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Ira Current

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ANSCO Reminiscences

by Ira Current, Prof. Emeritus
[Imaging and Photographic Technology Department](#)
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

(Prof. Current can be reached through e-mail at TNERRUC@aol.com)

ARRIVAL AT BINGHAMTON

Jobs were scarce in June 1934 when I graduated from the University of Colorado with a BA degree in Chemistry. Since I had considerable experience photographing art works for the Fine Arts Department at the University, which had provided me with an attic darkroom and other facilities, I wrote several letters to art museums who I thought might have need for a photographer. One alternative was to establish a portrait studio in Boulder. Of course I had no money and I would have to compete with Charles F. Snow who was owner of the most popular studio in the city.

Since I had modified the chemistry curriculum (as far as a student could) to include courses that I thought were necessary to undertake a career in photography, a letter to the Eastman Kodak Company seemed in order. But a three line reply said KODAK was hiring no chemists at the present time.

Agfa Ansco was vaguely known to me. I had seen advertisements for Agfa Ansco Film in AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY, and had even tried a roll or two. When all other avenues for employment seemed closed, Francis Geck, fine arts instructor and my mentor, suggested I write to Agfa Ansco. After all, one should try every possibility. Within a few days a letter from Dr. Willey Schmidt, head of Ansco research, offered me a position in the Phototechnical Department at a starting salary of \$20.00 per week. I should report as soon as convenient. I later learned that this was a perfect example of who you know, rather than what you know, that leads to success. Verne Reckmeyer, who had the Art Department position I held in my last two years at the University was now head of the Ansco Phototechnical Department. He was devoted to the precision and detail of photographic technology. When my application arrived he recommended that I be hired.

My brother Lynn, a kind of local basketball star, had died of leukemia almost at the very hour that my brother Richard and I received our university diplomas. Several days after his funeral I said goodbye to my family and embarked on the Rock Island for Chicago. Frank Geck insisted I buy a hat, since anyone in the east who didn't wear a hat was considered to be "queer". We selected a white straw Panama hat which I was to wear all the while traveling, and after arriving in Binghamton.

The trip across Kansas, Iowa and Illinois was sweltering. The layover in Chicago was to last several hours, and I had time to visit the 1934 World's Fair. The windy city obliged with a cold north breeze that was a shock after the hot trip across the Plains. I nearly

froze to death that afternoon and evening at the Fair. After a late evening departure on the Erie Railroad, I found myself the next morning sitting alone in a very cold coach in the middle of the Hornell railroad yards--there was no locomotive in front and no cars behind. I had been sleeping, and now felt the terror of being stranded, unnoticed by the railroad crew. In due time a locomotive backed up, connected to the front of the car, gathered up a few more and rattled off towards Binghamton. The front was open, and the car made a flue for the smoke and soot. We arrived in Binghamton near sunset, over the track where only a few weeks before a rear-end collision near the State Hospital had been fatal to a number of railroad passengers.

I found a room at the YMCA, learned that I should take a "Stella" bus to find the Ansco personnel office on Charles Street. There I was greeted by "Bobby" Dunn, a young junior executive who was acting as the personnel manager. The personnel manager shared a secretary with the purchasing agent, Eric Ruckbrodt, another young employee, but with a strong German accent. They all had offices in a small white frame house-like building clinging to the bank above and to the west of the one-story Building 42, which housed the Phototechnical Department. After a few formalities, Dunn said that Dr. Schmidt was not available to welcome me, and sent me off to Building 42, where I was greeted by Verne Reckmeyer. I was then immediately introduced to John Forrest, a sharp witted young fellow who originated on a farm near Binghamton. His speech was crisp and clear, very well organized, with good volume. Some often referred to him as "leather lungs". He took me in tow and started me on my career at Ansco.

Within a few days I had been directed to the home of the Goewey's on Beethoven Street where Bob Dunn and some of the other new executives had roomed when they arrived in Binghamton. Mr. Goewey, a tall man who drove an old Maxwell cloth top coupe, had owned a cleaning establishment in Troy, New York, but he was then employed by a related company in Binghamton. Mrs. Goewey was a delightful little lady who often talked about her social life in Troy, and maintained a houseful of art mementos. The Goeweys also had a daughter who showed the effects of a bout with scarlet fever when she was a baby. I lived with the Goeweys until I left for the Navy in 1942.

EARLY PHOTOTECHNICAL DAYS

John asked me if I knew what "sensitometry" meant. Before I had a chance to organize an answer, he proceeded to explain to me the fundamentals of sensitometry. It was a capsule ten or fifteen minute lecture on the process of determining the response of photographic materials to light and subsequent processing. I was then immediately put to work in the Sensitometry Department. The pride of the department was a new Eastman Type IIb Sensitometer, supplemented by a couple of Capstaff Densitometers. We were testing examples of various films and papers manufactured by Ansco in order to prepare technical data for publication. John Harmon, Lloyd Varden and Winston Schlag arrived about the same time I did. Harmon and Schlag were the two other members of the department, under the supervision of John Forrest. Harmon was an amateur machinist and spent his off hours at his South Bend Model A lathe constructing a 1-inch bore gasoline engine. "Winner", as Schlag was known, was an outgoing, potential "marketing type",

ending up as manager of the company's Boston branch. Although reporting to John, we also dealt with Vern Reckmeyer from time to time.

Shortly after my arrival, Dr. Willey Schmidt, a scientist from the Agfa parent in Germany, came through the department. He was a short stocky man with a brush haircut and a thick accent. He asked me what I had been doing. His accent slowed down my ready understanding of the question, and as with Forrest while I was formulating in my mind the answer, he cut me off with "das macht nichts", or something like that. He was gone in seconds, and I saw him on occasions briefly after that.

Our staff of three was supplemented by two work-study students from the Rochester Mechanics Institute, Ed Kelley and Lyman (slim) Hilliard. Ed was not healthy and he smoked excessively when off the company premises. Slim was a Vermonter, fairly rough hewn, but easy to get along with. In addition to helping as sensitometrists, these two provided latest thoughts from the academic world of Rochester.

Harold Kent was the chemical mixer for the department. He was not a "technical" person but could follow cook-book directions in carrying out his mixing duties which included precision developers for sensitometry. He was prone to some error, however, and one day he made an important batch of developer for our tests which did not develop at all. After that Hal instituted his own "quality" testing procedure which consisted of inserting a white-lighted piece of film into each bottle of developer just prior to corking it. If the film turned dark, the developer was OK.

Hall also mixed the lacquer required to refinish the wooden racks used to process 16mm back and white reversal film. Since the process involved both strong alkalis and acids it was rough on the lacquer coatings and the racks had to be refinished often. One day he dropped a five-gallon bottle of freshly mixed lacquer which was thus dispensed all over the beautifully tiled mixing room floor. Hal immediately started mopping it up. Dr. Schmidt opened the door in the midst of this process and asked "rack lacquer?", closed the door and went on. Within seconds the lacquer was not only being mopped up, but the tile floor along with it. The tile material was being dissolved and Hal was mopping the bare concrete subfloor. He survived this disaster but not too much later entered a career as a radio announcer.

The water system in Building 42 was taxed by all of the laboratory working requiring water. During the day water pressure, while adequate, was low. At the end of every working day, Schlag and I would make sure that the water in the darkroom was turned off. One day a trickle of hot water was left running in the darkroom at closing time. However the other departments were working overtime and when they finally left and turned off their water, the pressure increased the volume in the sensitometry room.

When Schlag and I arrived in the morning, the hot water had generated a room full of dense steam. Our sensitometer was soaking wet! We closed the door, proceeded to disassemble the instrument completely and wipe off all the parts, a process taking all morning and part of the afternoon with a "no light" sign on the darkroom door. The

sensitometer was never like a jewel after that. The Photofinishing Department consisted of John Risdon supplemented by two young ladies whose duty was mainly that of spotting prints made for advertising. John, a wiry native Vermonter defensive of his personal space, had one darkroom with about five Ansco Professional Contact printers and he was supposed to share a printer as needed by the Sensitometry Department. Invariably when I would ask to use one of the printers he would refuse me with a lecture about "nonsense work" of no value to the company. On explaining this to Verne Reckmeyer, I was told to go back and not take "no" for an answer. One day, working on a genuinely urgent project, I had to use a printer. I was hyped up more than usual. John said "no". I replied positively with strong invectives that he was going to let me have a printer. This outburst had amazing results. A printer was cleaned off and John said "There's your printer!" Ever since this we were the best of friends and there was always room for me in the Photofinishing darkrooms.

Jim Anderson came one day after graduating with my brother from Oberlin College. He was a native of Binghamton, whose mother Emma worked in the company paper plant and was in charge of charting the size and orientation of paper sheets to be cut for packaging. Jim was brilliant, could read an average book in an hour, then answer any question posed by classmates relative to the contents of the book, often winning sizable bets on the accomplishment. He had been hired to work in the paper plant and was sent to Phototechnical to learn all about sensitometry from Schlag and me. He spent a great deal of time reading paper sensitometric strips with a Marten's head densitometer. This was tedious and I think Jim was glad to get to his assignment as Assistant Head of Paper Testing, reporting to Herbert von Schoellenbach.

Schoellenbach was an interesting character of German origin. Those few of us "technical people" originating from outside of Binghamton banded together for dinner and sundry entertainment in the evening. The group consisted of Schoellenbach, Reckmeyer, Schlag, Hilliard, Kelley and me. Harmon, Lloyd Varden and others from the field joined us whenever they were in Binghamton. At our gatherings Schoellenbach regaled us with his biography; his experiences as a motion picture cameraman, his expeditions to the Amazon, and his association with Richofen, the World War I German aviation ace. He had been the cameraman on an expedition up the Amazon River when everyone became ill with fever. He was able to escape, alone, back to civilization but had buried several thousand meters of exposed motion film in the jungle. Dr. John Dessauer, who later headed Haloid which became Xerox, also had an assignment in the paper plant. At Christmas time he joined many of us, along with the German community at lively parties sometimes hosted by Schoellenbach and his wife.

THE PAPER TESTING DEPARTMENT

After an argument with Wilfred "Shorty" Davis, head of the Paper Emulsion Department, Dr. Dessauer left to go to Haloid. I filled the resulting vacancy by working in the Paper Testing Department as a paper technician. Herbert von Schoellenbach was in charge of this department, Jim Anderson was his assistant. I was in charge of the testing of rawstock used for manufacture of sensitized photographic paper and I reported to a young

lady who had been hired to head the rawstock testing operation. She maintained an executive demeanor but was pleasant to talk with. In a short time I was assigned a technician, leaving me more time in the office.

Dr. Fritz Wentzel, a German who had been in charge of the Gevaert plant in Belgium during World War I, was head of the Paper Plant. His gray brush-like haircut matched his idea of discipline, but there was also kindness in his personality. Shorty Davis, a strictly American type, neat and precise, served well as head of the Emulsion Department. Leonard Wilbur, an outdoorsman, had replaced Dr. Dessauer as assistant to Shorty, and devoted considerable time to experimentation. He was always scheming to produce a show. He explained to me that the Germans from the administrative areas always like to look at new things so he made an effort to have something new every time they appeared, even if the idea had no practical value. One time he had coated several small differently colored pieces of glass, printed images on them ready for the weekly tour. He even tried experiments with adding coffee and similar substances to the paper emulsions.

In time, Schoellenbach and his rawstock lady left Ansco and Donald Burchan was hired to become the head of the department. He and Schoellenbach had opposite personalities. He made many reforms in the department and was a very understanding and inspiring department head. Jim Anderson remained as his assistant and I was given the responsibility for the rawstock testing.

Norma (Wall) Sempter was assigned to me as a technician, taking care of most of the testing details that included various paper strength tests. I developed a fondness for Norma and we, along with her sister Pearl who was a dental assistant for Dr. Ivory, one-time Mayor of Binghamton, often went to her brother Leaman and Louise Wall's cottage on Seneca Lake for weekends. Sometimes we all stayed at her mother's home in Geneva.

Leaman and Louise were great hosts and I recall many pleasant days swimming, boating and picnicking on Seneca Lake. Leaman was a clown when off duty and he and Louise provided a lot of entertainment. We also enjoyed winter outings in Geneva where we spent days and nights ice skating on a small body of water connected to the lake. Another glamorous technician in the department was blonde Edith Schou, niece of a well-known Binghamton architect. She often joined Norma and me for drives around the region in my 1936 Ford V-8 roadster. My friends and I called them the "blonde cargo", even though Norma was not a blonde. Grace Clark sometimes joined us and that threw the balance in favor of blondes.

On the way to the paper plant I passed the local administrative offices of the company on Charles Street. The president of the company, Dr. Ernst Schwartz, often attended meetings in the building while his chauffeur stood outside near Schwartz' Packard touring car. One day when I pulled up to pick up the blonde cargo my eyes were more on the blond cargo than on what I was doing and I cut in too short, crumpling my right rear fender under the front fender of the Packard, with a resounding crunch. This was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. The Ford fender was a ball of useless metal,

but the Packard fender, after the offending scrap was pried out, appeared to be unscathed. The chauffeur was very nice about it. I later apologized to Dr. Schwartz.

None of our raw paper base was manufactured by Ansco. It was procured from various sources such as Eastman Kodak and others. My job entailed preparing reports and other communications with the vendors regarding offerings of new rawstocks, as well as quality problems with existing stocks. Anderson and I, the "college boys", wrote reports and memos. Those intended to get outside the paper plant were edited by Dr. Wentzel, who returned them interlined to change the structure to conform to his Germanic version of English. We protested, trying to make a point of good English, but Dr. Wentzel always won out and our memos always left as though written by a German. We called it paper plant English and became very adept at the writing style.

I was assigned a technician, Paul Kanna, who worked in a darkroom near the Paper Emulsion Department at the north end of the plant, considerably removed from where my desk was located. Cockroaches thrived in the paper plant. They seemed to love the gelatine and the emulsions made from it. They often rode the paper web through the drying alley, but forgot to step off before they were wound into the rolls. Their carcasses then became a common defect that was not always sorted out the inspectors (sic). Periodic spraying of insecticides in the coating areas would drive the cockroaches to the emulsion and paper testing areas. One Monday when I made one of my regular visits to Paul's darkroom, he had to open a paper storage cabinet. Finding the doors open, a sheet of cockroaches ran out and across the floor. We both stamped on them with our feet, creating footprints of dead insects, but the spaces with the shape of our feet continued to move across the floor.

A fellow named Tom was a technician who had some exciting adventures. One of his duties involved the use of a Photostat machine, since we were manufacturing large quantities of Photostat paper at that time (remember, Xerography had not yet been invented). One time when Tom was working on the night shift he copied on our thin stock both sides of a \$20 bill. He toned the appropriate image green, then pasted the front and backside images to make a rather stiff facsimile of the bill. During a break he went to a bar not far away on Clinton Street and ordered a beer and pulled out the \$20 to pay for it. Nobody laughs. Sitting next to him was an FBI agent, also taking a break--or maybe he was working. For a few harrowing moments he had Tom under arrest but, even though it was against the law to copy money to size, he confiscated the "bill" and allowed him to return to work.

To reach the Paper Testing Department one had to pass through the Paper Finishing Department where the guillotine paper cutters were used to cut down stacks of paper in large sheets from the slashers down to the finished sizes that were marketed for use in making photographic prints. Those who operated the cutters were given incentive pay--that is paid by "piece work". They became skilled at reaching into the cutter to rotate the stack of paper as the long, sharp cutter moved upward. As a safety measure two hands were required to activate controls that moved the blade downward. On rare occasions the blade would recycle immediately, with the chance of catching the operator's hands.

One day as I was coming to work I found one of the guillotine operators sitting alone on the front stoop of the paper plant smoking a cigarette, his hand lying on the boards beside him, and the end of his arm in a makeshift bandage. He was waiting for the ambulance to come and he was alone. His arm healed. He was no longer able to work as a guillotine cutter but continued working in the finishing department charting how the paper was to be cut down.

In this period before World War II Agfa Ansco seemed to be headed for prosperity, and Dr. Schwartz decided that a delightful piece of land between Binghamton and Windsor should be turned into a fine recreation area for employees. A pond was cleared, carloads of sand from ocean beaches were hauled in, a small beach house was constructed, lawns and shrubbery planted. Ansco Lake was opened for use in the hot weather on 1940. Later a club house at the top of an expanse of lawn to the west of the lake was constructed for social functions and other gatherings.

Hours of work were gradually changing from the 44 hour week for non production people and two daily shifts of 12 hours for 6 days a week for production workers. Paper coating machines produced paper at a rate of 12 feet per minute.

Emulsion and gelatine thicknesses were relatively great and the product had a great sensitivity to curling, especially when the relative humidity was low. Agfa Ansco was at a competitive disadvantage with Kodak and the rest of the industry with reference to curling of its products. Harold Harsh, head of Paper Emulsion Research, asked me to provide accurate methods of evaluating curl of production and experimental trials, particularly at low relative humidities. This had always been done by describing results of tests in subjective terms. We needed a way of reporting curl values in terms of numbers that could be treated statistically. I devised the versed sine method using templates that when fitted to the degree of curling gave values in terms of $100/r$ where r is the radius of the curvature in centimeters. It was relatively simple to provide higher relative humidities by means of saturated salt solutions for make these tests, (sic) but low humidities presented a problem, particularly in measuring the samples. With a minimum budget we purchased some sections of stove pipe, some bronze screen, a supply of anhydrous calcium chloride, a wet-dry bulb hygrometer and a couple of sheets of glass. Combining these with corrugated cardboard, an electric fan, and an old laboratory oven we fabricated an inexpensive curl testing cabinet that served a successful curl evaluation program.

Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941, brought an end to the Agfa- Ansco period. The company was taken over by the United States Alien Property Custodian. Many of the German officials were terminated or otherwise taken from the company whose remaining personnel were dedicated to the manufacture of photographic materials and precision equipment for the war effort.

World War II brought my paper plant days to an end. I responded to the request of Commander Thorne Donnelly and entered the Navy to serve at the Naval Photographic Science Laboratory in Anacostia D.C. He had recruited personnel from Kodak, Hollywood and other areas of the photographic industry to staff this new laboratory.

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