Wild Flowers in Color—An Adventure in Photography

By GUY MIRBACH II

The color photographs of wild flowers appearing in today’s pictures section are even more than they look. Dr. Julius E. Steyermark, botanist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, says they are the most remarkable photographic reproductions of wild flowers in a natural state that he has ever seen. Certainly no color photographs of the kind have ever appeared in the pages of a newspaper before, for such pictures would be impossible without The Tribune’s special color camera, recently built to order in Germany and the only one of its kind in newspaper service in America. And besides the camera, the technique required to catch these trembling little wild flowers as they seek shyly upward from the midst earth is distinctly a pioneering invention.

Color photography for printing is a delusive art which is still in its infancy, and until recently it was almost unheard of to shoot anything in color outside of a studio or without carefully regulated lighting conditions. And as it was with the advent of the fast black-and-white plate, Edward Johnson of the Tribune’s photographic studio and his assistants, Harry Bull, set out to bag the elusive wild flower in the field—to try to capture the entrancing quality of depth it needed to cross the blushing petals of the tulip and the hawthorn bud. And for 37 days and nights Harry and Bull took a trip to the country to record these small things as guide and interpreter. They tramped through the woods and fields, along little paths, over log bridges, through pastures, until they had introduced to all the different kinds of flowers and insects they had set out to meet. The corn that particularly struck their fancy they carefully marked so that they would be able to find them again. Then they hurried home to their studio in Tribune Tower to make ready. For there was no time to lose. Many wild flowers of the woodland are apt to lose their freshness very quickly. The photographers would have no chance to make tests, but must be right the first time. They tried to foresee every possible difficulty.

From the studio carpenter shop they got some poles, stakes, and rope. In a dry goods store they bought a large sheet of light muslin. Then, with their special color camera, its tripod stand, its loaded plate, a light meter, and a prayer for good weather, the expedition set out, looking like a sect in the Ottawa. At Harry Bull remembered it afterward: "Our first shot was of a black widow in its bower. The tree has a long weeping branch, which must be kept still. For this we used straps and wire to fasten the branch down. Then arose the question of how much of the tree to include in our picture. It was decided that to show the delicate formation of the flowers it would be necessary to get very close, and yet at the same time we wanted to include something of the tree. The great depth of focus required to accommodate subjects at such varying distances made it necessary to stop the lens down to a pin-point aperture, which of course increased the length of time the shutter had to be open. This we calculated with our light meter to be something over one minute. But what if the wind should howl or the moon come out during that minute? Even the wire could not hold the tree absolutely still all the time. The problem was solved by setting up a light, through which we could watch a single leaf and see when it was absolutely still. As soon as a gust of wind did down the shutter would be opened and closed in the field properly through the aperture. If it started to move again we would change the branch and wait till it was held fixed to its position of rest, when the exposure would be resumed." * * *

Such was the ingenuity required. The bed of spring blooms growing on their fragrant stems presented an even greater problem. Although detached from the wind by a cloth cleverly wrapped around the branches, the sun that beats down upon the beautiful flowers must necessarily mean that the contrast of light and shade would have to be great for good results with the sensitive color plates. Therefore a muslin tent was placed to soften the sunlight to exactly the desired degree. As for composition, the flowers being small and quite evenly spaced, it was necessary for us to start out with a given pattern and shape to the picture as a whole, but by painstaking trial and error the best distance angles were at last worked out, carefully marked, and the big camera brought into position to make the shot—without reservations which speak for themselves.

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