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Film photography fading away

Forrest Mims | Posted: Sunday, June 26, 2011 12:00 am



Picture of the Past This fading road sign along US 285 on the way to Carlsbad Caverns is a victim of the digital photography revolution.

“You Press The Button and We Do The Rest.”

So said high school dropout George Eastman in 1885 when he introduced the Kodak camera and created the era of amateur photography.

Eastman’s dream was to make picture taking “an everyday affair, to make the camera as convenient as the pencil.”

He succeeded far beyond his expectations, and for a century people around the world photographed their families, friends and vacations using cameras that descended from Eastman’s Kodak and the photographic film that he perfected.

Prior to the Kodak, cameras were the size of shoe boxes or small suitcases.

They recorded images on glass plates that the photographers themselves carefully coated with a light-sensitive emulsion inside a light-tight tent or enclosure.

Eastman's Kodak camera opened up photography to everyone with a dry, light-sensitive film that could provide up to 100 images.

In 1900 Eastman Kodak introduced the Brownie, a small, black camera designed for children that sold for \$1 (about \$26 today).

The Brownie could take six photos using a film cartridge that could be loaded into the camera in daylight. It was an instant success, and 150,000 were sold the first year.

In 1975, Kodak engineer Steven Sasson made the first digital camera. Instead of developing a commercial digital camera, Kodak built a solid foundation of digital camera patents and worked hard behind the scenes to improve digital photography. But Kodak was reluctant to commercialize an invention that might ultimately take a major bite out of its immensely profitable film business.

That didn't slow the competition. While Kodak makes digital cameras today, the leading digital camera makers are Japanese companies like Canon and Nikon.

Digital photography has ushered in a revolution almost as significant as the Brownie, for now anyone with a color printer can make their own photographic prints.

Before acquiring my first digital camera in 1998, I spent countless hours in a darkroom developing film and making prints for my books and articles. Today I can make higher quality prints in a few minutes.

While Kodak is no longer the leading photography company, its legend as the pioneer in its field will live on long past the fading billboards that advertise Kodak film along the highways that lead to New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns.

Recently the Kodak legacy came to mind while I photographed one of those old advertising signs with a modern digital camera that stores thousands of high-quality images on memory cards not much larger than a postage stamp.

You can learn much more about the legacy of George Eastman and his Kodak at www.kodak.com, where some of the history related here was found.