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Last Kodachrome roll processed in Parsons

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PARSONS — Freelance photojournalist Steve McCurry, whose work has graced the pages of National Geographic, laid 36 slides representing the last frames of Kodachrome film on the light board sitting on a counter in Dwayne's Photo Service in Parsons.

He placed a lupe - a magnifier that makes it easier to view film - over one frame and took a closer look at the film.

McCurry told Dwayne's vice president Grant Steinle how he had chosen to shoot the last roll of Kodachrome produced by Eastman Kodak by capturing images around New York.

"Then we went to India, where I photographed a tribe that is actually on the verge of extinction. It's actually disappearing, the same way as Kodachrome," he told Steinle.

Kodak announced last year that it would retire Kodachrome, a brand name of color reversal film it had manufactured since 1935. McCurry, well-known for his 1984 photograph of Sharbat Gula, or the "Afghan Girl," published on the cover of National Geographic magazine, requested from Kodak to shoot the last roll of 36 frames it manufactured.

National Geographic has closely documented the journey of the final roll of Kodachrome manufactured, down to its being processed. Dwayne's is only photo lab left in the world to handle Kodachrome processing, so National Geographic Television producer Yvonne Russo and National Geographic magazine senior video producer Hans Weise found themselves in Parsons Monday, along with McCurry, with the final roll of the iconic film of the 20th century.

As a professional freelance photographer, McCurry has used Kodachrome film for 35 years.

"It's definitely the end of an era," he said of Kodachrome. "It has such a wonderful color palette ... a poetic look, not particularly garish or cartoonish, but wonderful, true colors that were vibrant, but true to what you were shooting."

There are definite advantages to digital photography by comparison to film, McCurry said.

"You have the ability to view, edit and monitor what we are doing as we go. We can evaluate the light and composition and the design instantly. And we can shoot in extremely low light, which was impossible with film."

Regardless, digital photography is simply not the same.

"I like having something to hold in my hand," McCurry said. "With digital photography, it's just a hard drive. With Kodachrome, the film is real. You can touch it, put it in a drawer, and come back to it later. It's tangible. It's an object. With digital, the pictures only exist in a hard drive, in a memory chip."

A photographer since 1974, and photojournalist for National Geographic for 30 years, Kodachrome has been a part of McCurry's professional career.

Russo said they documented McCurry shooting the final roll of film in New York, then traveling to Bombay, India and Rajasthan, India, then back to New York, shooting along the way several iconic personalities of the world of filmmaking.

McCurry said he spent about two months shooting the images, which also included some scenic photos, as well as serendipitous moments on the streets of New York.

"And I actually shot the last three frames here in Parsons," McCurry said.

As Kodachrome is no longer manufactured, Steinle said that on Dec. 10 Dwayne's Photo will end its processing of Kodachrome.

"All this is going to be discarded," McCurry said of the processing equipment for Kodachrome, " ... so it's just a piece of history. It's nostalgic. It's kind of sad. I have about 800,000 Kodachrome images in my lab and these will be the last."

If National Geographic does a spread on the journey of this final roll of Kodachrome, McCurry said it will likely come out in the spring 2011 and will consist of only four to six images selected from the roll.

However, Weise said, "The entire 36 frames shot will be sent to the Eastman House in Rochester, New York, where Kodak is based, and live there."

Looking through the lupe at each slide image, McCurry viewed his pictures of Robert De Niro, the Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Central Station, the tribe in India, the actors, actresses and models in India and the other images of life he had captured.

Among the images shot was one self-portrait of McCurry in New York. Symbolic of the yellow and red packaging of Kodak film, McCurry chose a Yellow Cab to pose by. He called Steinle to have a look through the lupe at the cab's license plate. On it were the letters PKR 36.

Steinle laughed, not believing his eyes.

"If I hadn't seen this come off the processor myself, I would have sworn you had photoshopped that," Steinle said, explaining how PKR 36 is representative of Professional Kodak 36 film.

As the two men stood talking of the end of an era in film manufacturing and processing that affects them both, McCurry presented Steinle with a proposal.

Rather than paying Dwayne's Photo in cash for the processing of the film, McCurry offered to cut Steinle a deal. In exchange for the processing, McCurry offered to create a special print of one of the slides and have it framed and mounted with a letter of authenticity included and send it to Steinle.

It was a deal Steinle accepted eagerly.

Russo said the National Geographic special covering the last roll of Kodachrome manufactured will likely air sometime in spring 2011.

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