to start with developer at 76 F and come out at 67 F. Then we'd put the film in hypo at around 69 F, and it would get down toward 60 F. Then we'd wash it in 35 F water. Afterwards, the negatives were sometimes heat-dried. My landlord would build a wood fire for the baths in the same dirty kitchen we used for developing, and the sparks would start flying with my wet negatives hanging there—the dirtiest nega-

tives I ever had to spot in my life.

As long as a negative is printable, it's all right with me. The impossible light conditions I've worked under have made me struggle. Sometimes I mumble to myself, but then I say, "Oh hell, I'll just print it." Well, there's another approach to this. You don't always have to fight the light. Sometimes you can use it to make an entirely different kind of photograph. But if it's a photograph I've really had to fight for, and the content is there, I'll print it somehow. This is something only I can control in the darkroom.

There's nothing in photography I hate worse than the discipline of the darkroom. Yet I have spent all these years printing. The reason is very simple. I want the damn picture to say what I want them to say. I want to subdue those things that are not important to the statement, and I want to make sure that the important things are open, clear, and direct. Making my own print is the only way to fulfill what I saw when I made the photograph.

People think I make dark prints, but a good Smith print is not dark. You get a feeling of darkness, but you will see that all the important detail is very accessible. The secondary detail is quieter in tone. There is no way in the world you can tell anybody else to do this. I've had a couple of very good printers try to print for me, and sometimes I could accept their prints. But these didn't have the subtleties, the kind of statement I wanted to make.

My printing style has evolved out of my work for publications. In an effort to balance prints and make them work for engraving, I evolved a style that I happen to like for my own work. The two approaches coincide, except that I give the printer the worst prints. I'ts usually a little lighter, although you can't totally outguess a printer. I have illustrations from several sources, made from the same print, and the differences are fantastic.

Yesterday somebody shocked me by bringing over 16 prints I had made at the time of "Spanish Village" (1951). They were absolutely beautiful. Whether the paper has changed or I can't print as well, I don't know, but there was an openness I just can't get with the present papers. I'm not happy with any that I'm printing on. I have to work harder to get the openness I want, or I should say I have to work harder with ferricyanide. I don't feel that bleaching is dishonest to the reality of the image, because it helps me state clearly what I feel the true reality to be.

Basically, I bleach to bring back

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> "For the mother and daughter in the bath from the Minamata story, I dodge the area of the mother's breast . . . the water at the edge of the tub. I burn-in various sections of the white towel around the mother's head . . . I burn-in the face of the child . . . the iron edges of the tub . . . both ends of the picture . . . the stomach and chest of the child . . . Mostly I use my hands, even the fingers that are misshapen."

This article is one of 13 chapters taken from the book, Darkroom, *published by Lustrum Press. Copies of it may be ordered from Light Impressions Corp., Box 3012, Rochester, N.Y. 14614. Price is $15.*

W. EUGENE SMITH *from page 81*

what is not held strongly in the film or the paper. The better these are, the less I have to bleach. I can emphasize skin tones with ferricyanide. For instance, just a touch along certain highlight areas on the face or arms will give an almost three-dimensional feeling. It can also produce a much greater sense of texture. I like a surface that doesn't appear to have a piece of cellophane between it and the viewer. I want a piece of cloth to feel like cloth when you look at it. Bleach can also be used to remove that sheet of gray that comes over present printing papers sometimes.

I fill the little cup in the palm of my hand with ferricyanide, and mix it with ¼ cup of water. (If I'm in a hurry, I add more ferricyanide.) I wipe the hypo off the print with my hand (you can blow it off also). Then I paint the ferricyanide on with a 000 sable brush, or a cotton ball, or Q-Tip. Oftentimes, I leave large areas of the print covered with hypo, flood it with ferricyanide, and set it back down in the hypo, quick. You always have to get the print back into the hypo before the bleaching has truly set in. Afterwards, I like to put the print through a second, fresh hypo bath.

The atmosphere of the darkroom is important. It has to be very open, very comfortable, so that you have room to move around while working. And it must have music. I don't think I could ever stay in the darkroom without it. It has been my best concert place. It's also where I meditate. I do a lot of things in the darkroom all at once.

The positioning of equipment is important. When I'm trying to print rapidly, it speeds things up if I can glance over at the print I just made to get an idea about what to do with the next one.

I have an automatic foot timer that gives me great control. Most timers are fixed so that you push a button and the enlarger light goes on. But to my mind it is too hard to get your hands into position from the time you flick the switch. Many times a certain area will take as many as 15 exposures for burning-in. I have the timer fixed so that it is controlled by a foot switch, and I have to keep my foot on the switch if I want to give the set exposure. In other words, *I give the exposure with the foot switch, and the timer gives me the time.* When it comes to those fractions of a second, a bit of light here, a little shading there, my foot switch overrides the timer, and stays on as long as I keep my foot down. It could be half a second, or five seconds. When it goes on, the foot switch also turns off the safelight over the enlarger. I find it is one of the most important devices in printing. I also have a long string across the darkroom. I can grab it anywhere to turn the overhead light on.

The enlarger I use is an old, discontinued Leitz Valloy, with a single condenser and a light diffuser lid. This is the best balance of light that I have ever used. The lens that's on the enlarger right now happens to be made by Minolta for printing color. When made for color, they are well corrected, so that you get really sharp grain all the way across the print. I have something like 20 enlarger lenses, and about once a year I put a focusing grid into the enlarger and make a very systematic set of tests. I've never quite figured out which is the best lens. One or two of the more famous ones, to my mind, don't seem to measure up.

Many people think that one criteria of a good print is brilliantly sharp grain from corner to corner, but I don't give a damn about all that brilliance of grain. If I'm doing a portrait of someone, I would much rather have that grain broken up a little so there's more modeling in the face. I find that with the double condenser, all that acutance is so defined it breaks up the sharpness of the image. You have such a pattern of grain going across the face that you don't get the modeling you want. That's one reason I go for a single condenser and slight diffusion.

I use a piece of black wire screen held near the lens to get the diffusion. My nervous shake makes sure it doesn't give a screen pattern. I can often expose a print up to 100 percent of the time with the screen and not destroy enough of the sharpness to bother me. In this way, I get better modeling, a better feeling of the texture. However, I usually don't use it more than 25 or 50 percent of the time—just to break up the grain a bit.

If I want just a little more diffusion, I use a piece of black stocking. But only for a short time. If you use the stocking through much of the exposure, you get an odd kind of fogging. Sometimes I actually use a diffusion filter. If a print has an ugly, uneven sky (especially if the development has been bad), a diffusion filter helps smooth it out. One must always decide whether or not the picture is too diffused. These things must be used sparingly. When I smoked, I sometimes blew smoke under the lens. I also used to drop cigarette ashes in my developer. Some people thought it was my secret formula.

Most of the time I use selenium toner to intensify and slightly solidify grayish tones. I mix the selenium one-to-10 parts water and tone for eight to 12 seconds. Sometimes in night scenes I may go up to 35 or 50 seconds. This gives just an edge of toning, so you can't be sure if the print's been toned at all. I've noticed I have to overdo this a little bit because if I dry a print on a heat dryer, most of the toning disappears. Also I understand that selenium is supposed to make the print last a little longer. My prints usually get scratched as soon as I send them out, so I don't know why I worry about them lasting, but it should make those people who buy my prints happy.

Often, when I have an extremely difficult negative to print, one made under those impossible light conditions, a copy negative can make a difference. It can also be very difficult to print from. It's not just a simple copy that comes out like the original print. Unless it's a contact print, the values change, and I have to ferricyanide again to open up shadow detail that has disappeared with the increased contrast. There is a tendency for the negative to be a little sharp in the middle tones. That's why it's sometimes so hard to print from as the original negative. But a copy negative can finally help.

To make one, I used to use the old Polaroid Land film that was based on Panatomic-X. It was a little contrasty, but the copies I made with it came out almost better than any special copy film I ever used. "The Walk to Paradise Garden" is printed from a Polaroid copy negative. This is a straight print from it. Someone lost the original negative, which was very difficult to print from because some of the leaves were overexposed and some were too dark. I was trying to keep most of the leaves around the path, light, but with some detail.

The negatives the Compo Lab in New York made for me on gravure film were quite nice also. Compo was very co-operative in trying to make these things work, but I was always overexposing compared to other people. I always feel I can burn down. At its best, the copy negative is almost like the original print. It diminishes some of the terrible problems in a difficult negative.

The death scene from "Spanish Village" (1951) was an impossible negative. There was one light over the dead man's head, and the person seven or eight feet away was wearing a black gown. Try to bring everything together from that head to the black gown. It's just impossible. I wanted to shade off to the right, with the person in the upper right being darker than any of the other figures. But I wanted to shade off very gently, and still hold some detail.

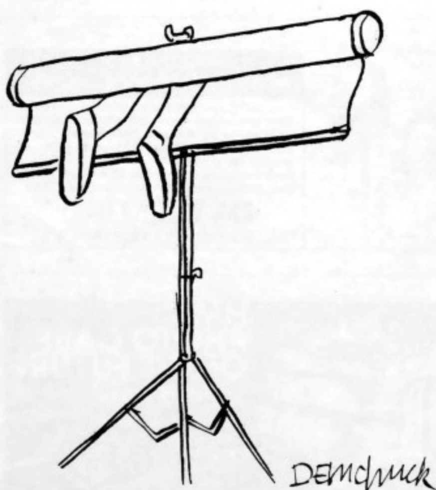
I don't mind signing my name to a copy-negative print if I've made it, and it's good. After all, I'm trying to make a photograph which expresses what I want to say, and I don't think one more mechanical process takes anything away from the final print.

The longest time it has ever taken me to make a print was five days and

five nights. That was the lead picture in the Schweitzer story. The problem again was bad equipment. I was using an 85-mm lens that was not properly baffled against an overbright backlight. It's a beautiful lens for sharpness, modeling, and things like that, as long as the light is behind you. But with the backlight, a sheet of fog came down over the entire bottom of the picture. Any commercial printing outfit would have simply thrown this negative out, but I wanted it for the lead picture. I went nuts trying to print it. I had to burn down every bit of detail in that photograph to get shadows under the hat, detail in the face, etc., etc. then after I got it much too dark, I had to bring everything up, detail by detail, leaf by leaf, arm by arm. One area alone would take me five hours to ferricyanide, and then five hours and one second later I made one jab too many, and *wham*, I'd have to start all over again! I can assure you that I'm never going to print the original again. This print is from a copy negative, and I think it works out fairly well. The copy negative is a little harsher than the original. I have to open up the highlights on the cheeks a bit more. It requires softening, but I can probably get a print in one hour instead of five days and five nights, and that's a big improvement.

All those legends about my taking a week to make a print are based on this experience. But I also remember that once when I got home from an assignment, I found I had only 12 sheets of paper and eight negatives to print. I made them on the 12 sheets.

As far as fast printing is concerned, I think I can print just about as fast as anybody in the world. I once made 800 5x7-inch proof prints in one day, operating two enlargers, one with each foot. (Somebody else developed for me.) But those were proofs, and that was my compromise with *Life*. I never showed the editors contact sheets. I'd make a fairly generous selection of 5x7s for them to look through, and we'd start arguing from there.



The negative for the photograph of Schweitzer at his desk wasn't a bad one. The exposure itself was 1/5 or 1/2 sec, along with a strobe that I covered with a handkerchief and bounced off the dirty brown floor. If I had just used the oil lamp, there would have been a sharp shadow across one side of Schweitzer's face and none of this softness of detail in the background. The long exposure gives the feeling of the lamplight, and the strobe gives the detail. When it came to printing, I had to bring down the whites around the edges on the left where some papers were intruding. They would have cut in like little ragged edges. And I had to burn in the whole shade to get it down so you could see the flame against it. Then I ferricyanided the flame. It took almost three hours to get the first good print.

The photograph of the mother and the daughter in the bath from the Minamata story represents another one of those impossible lighting situations. There were high windows almost the length of the picture. If I had used only the light that was entering the room, I would have had no shadow detail on the near side of the mother's body. In this photograph I also happened to use a small, battery-operated strobe. This time I bounced it off a fairly clean brown ceiling instead of a dirty brown floor.

I always print this picture on Polycontrast or Japanese Gekko paper. They each have their advantages. There is a basic exposure for the whole picture, in which I dodge the area of the mother's right breast. This is all the dodging I do except for the water at the edge of the tub. I burn in various sections of the white towel around the mother's head. I give it something like 16 times the original exposure, giving the face just one extra shot. Then I burn in the face of the child, maybe six, eight times the original exposure. In other words, the child's face takes much more exposure than the face of the mother or the main body of the picture. And I give these iron edges of the tub, a very narrow exposure. I burn in both ends of the picture to make sure there is no grayness creeping up from the edges—it must get darker toward the sides. I burn in the stomach and chest of the child just once or twice. In the upper-left-hand part, you see some boards, or lines, going along. This is where the edge of the bathtub meets the back wall. I give three or four exposures just to that area. Then I give the whole bottom part (masking off all the body sections except a touch of the body sections except a touch of the

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W. EUGENE SMITH *from page 145*
child's left foot) maybe another four or five exposures, so this area gets progressively darker. Then I burn in the very top highlight on her right leg as steadily as I can. It's very awkward. I use either a formation of my fingers or a cardboard cutout. Mostly I use my hands. Even the fingers that are misshapen. (It's a good advantage in making prints if you learn to make those shadows on the wall—animals and things.)

I burn-in the left leg to some extent. I never burn-in the top area long enough because frankly it's so strenuous on my back and hands that at this point I'm too tired. I use a 250-watt bulb in the enlarger with a heat-absorbing glass negative carrier. It holds the negative flat, which keeps it from buckling when the basic exposures are short and the burning in long.

If the small prints seem difficult, those 4½-foot prints we made for the Minamata show at the International Center for Photography were really murder. We had a couple of 2x4s that went across floor beams and put a piece of plywood on them so we could move without shaking the print. We took the enlarger off the stand and turned it around so it would project onto the floor. It took two people to get the paper down. The burning in was the same as for small prints, but the basic exposure was much longer. It probably took at least 15 or 20 minutes of exposure for each sheet of paper. And then, of course, we had a very narrow span in which to develop and get the print into the hypo. We put narrow boxes together, lined them with plywood, and had two rollers of plastic piping. We would ram the paper onto the rollers and into the developer, and roll it as quickly as we could from one roller to the other. I suppose the tray wasn't more than 1½x2 feet, and the paper was about four feet wide. When I used ferricyanide, we put a big tray outside. It took so many gallons of hypo to fill that tank it was unbelievable. And since we did a lot of this in winter, I had kerosene heaters to warm my front, but I was freezing from the rear. It was kind of messy.

As I said before, I absolutely despise printing. I look at the print. Then I come face to face with all the mistakes I made. In the darkroom it is my problem to overcome the mistakes. I know the print I want, and I know I'll probably get it, but it's sheer drudgery. My formula for successful printing remains ordinary chemicals, an ordinary enlarger, music, a bottle of Scotch, and stubbornness.

About the author

W. Eugene Smith was born in Wichita, Ks., in 1918. He first used photography as an aid in school assignments, and during the last two years of high school, he free-lanced for the local newspapers.

In 1936, he entered the University of Notre Dame on a special photography scholarship but soon left for New York City to join the *Newsweek* staff.

In 1938, he joined the Black Star Agency, and his work began to appear in national magazines. He signed a contract with *Life* magazine in 1939, in 1941, he resigned and began to freelance.

In 1943, Gene Smith became a war correspondent, briefly covering the Atlantic theater. He then joined the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company staff and went to the Pacific. Leaving Ziff-Davis, he rejoined *Life* in 1944 and continued to cover the fighting in the Pacific. In May, 1945, Smith was critically injured.

In 1947, after two years of medical treatment, Smith returned to full-time work for *Life*. A period of prodigious creativity followed, during which he produced such major photo essays as "Trial by Jury" (1948), "Hard Times on Broadway" (1949), "Spanish Village" (1951), "Nurse Midwife" (1951), "Chaplin at Work" (1952), "My Daughter Juanita" (1953), and "A Man of Mercy" (1954). After a serious disagreement over the handling of the essay on Albert Schweitzer, "A Man of Mercy," Smith resigned from the *Life* staff and joined Magnum Photos. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1956 and another in 1957 to work on a photo-essay on Pittsburgh.

In 1958, Smith taught a course at the New School for Social Research in New York entitled "Photography Made Difficult." He was recognized as one of the world's 10 greatest photographers, the result of an international poll by POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY.

Smith went to Japan in 1961 to work for the industrial firm, Hitachi Limited, and in 1964, his Hitachi-sponsored book, *A Chapter of Image*, was distributed in the United States. That year he was appointed to the President's Committee on Photography.

In 1969, he received a third Guggenheim Fellowship and also a National Endowment for the Arts grant for the publication of his monograph, *W. Eugene Smith* (Aperture, New York).

In 1971, Smith returned to Japan with his wife Aileen where they began a photo-essay about the effects of mercury pollution on the people of the Minamata peninsula. They received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to finish work on the book *Minamata* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York) which was published in 1975 in conjunction with a show at the International Center for Photography in New York City. ○