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FRED HENSTRIDGE PHOTOGRAPHY

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THE APERTURE

The Death of a Photographic Icon

On June 22, 2009 Eastman Kodak Company announced that it will retire KODACHROME Color Film this year, concluding its 74-year run as a photography icon. Over its 74-year production, Kodachrome was produced in formats to suit various still and motion picture cameras, including8mm, Super 8, 16mm, and 35mm for movies and 35mm, 120, 110, 126, 127, 828, and large format for still photography. It was for many years used for professional color photography, especially for images intended for publication in print media.

Original Kodachrome Box circa 1936

I purchased my first 35mm camera in 1953 from the profits of a morning delivery paper route of the Cleveland Plain Dealer for $35.00. The first film I used in the camera was Kodachrome 25 (ISO 25). Over the years I shot thousands of photos with this amazing archival color film. In 1960, on our honeymoon, my wife, Kathy, and I took many photos with the Argus V-100 35mm camera. I still have many of these slides today, some 49 years later and they are as colorful as the day I got them back from the processing lab.

Kodachrome 64 35mm canisters

Kodachrome began its life as a very slow positive color film with an ISO (ASA) of 25. That meant that on a sunny day the average exposure would be 1/25 sec at f/16. The film produces rich color images with an estimated life of over 100 years. As time passed Kodak increased the film speed to ISO 64 and eventually to ISO 200.

Kodachrome, a standard of family slide shows, was popularized by Paul Simon's song "Kodachrome" in 1970. "They give us those nice bright colors. They give us the greens of summers. Makes you think all the world's a sunny day...I love to take a photograph so Mama don't take my Kodachrome away."

Kodachrome cardboard 35mm slide mount

Kodachrome was always the favorite emulsion of photographers shooting for magazines such as National Geographic and Arizona Highways. Remember those photos in National Geographic; they always had information pertaining to the camera used, film used and exposure settings shown under the photo. They continued this with digital images, but they no longer publish this information.

1984 photo of Afghan girl by Steve McCurry for National Geographic Magazine

Kodachrome was used widely by photographers in the latter half of the 1900s due to its rich and vibrant colors. The film was made famous when a photojournalist, Steve McCurry, made the cover of National Geographic Magazine in 1984 with a portrait from Kodachrome film of a woman from Afghan with hauntingly brilliant green eyes. (Click on the image of the Afghan girl at the right to see more of the Kodachrome story.)

One of the issues with Kodachrome was that you had to have it processed by special laboratories (K-14). The main processing lab was Kodak. You would send your exposed 35mm canisters back to Kodak in those little yellow prepaid mailing envelopes and then anxiously await about a week for the processed and mounted slides.

Besides the advent of the digital popularity, Kodachrome was less popular than other films due to its complexity of processing. Unlike other color film, Kodachrome is purely black and white when exposed and then the three primary colors are added in 3 development steps rather than built into its layers like other films. Dwayne's Photo in Parson, Kansas is the only remaining lab that can process the film and they plan to phase out developing Kodachrome in 2010.

During WWII Kodak introduced a new color film with a totally new structure and processing method. It was called Extachrome. Unlike Kodachrome this new film could be processed by small labs and serious photographers in their home labs. This new process was called E-6 and it opened the door to Kodak's competitors. Companies like Fuji and Agfa were soon flooding the market with their own brands of E-6 films such as Fujichrome and Agfachrome. They all had their unique qualities such as saturation, ISO and grain, but their archival properties were no where the quality of Kodachrome. If you have some old E-6 slides lying around you will no doubt notice the faded, reddish color cast. The big advantage to Extachrome was the ability to push the processing to achieve ISOs exceeding 400 or 800. This was advantageous for natural low light photography. Another feature of the E-6 films was that they came in all film sizes up to 8x10 sheets.

One of the problems with Kodachrome is that it is difficult to properly scan a Kodachrome 35mm slide as the emulsion is comprised of four layers and it is very thick. If you hold the emulsion side up to the light you will see a noticeable relief on the surface of the transparency. To scan these slides you need a very high quality film scanner that has firmware and software that will compensate for this thickness. This effect can sometimes cause a slight loss of sharpness in the scanned image when Digital ICE or a similar infrared channel dust removal function is used.

I have many original and scanned Kodachrome transparencies in my archives and all of them look as fresh as the day I received them from the processing lab. It saddens me to see the death of this icon of imaging. Youngsters just being introduced to photography will never have the opportunity to shoot with this wonderful film and will only think of photography as a digital art. Kodak is planning to maintain a gallery of award winning Kodachrome images where you can see the photos this great color film produced. Kodachrome, like the Edsel, Packard, Studebaker, Veg-O-Matic, Hula Hoop and Captain Midnight Decoder Ring, now joins the ranks of the graveyard of history.

The photo on the left was taken in May 1960 with an Argus V-100 35mm camera using Kodachrome 25 film. It was scanned using a Nikon Super CoolScan LS5000ED film scanner. The 35mm slide is over 49 years old and it still retains the original color. The photo was taken at Meades Ranch Kansas, the once geographic center of the lower 48 states, on our honeymoon. Note the car in the background, a 1956 Dodge Custom Royal. Oh, those were the days! V-8s, Kodachrome, open roads and unlimited opportunity.

If you want to see a larger image please click on the photo. While the colors are still good there is a degrading of the sharpness. Some of this is due to the scanning of a Kodachrome slide, but most of it is due to the photographer's lack of talent and not the best lens.

To view a gallery of examples of scanned Kodachrome 35mm slides please click here

Control (Ctrl) Click on any Photo or Link to open a full-size image in a new window or tab.

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