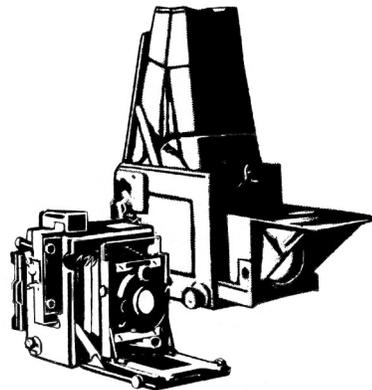


GRAFLEX HISTORIC QUARTERLY

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THE MYSTERY OF GREAT GRANDPA'S CROWN GRAPHIC

By Les Newcomer

Slide into any of the chat rooms, discussion groups, or websites about film photography and ask about a Speed Graphic without a focal plane shutter, and you'll get any number of experts coming out from their darkrooms to tell you with absolute assuredness that it's a Crown Graphic, made between 1947 and 1973. Some may add that it is lighter, slightly thinner than its sibling and is the best Graphic to own.

But Graflex collecting isn't that easy. Not even close. You can hardly make any kind of declarative statement about Graflex without at least two exceptions and one qualification. And I just found another.

Bought on eBay as a "Folmer box camera," it fits the definition of a Crown Graphic except that with serial number 56987, it

was made 30 years before the term was created. The body, bed, and bellows are all nearly identical to a contemporary (1917) Speed, with the exception that the body is thinner.

The serial number book gives us just a bit more information, as it's logged in as the 4th of six "4x5 Special Speed Graphic cameras." The next batch is for six more "Special Speed Graphic cameras" in 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 size. So this camera was probably a special order camera...we just don't know why.

The interesting features are few. It doesn't have a viewfinder, mainly because there's no room to put one on the top. And there are two tripod sockets on the bottom, and the ghost markings suggest they were both used at the same time, but how and why are anybody's guess.

The focus scale and lensboard add a bit of mystery as well. The original lens did not come with the camera, but the board seems to be original, as the serial number is written on it in pencil. The flange fits a No. 1 B&L Compound shutter perfectly, which leads me toward a Bausch & Lomb or a Kodak Anastigmat lens. But the focus scale is for a lens in the 6- to 6 1/2-inch focal length, and B&L didn't make a lens in that range. Nor did Kodak. Only Carl Zeiss did, a IIB Tessar, but in an American shutter? Not impossible, but certainly special.

In discussing this camera and lens problem with some other collectors, a local guy showed up with his version of the same camera, made at least a year later. With some minor points, the cameras are identical. This camera was serial number 79011 (so 20,000+ units later), had a 5 1/2" Cooke lens in a Compound shutter, a Cooke-made focus scale on the bed, and the body was slightly (less than 1/4") thicker.



On left, serial number 79011 with Cooke lens, on the right 56987, with surplus Kodak Anastigmat No. 4.

The more intriguing feature was that both cameras have the same double tripod mount in the same place with nearly the same impression in the leather that shows both sockets were used simultaneously. The serial number book lists this camera as the third of six “Spec. Graphic Cameras.”



The question now becomes “Why?” What was the purpose of these, effectively, turn-of-the-century Senior Graphic cameras made with Speed Graphic parts 20 years after they’ve fallen out of fashion?

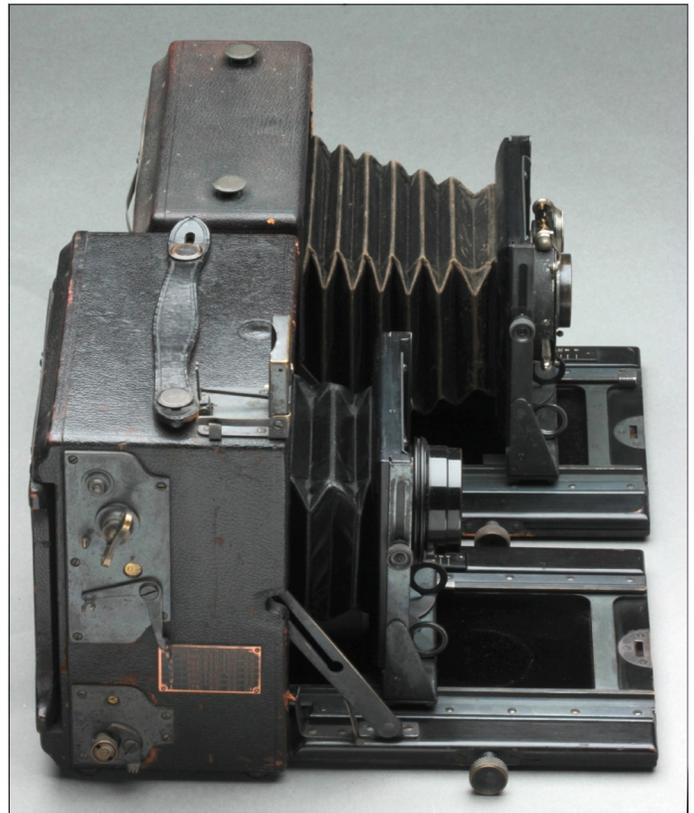
At one camera with a double tripod socket, you chalk it up to a single person who felt he needed a camera that was extra stable. At two, you say F&S insisted on making two in case something went wrong with the first. But we are now at 12, spaced out over about two years with the possibility of six more, if those 3¼x4¼ cameras were done the same way.

Anything at this point is speculation, but it’s obvious somebody, either Folmer & Schwing or an outside party, was trying something out with these cameras. Perhaps the camera was part of a larger apparatus, like a copy stand or identification system.

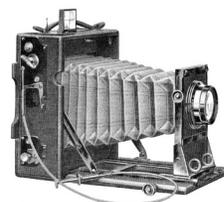
The two sockets might not be there for extreme stability but repeatable registration; with two sockets, the camera can’t twist or rotate on its mount, eliminating perspective and skew problems, which is paramount in a copy camera. A copy camera doesn’t need a viewfinder. And while I wouldn’t put much evidential weight on it, I found it interesting that both of these cameras have the infinity stops moved as far forward as possible—to maximize the bellows extension.

On the other side of the ledger, while there’s no need for a viewfinder on a copy camera, there’s no need for a standard focus scale either. Since these scales were hand-made and matched to the lens, wouldn’t it make more sense to have a macro scale? And the bellows is standard Speed Graphic, so at best, all you’ll get is 1:1, probably less with a lens at 6+ inches.

Alas, we have more questions than answers, and unless an ad, a photograph or a letter shows up with more information, the purpose of these two cameras may remain a mystery.

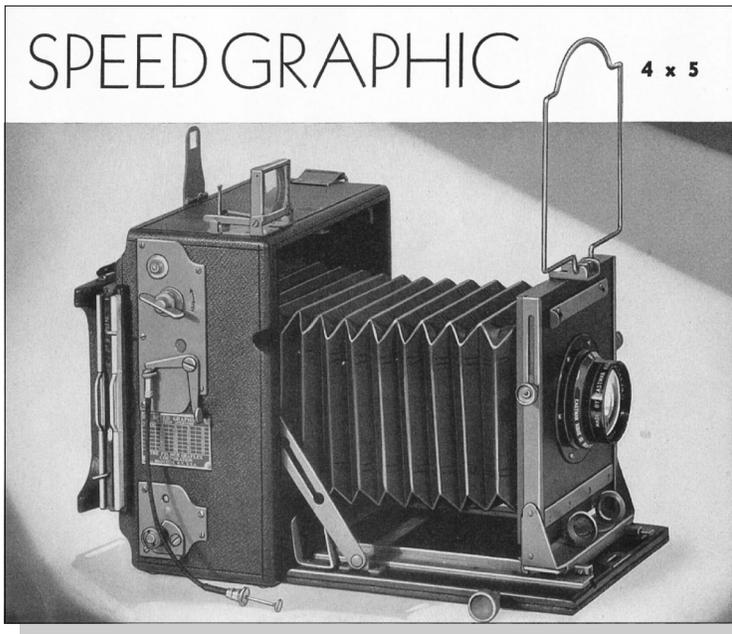


In front, a standard top-handle Speed Graphic number 31867 ca. 1913-14, and in the back, Special number 56987 ca. 1917.



THE SPEED GRAPHIC AND THE NEW CAMERA-MAN OF THE 1930s

By Thomas Evans



Speed Graphic from 1933 catalog.

The 'Pre-Anniversary' Speed Graphic

The Speed Graphic in question is the 4x5 "pre-Anniversary" model in production from 1928 through 1939. The original model of the Speed Graphic, the "top-handle," went into production in 1912 and was primarily intended to provide the very successful focal plane shutter of the Graflex cameras in a compact, folding camera. This first Speed Graphic had a folding, "direct" viewfinder, and the tapering bellows and small lensboard were just sufficient to carry an f/4.5 barrel lens. In 1928 the "pre-Anniversary" Speed Graphic replaced the original model, and while it retained the folding view finder, the new model was stronger, lighter and more compact, and introduced several design features by which this capable camera came to be known. The square bellows were long enough (13½ inches) to allow focusing a life-sized image with a normal lens, the 4x4 "C" lensboard allowed larger, faster lenses and lenses in large shutters. The handle was moved to the side to allow a firmer grasp and more control of the camera, and a wire sports-finder was added.

These new features made the Speed Graphic attractive to press photographers, as well as to police departments, government agencies and anyone who had a need for a solidly made, dependable camera that could be pulled out of its case, opened up, focused and fired on short notice. Focusing was accomplished either by opening the back of the camera and viewing the image on the ground glass, or by setting the estimated distance on the semi-vernier focusing scale on the camera bed and sliding track. Uncoupled accessory range finders were available in the 1930s, and the camera could be purchased with a rangefinder made by Ernst Leitz. These were used to find the distance, which was then transferred to the vernier scale to achieve focus. The coupled rangefinder became available during the middle of the decade, notably from Kalart, but these early rangefinders would not become dependable in the practical

sense until the Anniversary Speed Graphic was introduced in 1940. Early attempts to connect the rangefinder to the front rack, with a sliding, spring-loaded bar, were finicky at best. The Anniversary introduced a focusing track in which front and rear sliding tracks were coupled, and this provided the elegant, rear track-mounted stop on which the rangefinder arm could ride.

Jack Price, Chief Staff Photographer of the New York Morning World, and later the editor of a photographic column in Editor and Publisher, wrote two books in the 1930s on news photography in which he described the work in detail, as well as the philosophy behind it. He devotes several chapters of his books to the cameras used by news photographers and how to use them.

Interestingly, in his 1932 News Photography, his camera of choice "for straight news" was the 4x6 Zeiss Ica, a large folding camera that took "half plate" glass plates in single holders, while the 4x5 Speed Graphic and the 4x5 Graflex Series D were also noted as being very handy. In his 1937 News Pictures, all mention of the Ica had been dropped, and the Speed Graphic had top billing.

In 1932 both the 4x6 Icas and 4x5 Speed Graphics used at his newspaper were equipped with Carl Zeiss Jena Tessar f/4.5 160mm lenses with homemade "speedflashes."



In The Complete Photographer Encyclopedia (1949), William Eckenberg, Staff Photographer with the New York Times, wrote this about the changes in preferred cameras: "The 5x7 Press Graflex ...was followed by the 5x7 Speed Graphic. For a time many newsmen were carrying the 4x6 Zeiss Ica cameras. These were smaller, but they were too slow to operate. The ground glass had to be removed and a sheath type of plate holder inserted in the camera. These holders received very rough handling and, as a consequence, they leaked light. Many pictures were lost because of fog. Then too, the cameras had only a front shutter and the camera was not at all practical for fast action pictures."

The 4x5 Speed Graphic was a sturdy, relatively compact and light-weight camera that had a very fast focal plane shutter for action shots. It could easily be fitted with a lens having a leaf shutter that could be synchronized with flash. At some time in the early 1930s, the Speed Graphic became the standard press camera. During the 1930s, police departments in large cities developed photographic departments, and they also found the Speed Graphic to be a good field camera with which to document a crime scene, perhaps following the news photographer's lead.

In their 1940 book, Camera Take the Stand, Asa Herzog and A.J. Ezickson wrote that: "At the scene of the crime, the camera makes a complete factual record of everything that has happened, and also plays its part as a silent detective in the finding of clues. Shortly

after the arrival of the first policeman, photographers from the Homicide Bureau make their appearance, equipped with a Speed Graphic type of camera.... and all the auxiliary equipment such as photofloods, flash bulbs, loaded film holders...”

They also commented on the power that photography had to inhibit crime: “When Daguerre conducted his early experiments, he hadn’t the slightest idea that he was inventing one of the greatest threats the criminal world had ever known. A little black box, a lens, a shutter, and some sensitized paper.... and behold! the camera, the deadliest instrument ever flung in the path of the criminal. A killer, waiting for his prey, will not be daunted by a gun aimed in his direction but will flee in wild disorder at the sight of a camera. Not long ago an entire band of killers imported from another city to ‘get’ a crusading newspaper reporter quickly faded from view when the street in which they were loitering was suddenly invaded by a hoard of newspaper cameramen, who proceeded to photograph every person in sight.”

Synchronized Flashbulb

Flashbulbs had become readily available in the U. S. in 1930. The early history of the flashbulb is murky, with several people experimenting with combustible materials inside glass bulbs. Jack Price tells us that the flashbulb was developed in Germany during World War I to enable the making of flash photographs in potentially explosive atmospheres that might be ignited by flash powder. At some time in the late 1920s, Philips N.V. began to manufacture magnesium foil-filled flashbulbs in the Netherlands, and Ostermeier began to manufacture aluminum foil-filled bulbs (the Vacublitz) in Germany.

In his 2006 article in the Graflex Historic Quarterly (Volume 11, Issue 4) on the Graflex Flashing Unit, William Inman proved some early history. General Electric and Westinghouse licensed the rights to manufacture foil-filled flashbulbs in the U.S. in 1930 from J. B. Ostermeier. At this time, the flashbulbs were intended to be used for “open flash” (“bulb”) photography, just as flash powder had been used.

In his 1939 book, Synchroflash Photography, Willard Morgan discusses early development of synchronizers. Newspaper photographers had begun to experiment with synchronized flash even before they were manufactured in the U.S., bringing flashbulbs in from Europe. Morgan wrote: “Among the first synchroflash pioneers in the United States were ‘Doc’ Skinner of the New York Journal, Ernest Sisto of the New York Times, and Clarence Stieglitz of the New York World Telegram.” Morgan quoted Ernest Sisto as saying: “As far as I know, the first ‘buzzer’ or magnet type of synchronizer was made by Tommy Flannagen of the New York Daily Mirror.” In 1930 Harry H. Hipwell, a photographer in Pittsburgh, got a patent for a synchronizer that operated by compressed air, which used two bulbs that would flash in quick sequence to prolong the duration of the flash.

Flashbulbs very soon became an essential part of the press photographer’s outfit, and Jack Price provided plans in his 1932 book for converting a “common desk buzzer” into a flash synchronizer solenoid, which could be paired with a battery case and reflector and other “common hardware” to build a synchronized flash gun.

In 1937 Jack Price wrote that General Electric, Westinghouse and Edison were the major producers of flashbulbs, and de-

scribed their manufacture: “Contrary to prevailing belief, the bulbs do not contain magnesium foil. The silver-like material in them is hand-beaten aluminum foil, beaten thinner than commercial gold leaf. There are in each bulb four sheets of this foil, each one about 3 in. in diameter. It is packed into the bulb by hand as no machinery has yet been invented to handle it. It is almost impossible to pick up a leaf of it. The girls who pack the bulbs do so with a rubber-tipped piece of wood, not unlike a lead pencil.” He suggested that prior to inserting the bulb in the flash lamp, that one tap the end of it on the palm to settle the foil inside around the primer, as the foil tended to shift during shipment. He also advised keeping the bulbs away from high tension electrical wires, as these were known to fire the bulbs.

Wabash was producing flashbulbs by 1936. Philips introduced wire-filled flashbulbs in 1934, and GE began making wire-filled flashbulbs in 1937. Wire-filled bulbs ignited more quickly and were better suited for synchronization with leaf shutters. Also in 1937, leaf-shutter synchronizers were made and sold by Irving Jacobson (who later worked for Graflex) and by Sid Lindahl of Sol (who later worked for Heiland). Morris Schwartz of Kalart and Samuel Mendelsohn were early producers of practical, synchronized flash guns.

Graflex hired Irving Jacobson to design the Graflex Flashing Unit and Synchronizer, which was introduced in 1941. He also designed the Graflite, which was introduced in 1948.

The availability of synchronized flashbulbs, combined with the newly perfected panchromatic films, which were more sensitive to the yellow-red light of the flashbulbs, made quick, dependable photography a primary tool of news-gathering. The photographer could have his camera ready, step into almost any situation with any quality of light (including no light), and immediately grab the shot. The ability to take pictures in bad light also opened up night time coverage to the news photographer.

Larry Millett commented on the distinctive look of these night shots in his book, Strange Days and Dangerous Nights: Photos from the Speed Graphic Era: “Night photographs taken with the Speed Graphic have a look all their own. The camera’s big flash casts a sharp, harsh light in which images seem almost to be carved out of the encircling darkness, these pictures inevitably convey a sense of melodramatic, intensified reality – the essence of the ‘noir’ look.”

Speed Graphic number 197415 from 1937, with coupled Kalart range-finder, SOL flashgun, and Watson tubular viewfinder added.





News cameramen demonstrating the Speed Graphic and Graflex Series D cameras, from Jack Price's 1932 [News Photography](#).

The Press Photographer's Outfit

Jack Price wrote in 1937 that for complete coverage of all types of assignments the press photographer needed four cameras; the 4x5 Speed Graphic fitted with a 13.5cm Zeiss Tessar, the 4x5 Graflex Series D with an f/4.5, 7½-inch anastigmat, a "Big Bertha" or "Long Tom", a 5x7 Graflex modified to accommodate a 30- to 60-inch telephoto lens, and a "Magic Eye" camera, a 35mm movie camera that could be used to make movies or a rapid sequence of single shots. In addition to these, he recommended the news cameraman carry a 35mm Contax with an f:1.5 lens or a Leica, "for emergencies."

The Speed Graphic was invariably fitted with a speed flash synchronizer. "It is also necessary to have at least a dozen film holders, a film pack adapter, a Crown No. 1 folding tripod, a focusing cloth and a carrying case roomy enough to accommodate at least a dozen flash bulbs in addition to the other equipment."

The photographer was urged to fill his negative with the subject, securing a 1- to 1½-inch image of a person on the negative. The Speed Graphic was considered to be the camera best adapted to general newspaper photography, up to about 25 feet. The Graflex was considered best for longer-range shots, such as for sports from the sidelines, and the Series D could be quickly fitted with lenses up to 17 inches, as needed, to get a frame-filling shot. The Big Bertha was essential when the photographers were not allowed on the sidelines and took their shots from the stands, usually from a "special hanging balcony just below the first tier of the grandstand." The Sprague rapid focusing device was a new thing in 1937, which allowed the Big Bertha to be pre-focused on four different spots on the field, such as the four bases on a baseball field, so that the photographer could immediately shift the focus, by moving a lever, to where the action was and make the shot.

The Routine

"To the beginner the mechanism of the Graphic looks complicated, but after a little study of this box he will find that it is really quite simply constructed."

Jack Price left us with a detailed description of how to take a photograph with the Speed Graphic: "The ease with which the camera

may be worked depends upon the simplicity of the routine which the operator follows. It is recommended that wasted motion be eliminated. The following method is highly practical: open the camera, draw out the lensboard until it is stopped by the clamps tightened to the tracks. Decide at what distance the exposure is to be made and set it accordingly. This is accomplished by an indicating mark on the left side of the track and aligned to the ranges on the scale. If the speed flash synchronizer is to be used make certain that the focal plane curtain is open as this operation requires the use of the front lens shutter. Insert the holder, cock the lever of the shutter, then screw the bulb into the lamp and all is ready for an exposure. The camera should be held very rigidly. ...it is suggested that the camera be held firmly and against the cheek, permitting the right or left eye... to sight through either the glass or wire finder."

"...It is recommended that it be held firmly with the left hand, allowing the right hand to assist, but permitting the index finger freedom to operate the shutter lever. The very last thing which should be done before the exposure is made is to draw the slide."

Double-check the focus distance, shutter speed and aperture --- is the shutter cocked? Is the slide drawn? When all is ready, the exposure is made, the slide returned (with the black edge of the handle facing outward), the film holder withdrawn, flipped over, and reinserted for the next shot. Ample practice was strongly encouraged.

Writing in [The Complete Photographer](#) in 1942, William Eckenberg emphasized this point: "Practice at every opportunity, so as to become expert in handling your camera. Make your movements automatic until it will hardly be necessary for you to give thought to the mechanical manipulation of the camera while you are under pressure. This can be done without the use of film. You can go through all the motions of actually making a picture, even to putting back the slide of a blank holder, until you are certain that you have mastered the camera to a point of perfection."

But being able to effectively wield a Speed Graphic took more than mere proficiency with the equipment.

What It Took

William Eckenberg ([The Complete Photographer](#)) laid out the desired qualifications: "The news photographer must know his equipment, must be able to handle any type of camera he is called upon to operate. He should know how to get the most out of his negatives. He should also be able to print. He should understand lighting and the use of filters. He must know how to make his backgrounds count. Most important of all, he should capitalize on experience. Good news photographers are made through countless experiences and it is the successful man who can make the most of that experience when he finds himself in a tight spot photographically."

"As to personality, the news photographer must always exercise good judgment. He must have an understanding of news values. He must have an endless amount of patience. He must have tact, initiative, and creative ability. He must be observing. There are times when he will need to be a super-diplomat in his relations with people and situations. He must be cool under pressure. Above all, he must have imagination and the ability to anticipate, the ability to plan a picture...."

"...Setting out on the job, the photographer makes sure that he has plenty of film and bulbs. He takes an extra supply, just in case he

should be given another assignment before he gets back to the office. He must keep in touch with his desk by phone in case a big story should break while he is out of the office. When he is given additional assignments, he sends the completed stories to the office by messenger.”

“It is his responsibility to supply all possible details for captions and he must be extremely careful about correct spelling and order of names of people in the picture.... Control and calmness is acquired mainly through facing many varied and difficult problems in news photography. That might take years. But a short cut can be made in that direction by attaining confidence – not only in your ability, but in the equipment you are using. Practice at every opportunity...”

“Rattlesnake Kills Self”

What is news? What were the press photographers sent out to cover? Murders, fires, crime, natural and man-made disasters, sexual affairs, sports, high society, and various unusual features were the prized events.

Larry Millett commented that: “Blood was, for better or for worse, the visual signature of news photography in the Speed Graphic era. It can be seen spattered across maimed bodies... oozing from the wounds of victims in emergency rooms, darkening the floors and walls of murder scenes. The prevalence of such imagery in newspapers... was no accident. Newspapers chased spot news ruthlessly in those days.”

“Newspapers of the Speed Graphic era had many failings – sensationalism, sexism, racial and ethnic stereotyping, and subservience to authority... – they also had one great virtue, which is that they tended to be much closer to the ground of everyday life than newspapers are today... [they] were woven into the very fabric of the city... This helps to explain why so many news photographs of the time had a kind of intimacy seldom found today, the photographers were... taking snapshots of home.”

“The newspapers were just as devoted to what might be called ‘small town news.’ The photographers regularly shot everything from neighborhood festivals, church and club meetings, and local bowling tournaments. They were seen as part of the community and were welcome almost everywhere.”

Jack Price reported that practically 80% of a paper’s news was the less dramatic general news: “Some of it is razzle-dazzle but most of it is as humdrum as the shuffling rounds of a night watchman. Photographing it is the news cameraman’s job. A seeker of facts, his work is fundamentally factual. Hit ’em-in-the-eye visualization of the cosmic ho-hum... Much less imagination is needed to understand news pictures than is required of the cameraman who takes them. He, at least, must recognize in any composition that he shoots something of that nebulous quality called human interest --- the very marrow of news.”

The news photograph could also serve to draw attention to obstinate social problems. Writing in The Complete Book of Press Photography (1950), Edward Stanley said: “In breaking down the barriers which are erected by fear of the strange and the unknown, the press photograph is one of our most useful tools.”

Also in The Complete Book of Press Photography, Gardener Soule, Managing Editor of Better Homes and Gardens, said that

what was wanted from the press photographer was “pictures that tell stories, not pictures that are only illustrative or decorative, but of people in events that are actually happening. Pictures that need no more than headlines and captions to tell the complete stories.”

And again in Press Photography, C. M. Churchell of LIFE wrote that the press photographer should strive to capture “who people are, what they do, ...[their] relation to their environment. Provide information, appeal to an emotion, add knowledge.”

The photographs must tell a story, and the story must have the interest that moves the reader.

Weegee

Arthur (Weegee) Fellig worked the streets of New York City in the 1930s and 1940s as a freelance newspaper photographer. He said that murders and fires were his bread and butter, but he concentrated on the human interest in the events – capturing the reactions of the crowd as well as the main event, and this he extended to many socially interesting events, from kids at an open fire hydrant on a hot summer afternoon to swooning Bobby-Soxers at a Frank Sinatra concert. He sometimes used “invisible light” – dark red flashbulbs and infrared film – in order to capture images of people in the dark without drawing attention to himself. In the final chapter of his 1945 book, Naked City, he outlines his techniques:



“The only camera I use is a 4x5 Speed Graphic with a Kodak Ektar lens in a Supermatic shutter, all American-made. The film I use is a Super Pancro Press Type B. I always use a flash bulb for my pictures which are mostly taken at night. Even on the few occasions where I have made shots by daylight, I still use a flash bulb. I also use a Graflex flash synchronizer and the exposure is always the same. 1/200 part of a second... stop F.16, that is, at a distance of ten feet. When I am making closeups at six feet, with the light from the flashbulb closer to the subject and hence stronger, I step down to F.32...which compensates if I am a little off in my guess of the distance.”

“Guess focus troubles a lot of beginners, but on a story where lots of things are happening fast and furiously, one has no time to look through the ground glass to focus... or even to use the range finder... and besides, it is pitch dark. I keep my camera set at ten feet, which takes care of most pictures. For close-ups I quickly change the focusing scale to six feet by the light of a small pencil flashlight which I always carry with me. With the concentration on six and ten feet, and a lot of practice, one can guess these two distances.... Editors demand and expect to get needle-sharp photographs.”

“Captions are important too. Editors want to know who...when...where... Get all the information you can, don’t be

afraid to ask questions...be curious. The readers always are, and even the guy who has just committed a murder will give his name and address...and often try to justify his crime.”

“I work alone and I don’t use...extension lights, tripods...exposure meters. I haven’t got the time for gadgets because all my energy is concentrated on the drama which is taking place before my eyes. Some photographers would be horrified to learn that I use the much denounced flat flash... but I get snappy prints by using No. 3 enlarging paper.”

“If you are puzzled about the kind of camera to buy, get a Speed Graphic... for two reasons... it is a good camera and moreover, it is standard equipment for all press photographers... with a camera like that the cops will assume that you belong on the scene and will let you get beyond the police lines.... The newspaper photographers don’t stick their cards in their hats... that’s only done in the movies. Just go about taking pictures without getting in anyone’s way. ...make every shot count. Think before you shoot... get punch into your pictures...”

“...Be original and develop your own style, but don’t forget above anything and everything else... be human... think... feel. When you find yourself beginning to feel a bond between yourself and the people you photograph, when you laugh and cry with their laughter and tears, you will know you are on the right track. ...Good luck.”



Hindenburg, photo by Sam Shere.

Hindenburg Disaster, May 6, 1937.

“Oh, it’s flashing, it’s flashing terribly. It’s bursting into flames and falling on the mooring mast. Oh, this is one of the worst catastrophes – the flames are leaping 400, 500 feet into the sky. It’s a terrific crash, ladies and gentlemen, the smoke and the flames. And now it’s crashing to the ground, not quite at the mooring mast. Oh, the humanity!”
---Herb Morrison, Radio Announcer.

As the 800-foot long dirigible Hindenburg arrived at Lakehurst, NJ, at dusk, it burst into flames. Thirty-six of the ninety-seven people on board perished in the forty-seven seconds it took to catch fire and crash to the ground.

You may have heard the story that the experienced professional news photographers on scene, wielding their 5x7 Press Graflex

cameras, were not as quick to get the shot as a young, upstart cub reporter with a Speed Graphic, and that they all consequently abandoned the Press Graflex for the Speed Graphic. It may not have happened quite that way. By 1937 the Speed Graphic had already become a standard, and several of the photographers on scene that evening had one.

According to John Faber (Great Moments in News Photography, 1960), there were 22 still and newsreel press photographers at Lakehurst waiting to welcome the Hindenburg. He described the response of the photographers to the sudden disaster: “Murray Becker’s Associated Press training sent him into action with calm, methodical precision. At the very instant of the explosion, he made a shot with his 4x5” Speed Graphic. He then slipped the slide in, removed the holder, turned it over, pushed it back into the camera, pulled out the slide, cocked the shutter, and made his next shot, all within five seconds. Changing holders, he made a third as the ship settled to the ground.”

[Murray Becker’s 4x5” Speed Graphic was loaded with Super Pan film, and equipped with a 13.5cm Zeiss Tessar lens, pre-set to 1/50th second at f:8.] “Sam Shere, International News Photos; Charles Hoff, N.Y. Daily News; Gus Pasquarella, Philadelphia Bulletin; and Bill Springfield, Acme-NEA --- proved experienced news photographers react alike. Within the forty-seven seconds of destruction, each made just one shot --- the peak of the explosion. All four were identical --- the dirigible in the air, mid-section to stern a mass of flames.”

Beaumont Newhall chose Sam Shere’s image to print in his History of Photography. This image, probably the one you are most familiar with, shows the Hindenburg as it explodes in flames and flying embers.

According to Alan Du Bois (On Assignment: Photographs by Sam Shere 1978), Mr. Shere took two shots with his Speed Graphic and then switched to his Leica. “Sam had his camera ready. It was loaded with orthochromatic film. The shutter was set for 1/40 of a second at f4.5 and the dark slide was pulled in readiness. He was walking in front of the dirigible when he heard a crack ‘like the sound of a cannon.’ He spun around and literally shot from the hip. By the time he got the second shot, the tail of the ship was a ball of flame. Sam dropped to his knees, grabbed his Leica and began to shoot randomly at figures running from the flames. ‘Many of those pictures were too horrible to use,’ he recalls.”

Incidentally, Sam Shere had purchased the Leica in 1926, soon after it had been introduced, and had endured much ridicule from the press corps for using a “toy” camera, but it allowed him to get photos in places where more obvious cameras could not go, such as inside Sing Sing Prison. At Lakehurst it allowed rapid-fire photography. At least two other photographers recorded the disaster by rapidly shooting a roll of film through their Leicas: Arthur Cofod Jr. of LIFE and Mr. Foo Chu, an amateur photographer, sold his undeveloped roll of film to the New York Daily News, which published two pages of his pictures.

Writing in The Complete Photographer, William Eckenberg described the essential quality of the news photographer to think clearly while under pressure: “The Hindenburg disaster was just such a story. I don’t think there was ever a greater display of wholesale courage under fire than that which took place when the airship burned at Lakehurst, New Jersey... Sam Meyers, Manager

of the Philadelphia Bureau of Wide World Photos, covered the assignment in excellent fashion. Just after he made his first picture, he was struck by one of the landing cables of the airship, knocked to the ground, injured and his camera damaged. At about this time a man from one of the other agencies called to him, saying that he thought they had better get back out of the way. Sam yelled in turn, ‘You darn fool, stand still and shoot!’ Sam pumped pictures just as fast as he could. As soon as he made an exposure on a holder, he threw it on the ground in front of him and reached into his bag, which was hanging over his shoulder, for another. He did not stop to use the film on the other side of the holder. In this way he avoided the need of checking to see whether or not he was making a double exposure while working at such high speed in the dark. In all, he had about eight marvelous pictures showing various stages of the ship crashing.”

In his 1937 book, Jack Price said of the news coverage of the Hindenburg disaster: “Photographically the tragedy ranks as the greatest story of all time... After the first flash the newspapers, press and photo associations quickly mobilized scores of cameramen and reporters and rushed them to Lakehurst, thereby increasing the original forty [reporters] to four hundred within two hours. Extra lines were strung into the area by the wire utilities. Portable picture transmitting machines appeared miraculously and sped photographs of the tragedy to the far corners of the country and the world beyond. In all pictorial and reportorial respects the fiery doom of the Hindenburg holds, perhaps, the most distinguished place among the notable examples of high-speed coordination in news-gathering known to modern journalism.”

Conclusion

At a time when the newspapers were responding to the public’s desire to see the news, as well as read about it, by printing more photographs, and photographs of emerging events, the Speed Graphic proved to be a reliable tool with which to secure the pictures. It was compact, lightweight, well-designed and expertly made to perform its function day after day with minimal maintenance. The addition of flashbulbs opened up a new world of nighttime coverage, as well as making quick action photography more certain. As the news photographers used this camera day after day, they honed their skills to the point at which they could operate the camera without thinking through the operation step by step – with an informed automation, one might say, that today’s computer chip-driven cameras could only dream about.

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Kalart Micromatic Speed Flash on 4x5 Speed Graphic.

Graflex Historic Quarterly

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HOW ABOUT A DATE?

According to public records, the Folmer & Schwing Mfg. Company was incorporated in 1890. In 1897, according to a letter to Rudolph Speth of Eastman Kodak, Mr. Folmer stated that he equipped his “manufacturing plant” to produce Graphic styled cameras on that date. Before then, several other companies made cameras under his name.

In December 1902, a “Photographic Camera,” to be named the Graflex, was given patent number 716,021. “‘Graflex’ is simply a coined word; it is used by the Folmer & Schwing Mfg. Co., to designate a particular and exclusive [SLR] camera,” so said a Graflex camera instruction booklet for the Reversible Back Graflex, circa 1902-1903.

In May 1905, Mr. Folmer applied for a patent (number 843,140) for a “Camera.” An ad in both The Photo-Miniature and the Amateur Photographer in late 1905 introduced this camera as the “Auto Graflex.” Mr. Folmer seemed so sure of the uniqueness of his idea, that he introduced the camera before the patent was granted in February 1907.

So what’s the point of this tedious recital?

Wikipedia states “William F. Folmer, an inventor, built the first Graflex camera in 1898.” There is no evidence that this is accurate.

Brian Coe, in Cameras, states that “The Graflex camera, first in-

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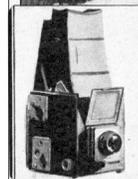
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roduced in 1898...and that “The Folmer & Schwing Auto Graflex camera of 1906...” Again, there is no evidence that these statements are accurate.

It is possible that “Graflex” was used in a generic way to describe all cameras made by Folmer and his companies, and since there was no 1905 Graflex catalog (that has so far surfaced), the Auto was assumed to have been introduced when shown in the 1906 catalog. The upcoming article on the Princehorn camera will bring up some additional examples of how Graflex history is reported.

Comments are welcome.



This Christmas...
a Graflex!
For the Whole Family