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W. EUGENE SMITH: TECHNIQUE, ARTISTRY
AND SOCIAL STATEMENT IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

BY
ROBERT E. ALBER

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Science, Major in
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AND SOCIAL STATEMENT IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Science, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................. 1
II. SMITH: THE EARLY YEARS ...................................... 8
III. A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PHOTO ESSAYS .... 24
IV. CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS .................................. 58
BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................... 67
APPENDIX A .......................................................... 69
APPENDIX B .......................................................... 79
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION


In New York, the city where Smith lived most of his life and the place where the largest body of his works were published, the New York Times was on strike and the Times' news service did not pick up the obituary until later in the month. Time and Newsweek did not report Smith's death until Oct. 30, and then they could not agree on his age. Smith died at the age of 59 just two months before his birthday. He had worked as a photojournalist for over 40 years.

That same October several hundred persons attended an exhibit of Smith's work in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. As is sometimes the case with creative people their work often overshadows them, even in death.

While W. Eugene Smith was not considered a prominent figure outside of photojournalism, most people who read newspapers and magazines from the 1930s to the 1970s have seen his work. His cameras focused on some of the great events of American history during his career, including the Depression, World War II, presidential politics (Smith photographed a smiling Harry Truman holding a Chicago Tribune headlining a Dewey victory), racial tension in the 1950s and anti-war demonstrations during the 1960s. Smith's photographic style embodied qualities rarely found in one man. He was a master craftsman who possessed the creative vision of an artist and the social consciousness of a highly sensitive person. This combination established a standard for the photographic essay. And while no one man can speak for the photo essay, Smith's name usually comes up when photographers talk about the picture story.
This thesis will look at selected photo essays and examine the relationships between Smith's photographic technique, artistic quality and visual statement. It is the author's contention that the photographs in Smith's essays were made primarily for the visual impact and social statement and secondarily for the artistic and technical quality.

Smith's career began in his home state of Kansas where he worked as a freelance photographer for the Wichita Beacon and the Wichita Eagle. It was there, long before the perfection of synchronized flash, that Smith submitted pictures taken by photoflash. His experimental pictures were used in the newspapers, much to the discomfort of the older staff members who were still using flashlight-powder. Smith was 15 at the time.

At 19 Smith was on the staff of Newsweek. By 25 he had been a member of the Life photography staff, and he had worked for Ziff-Davis Publishing Company that had a stable of magazines, including Popular Photography. He would go on to fill pages in those magazines and others during his career. He also produced three books and arranged numerous showings of his work and inspired countless others.

Toward the end of his life he was described as the greatest photographer in the world by one magazine, and a Life editor proclaimed that Smith's photo essays were the most memorable the magazine ever published.²

Purpose and Problem

The work that W. Eugene Smith created thrives. In 1976 the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson acquired the complete works of Smith's. His photographs are on permanent display
there as well as in New York, Chicago and Washington.

Jim Hughes, a personal friend of Smith's and an editor at large for *Popular Photography*, is researching the life of the photojournalist and reviewing his work for a biography. Smith's photographs continue to be reproduced and written about. Ken Kobre, a professor of journalism at the University of Houston, used a Smith photo essay and an interview with Smith in his 1980 textbook, *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach.*

Photographs by Smith have attracted the collectors and prices for prints continue to rise. This summer (1980) the Center for Creative Photography will devote a special issue of its bulletin to Smith and later will sponsor a traveling exhibit of his work. During his career Smith made over 100,000 negatives and published more than 17,000 prints.

This study takes an aspect of that work—the photographic essay—and examines the relationships between Smith's photographic technique, artistic quality and visual statement.

Although the author contends that Smith's primary purpose of the photographs in an essay was visual impact and social statement, in no way does this paper intend to slight the technical or artistic skills of photographer Smith. In fact, the reader will be made aware that Smith's skills as a technician and as an artist were considerable.

Since his death, the popularity of Smith and his work has increased. This may create an image of Smith in death that was larger than that of Smith in life. If so, this paper puts an important segment of Smith in perspective.
Methodology

The events in Smith's life seem to have had a strong influence on his work. Therefore, it is important for the reader to have a brief biography of Smith. Chapter II provides this.

In Chapter III is an analysis of selected photo essays that were published between 1938 and 1975. Because of the volume of Smith's work, it would be impossible to discuss all his essays within this paper. Therefore, the selection of the essays to be studied was based upon several factors including their significance as determined by Smith's peers and Smith himself. Each essay's popularity was another measurement of merit; the popularity was determined by the repeated publication of photos within that essay.

Although Smith began his photographic career earlier than 1938, it was not until that year that he began to produce multiple picture stories. Prior to 1938 most of Smith's work centered around the single image, with an occasional use of up to three photographs to illustrate a story. In 1938 his career with Life began and Smith was given the opportunity to expand his photographic coverage with the picture story format that Life helped popularize. Because this study will be limited to Smith's photo essays, it was determined that 1938 would be the beginning point.

Smith maintained a high level of productivity with Life until his final resignation in 1954. Several factors were considered in selecting essays from this period:
1. Smith's years with *Life* were divided into three categories to simplify an analysis—pre-World War II, post-World War II and The '50s.

2. Work from each category was then judged on the basis of how well it represented the entire category.

3. Persons interviewed in the research for this study were asked to name what they felt were Smith's most memorable essays.

4. Research also pointed to the significance of an essay by how often it was mentioned in reviews of Smith's work, its repeated publication and the mention of certain essays in the writings of Smith.

The period after 1954 and until 1975 was not as productive for Smith. His leaving *Life* took away the routine of assignments and the accessibility of publication. This lack of steady employment, and personal problems, also limited the body of work Smith would produce from 1955 until 1975. Consequently, the selection process was simplified to a certain degree, but the factors, stated above, that were used to make selections during the *Life* years were again applied here, except for a categorization. It should be mentioned, however, that this later period of Smith's work was initially selected by him. He did not have an editor making assignments, and when he was asked to take on an assignment, on a freelance basis, he had the opportunity to turn it down.

Appendix A is a complete listing of Smith's *Life* photographs (1938-1954) and includes his other essays that were made through 1975. Appendix B reproduces several of Smith's photographs from major essays in order to give the reader an understanding of Smith and his essays.

Smith's book, *Minamata*, named after a Japanese city of the same name, was published in 1975. It contained 185 pictures and was the last
essay produced by Smith. At the time of his death in 1978 he was in the process of researching a photo essay for Look magazine on John Travolta.5

Personal interviews with a number of people who lived or worked with Smith, and the author's analysis are used to judge the question of the thesis--were Smith's photographic essays made primarily for the visual impact and social statement and secondarily for the artistic and technical quality?

Recorded interviews were conducted with the following people:

1. Aileen Smith, Eugene's second and last wife (married in 1971 and divorced in 1975) who was with him throughout the three and one-half years of photographing in Minamata and who is still living in Japan

2. Jim Hughes, editor at large for Popular Photography. He is Smith's biographer (publication is three years away) and was close to Smith during the last few years of Smith's life

3. Howard Chapnick, contributing editor for Popular Photography and chief of Black Star photographic agency where Smith once worked. Chapnick was a friend of Smith's for over 40 years and one of three persons responsible for the W. Eugene Smith Scholarship Fund

4. Phil Kunhardt, managing editor of Life and an assistant editor of the old Life. He and Smith were also friends for over 40 years, and together they were responsible for several of the Life essays

5. Sherry Suris, a photojournalist who received much of her training as a photo assistant to Smith. Suris helped Smith move his collection from New York to Arizona, catalog the negatives and prints, and assist him in the printing. She lived with Smith from 1975 until the time of his death in 1978

Letters were exchanged and unrecorded conversations were conducted with John G. Morris, a close friend of Smith's since the 1940s and the administrator of the Smith estate; Jim Enyeart, director of the Center
for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona; William Johnson, photographic archivist at the Arizona center where the body of Smith's work is housed; Larry Schiller, executive producer at Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, who was responsible for assisting W. Eugene Smith and Aileen Smith in the layout of their book Minamata; Ken Kobre, author of the text Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach that included an interview with Smith on the photo essay; and Dr. Ernest Ceriani, a Colorado physician, who was the subject of Smith's "Country Doctor" essay in 1948 for Life.

1Art and Artists, October 1979, p. 45.


3Ibid., p. 284.


CHAPTER II

SMITH: THE EARLY YEARS

Sherry Suris, Smith's photo assistant and companion during the last years of his life, recalled the photojournalist:

Gene had an intensity about him that was unique. He knew how to apply himself and he would have been a success at anything he tried. He slipped into photography. He started using the camera to help him understand airplanes. He wanted to be an airplane designer.¹

At the age of 14, William Eugene Smith had made the decision to be a designer of airplanes. His room was filled with models and he collected pictures of all the planes he could find. That Christmas he gave his mother a sheet-film back for her Kodak. But his intent was to use the camera to take his own pictures of airplanes.²

His fascination with aircraft was soon replaced by his curiosity about the camera and photography. And although his photographs were initially aerial pictures and other shots about aviation, he was moved by the images the camera could produce. Within a few months he owned two cameras, had decided to become a newspaper photographer and had purchased a car and had painted "Eugene Smith, Photographer," across the trunk.³

The intensity that Suris remembered was with Smith from the beginning. He was not satisfied with easing into his new-found profession. He charged ahead and immersed himself in photography. When he reached the point where he knew his equipment as well as could be known, he pressed forward and experimented.
Peter Martin, a photojournalist and close friend of Smith's during Smith's early years wrote:

Long before Kalart synchro-sunlight publicity, he was experimenting with flashbulbs to kill the knotty holes the Kansas sun made in the faces of his subjects. Editors of the Wichita Beacon and the Wichita Eagle used his pictures. Their staff photographers were living in an older era.4

One year later, in 1934, the drought hit Kansas, and Smith, age 16, recorded it. His cameras pictured the stark landscape of failing crops and starving livestock well enough to be picked up by the New York Times.

In 1936 the Depression prompted an event that many Smith observers believe shaped his future in photojournalism. Martin, in a 1979 Popular Photography article wrote:

Gene's father had been an operator of Kansas grain elevators. It was a time of crop failure and his father's business was on the rocks. In an ultimate moment of despair, his father shot himself only one day before his life insurance was to expire.5

Lincoln Kirstein, credited with writing the biography of Smith in Smith's 1969 Aperture Monograph, W. Eugene Smith His Photographs and Notes, attaches great significance to the death of Smith's father. The words in the monograph take on even greater meaning to Jim Hughes who is presently researching Smith's life and who was a close personal friend of the late photographer's.

In a telephone interview Hughes claimed:

You've read the Aperture Monograph? Well, Kirstein didn't write it. Smith wrote it. And as to its accuracy, no one can say for sure. I'm going to Kansas soon to research his childhood, but I'm not confident that I'll be able to solve anything. Smith's father did commit suicide and the papers did comment on it. I do know that.6
The Aperture Monograph details the elder Smith's death and attempts to put the event in some perspective for Smith.

At eighteen, Smith, long before he could accurately define a failure in The American Dream, was haunted by its ghost in his own house. His father was dead. How? By Whom? Why? When? Where? What does journalism fatten on? Murder and suicide. Naturally, local newspapers sniffed this small fact: the irrelevant, forgettable, expendable detail of some guy (named Smith?—not Jones, nor Brown). Why did a perfectly sensible man do a silly thing like that? Son, why did your daddy do it? He had so much to live for. Or did he?

Eugene Smith was educated early in a hatred of journalism, the apt shabby techniques of sob sister, feature writer, their colleagues with cameras, whose increasingly professional rape of privacy must dog Gene Smith for thirty years since he would, perforce, try to make a living beside them.7

Later in the Aperture Monograph the author writes again of the elder Smith's death, but this time the style is more personal.

...Your father is lousy dead; make something out of the lousy life which did him in. With a camera. I shall indict my father's murderer of fix the black magic of his, and my, self-murder. While newspapers, weeklies thrive by soiling us with their information, nevertheless, there must be a continuing dialogue. One must speak to another, many others—the world. Few are saints, martyrs, or artists. But let a working historian tell it how it was and is. How could I remain to work in such a profession of dishonesty?

Hughes and others who knew Smith well say that Smith seriously considered changing his decision to make a career of photojournalism. In the Aperture Monograph Smith makes reference to a newspaper colleague who convinces him to stay in photojournalism. Smith quotes his colleague, "honesty is not of a profession, but within the individual and what he brings to his work."9

Hughes of Popular Photography was interviewed again after he returned from Kansas where he was researching Smith's early years and
specifically the events of the elder Smith's death.

Hughes comments:

The sensationalism referred to by Smith (when speaking of his father's suicide and the newspaper's coverage of it) doesn't seem to be backed up by the reality of the newspapers I've read.

What I can say is that his father's suicide was incredibly important. I know that now. But it is not as Gene presents it. I think it is a greater importance in another way somehow. It has meaning to his life and photography, but I'm not sure of the exact meaning.

He (Smith) literally did call it a circus—the way the papers covered his father's death. But I found nothing like that. I talked to people who remembered it and they said it was played down and that's what I found. Unless there is a paper that I don't know about. 10

Following his high school graduation, in that same year of his father's suicide, he attended Notre Dame on a scholarship. Once there, he became the campus photographer and by Christmas had shot almost 1,500 negatives. But his education away from the camera suffered and his grades fell. He left school during the holiday, traveling to New York. He did not go back to South Bend.

By the next fall Smith was on staff at *Newsweek*. 11

But his quest for technique with the camera led him afoul. In 1938, after just a year with *Newsweek*, he was fired by one of the magazine's editors for using a miniature camera. The camera used was a twin-lens 2¼ x 2¼, considered large by today's standards, but when Smith used it, the professional press camera was the 4 x 5 Graflex and 4 x 5 Speed Graphic.

After a short period of unemployment Smith found a freelance position with Black Star, a New York based photo agency. His work soon began to appear in *Colliers*, *American Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *New York Times*
and *Life*. In 1939 he signed a retainer with *Life* magazine.\(^1\)\(^2\) He was 21 years old.

**Smith's Years at Life**

Smith's time at *Life* was stormy; it was an on-again-off-again relationship. He resigned from the magazine first in 1942, because he was dissatisfied with routine assignments. He was wooed back in 1944 by *Life* editors who were taken by his freelance war photography for *Ziff-Davis* Publishing as a Pacific correspondent. He stayed with *Life* until his 1955 resignation.\(^1\)\(^3\)

A. D. Coleman, photography writer for the *New York Times*, sums up Smith's resignations in a 1975 article. Coleman wrote:

...And it was Smith who resigned from *Life* in a battle for the photojournalist's right to retain editorial control over text, captions, cropping and layout on the basis that individual moral accountability was the necessary premise for meaningful dialogue.

His lonely struggle with *Life* was held to be not merely idealistic but indeed quixotic; thus defined as a form of personal obsession.

As it turned out, Smith was right from a practical as well as ethical standpoint. By the mid-60s there were few established photojournalists who enjoyed even a modicum of spokesmanship among the current audience. Generally, they had entirely abandoned—or never joined—the fight for editorial control, retaining only the right to ex post facto lamentation over the abuse of their work by others.\(^1\)\(^4\)

Smith's final resignation from *Life* came over a disagreement about his photo essay, "Man of Mercy," on Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Smith attempted to affect the use of pictures and captions and to expand the Schweitzer layout. Smith held that if what the writer wrote was his entirely, why then, should not the picture story be completely the photographer's?
He resigned before the essay was used in an attempt to convince the editors of his point and purpose.\textsuperscript{15}

Part of Smith's photographic philosophy was that he would never let go of his negatives. Even while covering the war in the Pacific he developed his own negatives and sent his editors the prints. He did this to maintain some leverage and as much control as possible.

In an interview with Jim Hughes for \textit{Popular Photography} Smith commented on his problems with Life. Hughes, using the Smith quote in an article that appeared after Smith's death, wrote:

\begin{quote}
I do, clearly in advance, frequently stipulate that, okay, if you do use it—if you want it—then it must be used my way. In my compromise battles with Life, it was, "You do not have to use my layouts, but if your layouts and words distort my reportage, I must have the right to withdraw it from the magazine." The scream was always, "Oh you are trying to dictate to the editors."

But I think there was always the fear that if they let me get away with it, that a lot of photographers would start doing it. In my opinion I don't think a lot of photographers would have wanted to, for the simple reason that such things as doing your own research, doing your own prints, is just too much hard work. Most photographers would rather gripe about it than do it.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

A longtime Life photographer, who is still with the magazine and requested that his name not be used, shared another view of the struggle in a telephone interview.

\begin{quote}
It was too bad that more of us didn't join in and support him. What happened then is still going on today. In a way it is almost comical. How many people can remember any of the words under any of those pictures? But a Smith photograph continues to tell its story, and if you wanted to buy one, it would cost you a lot.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}
In a June 18, 1980, phone conversation with Aileen Smith, a former wife of Smith's and his co-author for the book *Minamata*, she pointed out that she came to understand her husband's feelings about *Life* and its editors. Aileen Smith recalled the publication of the *Life* essay and the times that followed:

When we did the Minamata essay for *Life*? Now I didn't have that much experience with editors, but to me it was an absolute disaster. I had always worked on Gene's terms and well, like for an exhibit, basically, we didn't have to compromise, and I could see that project go through.

But oh, with the Minamata thing it was like the whole world came collapsing down as far as I was concerned. The text was, oh, like, "death from a pipe" we never said any of that stuff. I couldn't believe it.

When we got the magazine I just cried all night. It was just horrible.

Well, Gene said, "Aileen, this is really great. This is the best I've been able to do so far."

There is a very, very practical strain in him, you know. And it wasn't the sort of thing, like, forget all this compromise and integrity thing. Now is publication time and we have to throw it all out the window. It wasn't that. But he knew that it had to be produced. There was a part of him--it wasn't a resignation part--he just had this part that was very practical. In a way he was satisfied with it.

"With *Life* this is pretty good. I got what I wanted. My objectives at that point were to let the people see and read about Minamata."

But at Gene's funeral Phil Kunhardt (*Life* magazine's managing editor) got up to speak and told us that he had been proud to give Gene free reign with the words and pictures in the Minamata essay.

I couldn't get up there and say, "Hey look, I was there." But it wasn't so at all. But it was like I could hear a voice somewhere saying, "Oh, ho, ho." Gene was getting the last word.18

But even though there were battles, the *Life* editors knew the power of Smith's photographs. And while they would fight the man, his pictures made their own way, appearing in several *Life* reprints and books.
In one of Life's books on photography, titled The Documentary, an editor described Smith's work:

Twenty-five years after the close of World War II, W. Eugene Smith regards his shattering photographs of that global conflict as a failure: they did not cause war to be abolished for all time. His bitter feeling of defeat in an impossible task indicates the high goals this emotional documentarian has always set for himself. Throughout his career, Smith has poured his soul into his work, hoping to persuade those who viewed his pictures that wars and cruelty must end, that respect and tenderness are due all living creatures.

Few viewers share Smith's conviction that he failed. The depth of feeling his photographs evoke is expressed in a letter he got after the war from a Japanese who had recently seen a Smith picture: "Please kindly accept pleasure I find of photograph. I see it first time. I hold it and see it until tears are make in my eyes. It was very beautiful photograph. I sorry, which we did."19

The problems Smith had at Life were many, but they did not detract from the quality or amount of work he would do for the magazine from 1938 until 1955. During that period he produced unique photo essays: "Country Doctor" (1948), "Spanish Village" (1951), "Nurse Midwife" (1951), "Chaplain at Work" (1952) and "Man of Mercy" (1954). Jim Hughes wrote that it was Smith's essays that defined the medium.20

In a phone interview with Black Star Chief Howard Chapnick on June 18, 1980, the 40-year friend of Smith's recalls:

The fights he had were a part of the man. If there had been no Life magazine to battle, Gene would have created one. He was a martyr. He had to struggle against the powerful, the strong and the privileged. That was a necessity for W. Eugene Smith as much as the film in his camera.

But that is not as important as his work. What remains now is an awesome body of work that inspires countless photographers worldwide.21
In his first year with Life his camera produced more than pictures. While on an assignment he spent time with Marrissa Flores, a dancer who was traveling with a troupe from Mexico. In order to communicate with his friend he enlisted the aid of an interpreter. Soon he was in love with the interpreter and in 1940 he married her. Carmen Smith would live with him until the mid-'50s.

Soon after his marriage World War II broke out and Smith was involved—first with Ziff-Davis Publishing, after his 1942 Life resignation, and then again with Life.

Not only did the war affect his emotions—as reflected in his images from the Pacific front—but the war also had an effect on his physical well being.

In May 1945 Smith was severely wounded by shellfire. He had covered a dozen invasions, including those on Saipan, Guam, the Philippines and Iwo Jima. On this, his 13th campaign, on Okinawa, he received multiple head, chest and back injuries, requiring extensive field surgery and 32 stateside operations. From then on he would live with pain.

Summing up Smith's years with Life isn't easy. His work was so varied, running up and down the full breadth of photojournalism, from social dances to World War II, that it defies categorization. Sherry Suris, in a telephone interview, tried to describe Smith's work for Life.

At first I want to say yes, yes, I can tell you what is most representative. But even as I began to say it I have to stop. If you go to Arizona (University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography that houses Smith's work) your mind will reel. I mean just the immensity of it. And it is all so good that you can't make choices. Even Gene didn't make choices. That was part of his problem with editors.
I can understand how the editors felt. What would you do faced with hundreds of excellent photos on the same theme. You don't have to be a photographer to enjoy Arizona either. Once it is seen it is never forgotten. You walk from one display to another, and as you leave one, you think it's impossible to see a better one, a more powerful one. But it is possible. I helped open them up, (they had been crated from New York) print them and hang them.22

Smith on His Own

By the mid-'50s Carmen Smith did what she had to do. Her husband had resigned from Life and immersed himself in a photographic essay on Pittsburgh. He had managed to go through two Guggenheim grants, an inheritance, the savings, loans, advances, and he ended up trying to pawn his way through the essay. Carmen packed up the family--three daughters and a son--and moved away. They were divorced a short time later.23

His resignation from Life had not been easy. It wasn't the first time Smith had been on his own and freelancing. But his earlier attempt, in 1942, came during the war and the war provided ready employment for almost any photojournalist willing to go.

Pittsburgh might have been a personal war for Smith, but few editors were willing to pay for it at the time. Smith continued to work on the Pittsburgh project for three years, 1955-58. It was published in the 1959 Photography Annual. The essay amounted to 38 pages containing 89 photographs. Smith was paid $2,500.24

Although Smith would look back on this period of his life as the most difficult because of personal and financial difficulties, it was also a rewarding time of professional growth and recognition.
Smith, in his notes in the Aperture Monograph, wrote:

Dire personal difficulties related to health and financial stability; nonetheless realized a wonderful sense of inner expansion to see and to understand. An intense creative period; photographing, writing, experimental layouts for essays. Seven days a week, averaging 20 hours a day. The hungry artist has worse things than success to hang him up.25

During Smith's self-proclaimed dark time he would receive several honors. In 1958 he was noted as one of the world's top 10 photographers in an international poll conducted by Popular Photography. His work would be purchased by The Museum of Modern Art, by George Eastman House, The Art Institute of Chicago and the White House. He was appointed to the President's Committee on Photography in 1961 and then put on several conferences and exhibitions of his work. In 1969 Smith received a rare honor of a third Guggenheim Fellowship. With the fellowship came a few photographic commissions that helped Smith pick up the threads of his life.

Smith was only employed (in the normal sense of the word) once during this period. Shortly after leaving Life he worked for Magnum Photos, a New York photo agency. Most of the time he was freelancing and many doubted if Smith would ever make any real photographic contributions again.

Hughes, of Popular Photography, has written of the rumors about Smith, the real threats of suicide after Smith's wife left him and the bouts with bottles of scotch.26

To get him through the difficult times, Smith increased his workload and adopted several cats, an animal that he was always fond of and never without. Also, a student, Carole Thomas, entered Smith's life.
He wrote about her in the Aperture Monograph.

She assisted me as a human photostat machine, sketching over 500 photographs to size and in detail for the first dummy of The Walk to Paradise Garden. (Never published book) I grew to love her deeply and to admire her abilities as a graphic artist and editor, her eventual excellence as a photographer. She was a beautiful strength in my life for nearly ten years.²⁷

Minamata

In 1970 Smith was preparing a huge exhibit of his work at the Jewish Museum in New York. A Japanese film company, Fuji, sent representatives to the museum, where Smith was working, to talk to him about doing a commercial. After setting up the details for the advertisement the company representatives asked Smith, through interpreter Aileen Mioka, if he would take his show to Japan. Smith accepted the offer. Two days after the show opened in Japan, Gene and Aileen, a Japanese-American, were married. Smith had a soft spot for interpreters. He was 52 and she was 21.²⁸

The Fuji people suggested that the Smiths look into Minamata, a small fishing village where people were suffering from methyl mercury poisoning caused by industrial waste. On their first visit to the village the Smiths knew they had to spend time there. They moved into a small dirt-floor house and became as much a part of the scene as the native inhabitants. Three years later the Smiths would see the chemical company, responsible for the poisoning, forced to compensate the victims.²⁹

The Minamata experience was a profound one for Smith. He could record, and did, the struggle between a community industry and its people.
Doctors estimated 10,000 of those people were born deformed due to an excess of mercury in their diet.\textsuperscript{30}

While documenting the results of this industrial genocide Smith was attacked by six of the chemical company's hirelings who swung him by the legs, bashing his head against a concrete wall. And although he never fully recovered his eyesight, he continued to photograph the event until the end of the company's hearings and trial.\textsuperscript{31}

In 1975 Smith and his wife, Aileen, produced the book \textit{Minamata}. It met with great critical acceptance. Julia Scully, columnist for \textit{Modern Photography}, wrote:

\begin{quote}
It is Smith, the committed journalist, who comes through in this work. In my opinion, the publicity surrounding him emphasizes his role as a martyr suffering at the hands of a cruel establishment and clouds his real achievement as a tough-minded dedicated professional.

Together with his Japanese-American wife, who took many of the photographs and researched the text as well as writing some of it, W. Eugene Smith has made a powerful and effective statement about what an irresponsible, powerful industrial giant supported by a benevolent government can do to simple, powerless individuals. In spite of the deep emotional involvement Smith and his wife had with their subjects, they have managed to present the case with dimension and breadth. As an artistic, journalistic statement \textit{Minamata} is a success.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

On the back cover of the book, \textit{Minamata}, Smith wrote of his feelings and reasons for photographing the village and producing the book:

\begin{quote}
Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes—just sometimes—one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses into awareness. Much depends upon the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone—or perhaps many—among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong, and may even be inspired to the dedication needed to search for the cure to an illness. The rest of us may perhaps feel a greater sense of understanding and compassion for those whose lives are alien to our own.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}
The Japanese experience and the publication of the book was hard on the Smith's marriage and they separated, Aileen returning to Japan. Later they were divorced.

**Smith's Last Years**

After Minamata Smith's health began to deteriorate rapidly. The injuries of World War II and the beatings he had suffered, the one in Minamata and an earlier one while walking the streets of Philadelphia prior to a gallery opening, took their toll. His speech was slurred and he couldn't focus a camera because of failing eyesight. He was also taking insulin to control diabetes that had been diagnosed in late 1975.

In an interview Jim Hughes recalled this time in Smith's life:

He called me in the middle of the night and told me he wanted to put his house in order. He actually told me he didn't expect to live another two years. He was concerned about his work and wanted help in, as he said, 'separate the crap from the photographs he wanted to be remembered by. If he couldn't get help, he would burn everything.' I believed him.

But it took Morris (John Morris, a close friend of both Hughes' and Smith's) and I a year to get the contacts made. That's when we made the hook-up with the University of Arizona and the Center for Creative Photography. They agreed to take on the Smith collection and organize it and hire Gene to teach some classes. It was the first time in his life that he would have some stability.34

Over 100,000 negatives, 30,000 workprints and several thousand exhibition prints were moved to Arizona.

Sherry Suris, Smith's living companion and photo assistant, helped move the photographs, papers, personal possessions and Smith's cats. That was in 1977 and Suris remembers the task as a remarkable one once they got to Arizona and had to begin to sift through everything.35
After months of organization Smith and Suris edited the prints, built a large darkroom for the Center and worked out lectures for his photography classes for the fall of 1978. They would wait to classify and organize his papers and notes for the archives.

But just a few weeks after his teaching duties began, Smith died. He was out looking for a stray cat that he and Sherry had taken in when his legs buckled and he fell and hit his head. It was Oct. 5, 1978.36

1Sherry Suris telephone interview, June 1980.


3Ibid., p. 130.

4Ibid., p. 149.

5Ibid., p. 149.

6Hughes interview, April 1980.


8Ibid., p. 3, biography.

9Ibid., p. 1, chronology.

10Jim Hughes telephone interview, New York, June 1980.


12Aperture, p. 1, chronology.


16 Hughes, Nine Lives, p. 137.

17 Life photographer interview (name withheld by request), June 17, 1980.

18 Aileen Smith telephone interview, Kyoto, Japan, June 1980.


21 Howard Chapnick interview, New York, June 1980.

22 Suris interview, June 1980.


24 Ibid., p. 138.

25 Aperture, p. 3.

26 Hughes, Nine Lives, p. 138.

27 Aperture, p. 3.


29 Hughes, Nine Lives, p. 140.

30 Coleman, At Last, p. 73.

31 Hughes, Nine Lives, p. 117.


34 Hughes interview, April 1980.

35 Suris interview, June 1980.

36 Hughes, Nine Lives, p. 141.
CHAPTER III

A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PHOTO ESSAYS

The photo essays selected have been selected by the author and represent W. Eugene Smith's work during each period from 1938 to 1975.

The discussion of the essays will be in a chronological sequence.

The analysis of the photo essays is based upon the author's contention that Smith's essays were made primarily for the visual impact and social statement and secondarily for artistic and technical quality.

Prior to the survey and analysis of Smith's photo essays there will be a brief discussion on Smith's photographic technique, artistic background and social statement. The discussion gives the reader insight into the relationships of technique, artistic expression and social statement.

Smith's Photographic Technique Defined

The term technique, as applied to photography and photographers, is usually used as a catch-all. It can refer to the way a photographer uses equipment, film, printing paper, lighting and several other aspects of the medium. The term technique, as it relates to the photography of W. Eugene Smith, will be considered in two parts—lighting and darkroom printing. The other aspects of technique in photography have been eliminated here as the basis of comparison with other photographers of the same era. In other words, what was available, or unavailable, to Smith in 1938 was also available, or unavailable, to other photojournalists. The improvements in film, lenses, chemicals and paper, had a reciprocal effect on the photographers. A different technique in lighting, however,
or in the printing of the negatives can set one photographer apart from
the rest.

In reviewing Smith's photographs the viewer should consider the
range of tones from black to white (Smith preferred black and white and
only shot one essay in color during his career). The photographs should
be printed in sharp focus and the lighting, while often artificial,
should not be harsh or disturbing.

The control of the lighting, the print's tonal range and the print's
sharpness are factors dealt with by the photographer both in taking the
picture and in the darkroom.

In 1956 Arthur Goldsmith interviewed Smith on lighting and the
print. Smith responded:

A print is also of lighting, shaded in grays—a print
is the summation. In much of the work I see—ignoring all
else—considerable improvement could be gained by the some­
times not simple device of making a good print. By this,
I don't mean trick printing, but I do mean very careful
printing and a reinforcing of values back to the values pre­
sent when the photograph was made, and with the attention paid
to an emphasizing of the important, the subduing of the irrel­
evant.¹

The majority of Smith followers marvel at his use of light and his
printing. But there is contradiction. Gene Thornton, a photography
critic for the New York Times, wrote in a review of Smith's book,

Minamata:

His prints are dark, too dark. They look like 17th cen­
tury Spanish paintings. Time and again Smith comes up with
images that are gloomy and dreary. It is as if all the
world is bleak and dismal. Isn't there any happiness in
Smith's eyes?²
Hughes of *Popular Photography* is not nearly as critical of Smith as is Thornton, but Hughes does not believe that Smith's use of lighting and printing were anything special—anything that the top professional photographers were not also doing. In fact, according to Hughes, Smith hated the darkroom and would put off the work and let it pile up until it just had to be done. Then he would lock himself up in the laboratory for hours.3

Aileen Smith and Sherry Suris agree with Hughes about Smith's procrastination, but not about his printing. Aileen helped her former husband with many of the prints in *Minamata*. She remembers how he used to work:

Well, he didn't like the darkroom and he would put off the work. But once he was in there it was something to see. He was so critical of what he did. He would work with one print for hours and hours until he got it just the way he wanted it.

Many of the things he did he couldn't explain. He had been doing it a certain way for so long that his hands and eyes just took over. His labor would put the exact mood into a print that was there when he took the picture.4

Suris also worked in the darkroom with Smith for several years, and in a telephone interview from her home in New York she attempted to explain the reason Smith's prints were said to be too dark.

First of all, Gene didn't feel that his prints were too dark. Some of them appear dark in the magazines, but what needs to be seen can be seen.

And he printed for the magazines. I mean he knew that the magazines would take his prints and print them—not photographically print them—but on a press. When you do that you tend to lose some of the detail unless you control the original photograph. Gene would control the original, printing the photograph so that when it took on the ink of the press it would have the proper tonal range.
The prints aren't too dark. They are rich in tone and say just what they said before Gene took the photograph. Much of the criticism about pictures being too dark comes from just a few of his photographs—the bath scene in Minamata (the one that critic Thornton directed most of his attention to) and the death scene in "Spanish Village." These pictures are dark and rightly so, judging the mood. What is unfortunate is that because these photos are so famous, people judge the entire essay by them. Gene did portray happiness. Not everything was depressing to him.5

But the dark print is a Smith technique, if not a trademark. Students of his photography can usually pick a Smith photo out of a batch of others, solely because of the lighting. This was recognized as early as 1952, and in a Popular Photography article that year, Smith commented on his technique:

The important elements of the picture are not dark, they are easily accessible. Other areas are subdued; I use whatever controls in printing seem necessary for the effect I want. I am not always successful; I have printed the death scene in "Spanish Village" story several times, for instance, but I have yet to make a really good print of it—one that satisfies me. There is a basic tonal balance I want, which I have not achieved. In all my work I try to translate the scene as I see it, as simply and powerfully as I can.6

**Smith's Artistic Background**

It is not difficult to find persons who will praise the artistic quality of Smith's photography. Not as easy is finding any documentation that Smith had ever received any formal training in art. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that Smith's talent, for artistic expression, came from an innate source.

The characteristics that define the artistic quality of Smith's photography are based on the elements of composition—line, form, tone
and texture. These elements are readily found in Smith's photographs, and there is considerable crossover to the area of photographic technique.

John Morris, a close friend of Smith's and co-worker at Life, discussed this crossover in an interview with author R. Smith Schuneman.

Last summer when the "Andrea Doria" sank, Gene Smith worked that night to cover the arrival of the survivors, and for the first time in many years I had the pleasure of going out on a story with Gene. In the days when I had worked with him at Life many years ago, he only worked with one or two cameras at a time. Now he will work with four or five. And I'd heard other photographers joke about this. Well, at about 5 a.m. I looked at Gene's contact sheets from those five cameras. They represented one of the most beautiful pieces of camera work I've ever seen. It was just poetic to see the way in which he had interplayed one camera and lens against another to get this effect here or another effect there. There weren't wasted exposures in those five rolls, either. Of course, the percentage of pictures Gene would print was very small, but he worked with five cameras as a sensitive musician would play an organ, getting his depth of feeling out of them.

Not only does Black Star Chief Howard Chapnick feel that the technical and artistic quality of Smith's photographs cannot be handled separately, he believes that social statement cannot be dissected from the whole either.

Chapnick commented in a telephone interview from his New York office:

Yes, the man was an artist. Don't think for an instant that the lighting of the death scene in "Spanish Village" or "Tomoko's Bath" in Minamata was an accident. They have been compared to the classic paintings. The bath scene is so like the Madonna with child paintings. He knew what he was about and what he intended to do every minute. His composition—the way he pulled the viewer from one picture to another—was a special artistry.
But I don't think that you can separate any of these elements. They just don't come apart. What made the photography of W. Eugene Smith was the way he used all the aspects of photography.8

It appears that Smith's use of composition was natural. Sherry Suris said that he simply had the ability to use the shapes and lines of the things he photographed without really thinking about it. It was, she said, a form of artistic double vision, where Smith would see his subject as the focal point of an essay, but also see his subject as an artistic shape. Almost subconsciously, Suris believed, Smith would consider all that was before him.9

In Goldsmith's Popular Photography article, interviewing Smith on lighting and technique, the author asked Smith to consider the present situation as they talked. How would Smith take a picture of the interviewer, right here and right now, with this light, asked Goldsmith?

Smith answered:

The subleties my mind is aware of--I doubt if I can so quickly conjur them into meaningful words. Well, I feel each shift that you make, and with each there is always a ripple of changing values... when you lean to that side--too heavy, in highlight on the left cheekbone, on the temple--the eye has lost its catchlight--the balance is wrong.

I would begin this way, it would be nearly subconscious subordinate, for I would be concentrating upon you, as individual, as the subject. I would be walking about, searching you out, feeling the play of light--talking, seeing with two visions--one focused sharply to your face, and one that is softly aware of everything behind you.10

The technique and the composition move the photographer to the subject; once there the photographer must operate instinctively, said Smith. The process must be natural and flow easily or it will disrupt the essay.
The photographer, the good one, cannot constantly consider the state of the art, Smith explained, in a *Popular Photography* interview. Consideration does not trip the shutter. Practice and repetition with camera technique and composition will get that out of the way—the print is the sum total.\(^{11}\)

In that same 1956 interview, Smith summed up his own technical and artistic training with an analogy that is close to the way his friends and co-workers believed he operated.

Smith said:

I'm rather like the Kentucky mountaineer measuring a distance by sight: he may not know whether it's 12 feet or 15 feet, or if there is such a thing as a yardstick, but he can look at a cabin he's building and look at a tree and cut it within a fraction of an inch by the measure of his eye—and that is knowledge, not information.\(^{12}\)

### Smith and Social Statement

While Howard Chapnick argued that it was not possible to separate Smith's technique, artistry or social concern, when asked what Smith would be remembered for, Chapnick replied, "social statement."\(^{13}\)

There is a distinction to be made between the photographer and the photojournalist. The photographer has the greater freedom to operate, only limited or restrained by the equipment of his craft and the limits of his skill. The photojournalist deals with another factor, truth. His pictures, whether illustrating a story or presenting one, have to strive to be accurate. That does not mean that they cannot contain a strong statement.
Photography at its fullest can trigger more of a viewer's senses than just the visual ones. A photograph can elicit emotion. It can provide a social statement.

Sherry Suris discussed how Smith felt about his photography in an interview:

What he is most known for is certainly his photographs that show social concern. He had to do other things and he enjoyed doing other things, but he liked the work that had the ability to affect a person's thinking. He always considered himself to be a journalist, a documentarian. He wanted to provide the truth, but he wanted to educate and influence with his photographs.¹⁴

But possibly the most complete definition of how Smith felt about the social statement is found in some of his photo essays. The solid photo essay attempts to provide a clear and true story, but it is not without involvement or concern. It is this concern, or involvement, as it appears in the photo essay—or the visual impact of one or more of its photographs—that determines the statement. The photographer's technique and artistic expression modify the statement, but do not dominate it. In fact, a strong social statement or visual impact can stand by itself without quality in technique or composition. In the 8mm film of John F. Kennedy's assassination, photographed by amateur photographer Abraham Zapruder, the sequence, if stopped and viewed as still photographs, does not exhibit either technique or artistry. Yet, their impact and statement is both powerful and lasting. To the amateur, this impact and statement usually come as luck; the professionals, like Smith, look for it and anticipate it.
A Survey and Analysis

As earlier mentioned in this study, Smith's years with Life conveniently break into three categories—pre-World War II, post-World War II and the '50s. Rather than discuss Smith's career by employers, or periods, the author will proceed in a chronological order. A chronology should be easier to follow; and it will include headings that provide definite distinction to Smith's employment changes. This distinction is necessary because there is evidence to suggest that Smith's employment changes had a direct bearing on his photography.

Pre-World War II With Life

Most of the sources who have written about Smith and his career with Life list 1938 as the year Smith began his employment with the magazine. Technically, Smith was not a staff member of Life until 1940. And although a majority of his work in 1938 and 1939 came from assignments with Life, the magazine, in its list of credits, put the letters B. S., for Black Star agency, behind Smith's name.¹⁵

Prior to 1938 and his assignments with Life, Smith spent little time developing the picture story. Most of his photographs are single images that do not tell a story, rather they supply illustration to a written story.

Smith's first picture story, "Life Goes to a Rubber Ball," appeared in the magazine on Dec. 26, 1938. The story contained nine photographs.

The author uses the term "picture story" rather than "photo essay" purposely. These early stories are merely snapshots recording an event.
There is only a hint of a linear progression that so marks what Smith would do later. For example, in "Life Goes to a Rubber Ball," the pictures simply record that the tire industry sponsored a costume dance in Akron, Ohio. Smith caught the guests candidly in some of the pictures and set up the other photos. There is a posed photograph of Leonard and Polly Firestone, an overall shot of the ballroom and a picture of Charles W. Seiberling, dressed as a king and presiding over the event. Other pictures include unidentified persons dressed as hot-water bottles, boots and, of course, tires.

Technically, the pictures are good and the equal, based on lighting and printing, of any of the pictures in that December issue of Life. Little consideration was given to the composition. Almost all of the pictures are straight-on shots with central framing. It is doubtful that there was any intent by Smith to make a social statement.

The following month Life assigned Smith to cover another dance. This picture story, "Life Goes to the Butler's Ball," Jan. 30, 1939, contained 21 pictures. The dance was sponsored by the Staff Club of New York for the city's 128,000 domestic servants. Smith's coverage was similar to the earlier dance series. Again there is not linear progression, just a record in pictures of the event. The quality of the pictures is good, based on lighting, focus, tonal range, etc. The pictures are posed in a straight-on fashion, with minimum attention given to composition.

During the remainder of 1939 Life assigned Smith to several social events, most of them musical openings on Broadway (see Appendix A for a
complete listing). Smith always exhibited technical quality in his work, but in most cases the composition and statement had been determined by the play's director. These assignments left very little room for Smith to maneuver. It must be remembered that Smith was only 20 years old, and possibly, the editors at Life were controlling his assignments to verify that he could meet the standards of the magazine. Also, assignments were made on the seniority system and Smith, being one of the youngest staffers, was down the line and left with whatever remained.

Smith's assignments in the '40s did not begin with any greater substance than those of earlier years. One of his first tasks of the year appeared in the March 11 edition of Life titled, "Betty Hutton Rips Into Miss Muffet."

But the July 22, 1940, copy of Life holds a solid example of the skills Smith possessed. "U.S. Opens Its Homes and Hearts to Refugee Children of England," gave Smith some photographic freedom. The opening portrait of seven British refugees is striking in its technical quality and composition. The story follows a linear sequence and tells a story. The text, not written by Smith, aids the understanding of the pictures, but the photos could stand with only their outlines. One photograph, showing the seven children climbing a curving staircase, has fine composition and the lighting is even, providing a clear range of tone.

The pictures in this story provide more than a record. Jim Hughes suggested the possibility of a social statement by Smith in the photographer's early work, but couldn't pin it down.
Hughes reflected:

A lot of the early stuff is funny to look at, but it must have been sad for Gene. Even when he was young he wanted to do more than take snapshots. Some of those early ones show a little of the later concern that would be so strong in a few years.16

Smith's photography for Life began to vary in 1940. He was still doing an occasional musical, but Smith was also allowed to photograph America's preparation for war. Several picture stories, "The Naval War College," "Army Uses Tower to Train Its New Parachute Troops," and "America Begins Training First Conscript Army in Its Peacetime History," are just records, but they are well done and suggest that Smith wanted to become more involved.

The years 1941 and 1942 followed a similar pattern of Life assignments. The magazine used a lot of social photography and Smith shot his way through several stories like, "Life Goes Calling at an Officer's Club" and "Life Goes to a Party With Manhattan Cafe Socialites." One 1941 picture story, "Women's Prison," had the potential to set itself apart from the rest, but Smith did not seem able to get involved with his subjects. Most of the pictures appear to be taken from a distance and later darkroom work blotted out the faces, so that the women would not be recognized. These techniques keep the viewer from getting into the story. It is assumed that Smith was not allowed the kind of access or freedom he would have liked to have had.

In the summer of 1942 Smith resigned from Life. He mentioned it briefly in the chronology to the Aperture Monograph.
Smith wrote:

Interested in pursuit of individual directions and increasingly dissatisfied with routine of Life assignments, resigned contract though warned career would be jeopardized and there would be no further opportunities to work for the magazine.\(^{17}\)

In the Aperture Monograph Smith puts the date of his resignation as 1941 and mentions that Life would somehow hinder his photographic career. Hughes's recent research for Smith's biography contradicts this.

Well, Smith wrote the chronology to his monograph and it really isn't accurate. I also couldn't find anything to substantiate what Smith said about Life trying to blackball him.\(^{18}\)

According to the bibliography in the Aperture Monograph, Smith continued to work for Life until the summer of 1942. His last picture was a single photo titled, "Colonel Jarrett," and it appeared in the Aug. 16, 1942, magazine on page six.

While the exact date of Smith's Life resignation is clouded, several sources mention his disenchantment with his assignments as the reason for the resignation.

Lincoln Kirstein, in the Afterword of the Aperture Monograph wrote:

But 1942 was wartime. Smith was in a position to elect his assignments. Now, 30 years later he accuses himself of misusing his hard-earned liberty because of creative or rather moral immaturity. "I made brash, dashing, interpretative photographs which were overly clever and with too much technique... with great depth of field, very little depth of feeling." The problem of identity for commercial photographers remains: Who am I, photographer, artist, historian?\(^{19}\)
Hughes, writing about Smith shortly after the photographer died, also mentioned the depth of field, depth of feeling quote, and introduced another element to Smith's photography of the early '40s.

Hughes wrote:

He burned much of his earlier work, would burn the rest if he could have found it, and felt he misused the freedom he gained after his first resignation from Life. 20

Smith's burning of his early work would help explain why laboratory assistant Sherry Suris, who thought she had seen all his negatives, couldn't recall seeing any of the Life social ball pictures. 21

There is the possibility that Life's archives hold the negatives, but several sources, including Smith, make a point of how the photographer always held onto his negatives, even when others at Life just sent in their film for processing. 22

Smith attempted to join the military after his Life resignation, but an old injury made him ineligible for service. Within months after leaving Life, however, Smith signed a contract with Ziff-Davis Publishing and went to photograph the war.

Smith During World War II

Most students of Smith's photography would agree that World War II ignited something in his work. The photographer's technique and artistry faced the largest social concern of the era.

Smith and his camera became involved and this involvement led to a power in his images of war that he only hinted at in the earlier works
of covering refugees and women in prison. In a letter from the Pacific, reprinted in the Aperture Monograph, Smith wrote:

World War II . . . and each time I pressed the shutter release it was a shouted condemnation hurled with the hope that the picture might survive through the years, with the hope that they might echo through the minds of men in the future--causing them caution and remembrance and realization.

Know that these people of the pictures were my family--no matter how often they reflected the tortured features of another race. Accident of birth, accident of place--the bloody, dying child I held momentarily while the life-fluid seeped through my shirt and burned my heart--that child was my child.23

Smith's method of printing, where the dark tones dominate the scene, lent itself well to his war photographs. One observer remarked how they were beautifully composed like a Rembrandt or a Goya. With the light standing out against those ominous blacks, they had the look of one of the master's paintings. Except, Smith's work was real, very real.24

In March 1944 Smith returned to the United States for a rest. He had just completed shooting an attack on the Mariana Islands. When he arrived in New York he discovered that Ziff-Davis had censored about half of his photographs. He resigned from Ziff-Davis and signed a contract with Life, and once again returned to the Pacific.25

Smith landed on Saipan and promptly produced a string of photo essays for Life. "Japanese Civilians On Saipan," Nov. 6, 1944, consisted of 14 photographs and presented a story of the Japanese that showed them as humans--unlike the villainous posters of war propaganda. Smith worked close to the people and extracted excellent detail with his camera.
In a *Life* essay titled, "Saipan," Smith pictured the horrors of war. One photograph shows a terrified Japanese mother and child standing in the trees as shells exploded around them. Another picture, in the same essay, captures an American soldier holding a baby that he has found with its head under a rock.

The images are clear, but it isn't technique or composition that give them their significance. Jim Hughes had a chance to see an exhibit of Smith's war photographs, the censored and the uncensored. He wrote about the exhibit in a 1979 article in *Popular Photography*:

Years later, in 1970, New York's Jewish Museum would turn its space over to Smith... One gallery seemed somehow separate from the rest. I remember walking into a darkened room full of young people. Most of them were sitting on the floor. Hundreds of eyes were riveted on a large screen where Smith's pictures were being continuously projected. There, much larger than life, were the stark black-and-white symbols of war. There, young men huddled cradling machines of destruction in their arms. There, human beings hid behind rocks from other human beings, sensed but not seen. There, trees stood scorched and leafless against a horizon of white dust. There, boys bled; men died. I particularly remember their eyes: bewildered, frightened, wild, dulled, dangerous, drained finally of every human emotion but survival.

I entered that room on three different occasions. Each time, I heard no words uttered; only the sounds of the projector punctuated by a grunt or a moan. Smith had created a temple of tragedy.

Aileen Smith, a Japanese-American, has seen the war photographs of her former husband many times. She met Smith at the Jewish Museum exhibit and helped him move that exhibit to Japan where it was shown again.

I really couldn't believe it. I thought that it would be an American point of view. Well, it was, but not in the sense I expected. What I saw was a plea, a statement against war. The photographs may be of World War II, but it doesn't
matter. They are ageless. They have so much impact and concern. It would be good to keep them circulating, keep them in the public's mind. Gene wished that they could stop a war—knowing they couldn't. But they might be able to prevent one.\(^\text{27}\)

Sherry Suris has also seen the war photographs and in an interview told of their impact:

They were amazing to me. Shocking. Revealing in their power. I used to watch the reaction of people as they entered an exhibit. No one was ever able to easily pass through without being moved. The pictures demand that you look at them. Part of it is their composition and desolate look, but most of it is what they tell you about war.\(^\text{28}\)

On Christmas Day 1944 \textit{Life} ran a nine-picture essay titled, "Hospital on Leyte." Smith had walked through the hospital and photographed the wounded soldiers and those caring for them. The tones are subdued. The hospital's whiteness adds light to Smith's work. The scenes are calm ones and the photographer could have had the time to balance his light and compose. The combination of technique, artistry and social statement are at a peak.

In the spring of 1945 Smith photographed "The Battlefield of Iwo," 13 pictures of the Iwo Jima invasion. \textit{Life} gave his pictures eight inside pages and the cover of the April 9 issue. The most reproduced of these pictures is one of four soldiers clinging to a large rock while a bomb explodes a short distance away. The range of tones in this stark landscape is excellent. The soldiers' helmets have caught the highlight of the blast and Smith's printing pulled them into the foreground. This technique gave the photograph depth and drama.
On the caption sheet that was sent to Life along with the pictures were the words: "Sticks and stones, bits of human bones...a blasting out on Iwo Jima."29

Smith's last photo essay of the war was a true linear story in pictures. "24 Hours With Infantryman Terry Moore," appeared in the June 18, 1945, Life and contained 18 photos. One of the pictures was of Smith in a hospital bed. He had been severly injured while doing the assignment. The essay provides the viewer with the feeling of being an infantryman. Life's editors help give the essay a smack of reality with the picture of Smith. It tells the viewer that everyone, even those sent to record the history, are also subject to the destruction.

Post-World War II With Life

Hughes believes that the two-year period that Smith needed to recover from his injuries was the turning point in his use of the extended photo essay. While Smith's pictures were often brilliant, Hughes said, they tended to be made individually, without a story plot in mind. Hughes discussed Smith's use of the essay in Popular Photography:

From 1947 on, however, Smith explored his subjects in a uniquely linear manner, compulsively peeling away layer after layer to get at the heart of the matter. As he researched, one fact would lead to another; as he photographed, one picture would lead to another. He seemed now to think in terms of themes and photograph in terms of layouts that included main pictures, point pictures, counterpoint pictures. Musical analogies are appropriate. Gene Smith didn't simply take pictures; he orchestrated them.30

The first essays of 1947 and 1948 seem to contradict Hughes's statement. Smith photographed "Folk Singers" for Life in October, 1947, and
the seven photographs are individual portraits. The story lacks a strong central theme. Smith was a lover of all music and while the portraits are individual, they sparkle of his personal involvement. Most photographers agree that it is easier to photograph your subject if there is a common bond. The sharing breaks down the artificiality that the camera sometimes injects.

The next full essay did not appear until May 17, 1948. This one, "Trial by Jury," is made up of 40 photographs and followed the trial of Clifton Bowers, accused of robbery. The story is linear in approach, but it is also clinical in content. Each juror is introduced with a small picture of him or her at work in their regular jobs. There are several courtroom pictures, and even a few where Smith went back to the scene of the crime. Witnesses are also photographed as well as the judge and the trial lawyers. The defendant, pictured on the witness stand, was found guilty.

The prints do not have the usual Smith crispness of focus, possibly due to the lack of courtroom lighting. The prints also do not have the full range of tone, and tend to be dull in contrast. Except for the street scenes, composition is not imaginative. It is assumed by way of explanation, that Smith was not allowed the freedom to move about and choose his angles and lighting.

The following month Smith photographed the "Class of '48," for the June 7 Life, on the Cornell University campus. The picture story is reminiscent of the society ball pictures of the late '30s and early '40s.
There is an attempt at a chronological order to the story, but the pictures are not artistic or particularly memorable. The technical quality is the professional standard of its day.

But in September of 1948 Smith hit the stride that Hughes would later write about. Many critics agree that his Sept. 20, "Country Doctor" essay is the best he ever did. Smith traveled to Colorado for the story and ended up staying much longer than anticipated.31

Smith followed the doctor on several calls, until the presence of him and his cameras was accepted. Of the 28 photographs in the essay, each one is a strong image, but adds to the story. The technical quality of the photographs and the composition are in harmony. But the pictures' lasting quality is held in the range of emotion and feeling they capture.

Hughes believes that the time spent to develop the essay was Smith's greatest ally. Hughes said that Smith fought for more time whenever he could and that the photographer believed that time was necessary for an accurate story.32

After the "Country Doctor" essay, Smith's pace slowed. During the remainder of 1948 and well into 1949 he produced several single images for Life, but few essays, and none are of the caliber of "Country Doctor." But one of the smaller assignments, consisting of only two photographs, had an intensity that set it apart from the rest. Smith went to Colorado again and photographed Dr. Albert Schweitzer's return from Africa. The lead photograph illustrating the Life text pictures Schweitzer at the piano. The portrait's artistry and feeling has the same quality about it
that was present in "Country Doctor." The single image is significant here, because later Smith would produce an essay of Schweitzer—a 26-picture portrait of the man and his work—that would cause controversy at Life and end Smith's career with the magazine.

Smith's next published piece for Life, after the two Schweitzer pictures, came on Sept. 26, 1949. It was an 18-photograph essay titled, "Life Without Germs," taken on campus at Notre Dame. The technical aspects of the photography seem to match the technical accomplishments of Smith's subject. The composition, Smith uses the line and form of several scientific instruments in the picture's foreground, is excellent. But the essay was never suggested as one of his better ones in the writings about Smith's work, or in the interviews with Smith followers. Smith does include some of the work in his Aperture Monograph.

**Smith and Life in the '50s**

While Smith's biographer points to the late '40s as the formative period for the photojournalist's photo essay technique, it wasn't until the '50s that Smith would use the technique consistently.

*Life* only published five of Smith's essays in 1950, and none of them were picture stories. In fact, the five assignments only produced six photographs. Smith was hospitalized for most of this year, due to war injuries, but it was as if Smith were building his strength for the next few years.

In March 1951 *Life* published, "Recording Artists," 22 photographs of musicians at work. Again Smith's interest in music allows him to
capture the inner workings of the industry. There are individual pictures of Robert Merrill, Isaac Stern and Igor Stravinsky that show each performer's intensity.


In an interview with author Ken Kobre, in the late-1970s, Smith told how he had researched the story before traveling to Spain. He read as much as he could on the area and looked at as many pictures as he could find.33

Howard Chapnick of Black Star singled out "Spanish Village" as a classic example of Smith's artistry. Chapnick feels the essay is Smith's best and combines all the elements of composition, the highest quality photography one could achieve at its time and the feeling and pathos that make it endure.34

At the end of 1951 Smith photographed "Nurse Midwife," an essay of 30 photographs that Smith admitted a special attachment to. In his monograph, Smith wrote of the midwife essay:

This essay on the nurse midwife, Maude Callen, is, in many ways, the most rewarding experience photography has allowed me. The published story received an overwhelmingly good response, but more than that, there is the woman herself.

At the time of the essay she bore near-total responsibility for several thousand scattered, swamp-bound, backwoods individuals, nearly all impoverished.

They are better off for her care, and I am a better person for her influence.

If this sounds like a love letter, it is.35
Not only was the experience of the essay an important one for Smith, but in doing the essay he had to tackle a difficult problem of lighting. In a *Popular Photography* interview, Smith told how he had to deal with the light:

> ... In the case of the midwife essay, I would have been considerably the liar and untrue to my essay-subject, and to my moral responsibilities, if I had passed up those pictures requiring the aid of additional lighting, and which was often contradictory to the lighting as found. And if--during and after the event, say of the birth of the child--if that birth was less a fact, less a truth, any different for my having added speedlight--I just don't believe it!

> I didn't try and duplicate the existing light. What with the dark skins and white sheets and the oil lamp sitting behind them I could not possibly have seen the necessary details--the expression and the emotions and the relationships I was trying to relate.\(^{36}\)

Ken Kobre, in his book *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach*, stated that Smith felt that the midwife essay was his best work. Sherry Suris does not agree and related her reasons in an interview:

> Many times Smith referred to the midwife essay as being his favorite. But I think what he was really referring to was the experience of meeting Maude. It was the most important one he ever had. I don't think he is referring to the images being any stronger than in any other essay. He was referring to the personal experience of working with her and watching her dedication.\(^{37}\)

> Suris goes on to say that Smith never expressed any strong feelings for any one photograph over another, but he did react to what the photos represent. Another reason he so liked the midwife essay, said Suris, was because after it was published, Maude got her clinic.\(^{38}\)

In 1952 Smith's work took on a lighthearted tone with an essay on Charlie Chaplin. "Chaplin at Work" was published in the March 17 edition
of *Life* and contained 31 photographs. The pictures follow a progression of Chaplin's routine before, during and after a performance. One striking photograph captures the comedian taking a nap on stage during a rehearsal. Its strongest element is its stillness. It is difficult to imagine Chaplin immobile. Peter Martin, a longtime friend of Smith's, predicted the photographer's use of the unexpected in a 1943 article in *Popular Photography*.

Martin wrote:

In the early '40s, Smith, in a desperate mood, pulled all his prints out and covered the walls and floor space of his house. He looked at them all and thought there was something wrong. His conclusion was that the pictures were too darned perfect. They were all exposed precisely at the "climax of action;" compositions were too balanced. Later he brought into his work a healthy kind of imperfection. Motion was stopped before it reached the obvious point; people were caught doing what you would not expect them to do.39

In 1953 Smith began the year with "The Reign of Chemistry," an 18-picture look at our technological society. In April he revisited the place of his midwife essay and produced "Maude Gets Her Clinic." It was a gratifying look at what his photographs could do.

His last essay of the year was published in September, "My Daughter Juanita." The essay originated as a camera test when Smith purchased some new equipment. It ended with 17 photographs and the cover of *Life*. The print quality of the images—their simplicity and penetrating feeling—has the ability to hold the viewer.

Aileen Smith commented:
No one could look at those pictures and not know that the photographer loved that little girl. In fact, it is difficult for anyone to look at those pictures and not love that little girl.

It was that same quality that he brought to Minamata and used when he photographed some of the children there. His photographs could make a calloused man cry.40

Smith only had one essay published with Life in 1954 and it was his last for the magazine as a staff member. Early in the year he traveled to Africa to photograph Albert Schweitzer. He stayed there several months and found a difficult situation. Schweitzer's life was complex. There was sacrifice, conflict in decision, hope and despair. Smith, the journalist, felt that it all had to be reported. He did not want to offer a shallow portrait. It was around this point that a controversy with his editors at Life began. In an interview Smith voiced his concern to Ken Kobre.

Smith said:

I had read all his books, and thought it would be easy to strike up a rapport with him. When I went to meet him, I found that he was vastly different from what I expected. Those who had written about him had especially idealized him, and left him not quite mortal. I found, however, he had to make compromises.

In the leper village, for instance, Schweitzer would let a clean child remain with leprous parents. He would not say, "Take the clean child away." Instead, Schweitzer would say, "If I take the clean child away, there will be no place for him to go. His parents will leave also, and they will be in the forest where I cannot watch them, and they will spread the disease."

When Schweitzer first reached the village, his European training called for the amputation of a native's leg that was badly crushed. But if Schweitzer amputated, he would become known as the "butcher doctor." He didn't amputate. He lost some lives but saved many more in the long run because natives kept coming to him for help.41
Kobre asked Smith if any of this was revealed in Life.

Smith continued:

No, this was the reason that led me to resign over the story. I resigned before it was printed, trying to force the editors to give some consideration and space necessary to tell the story right.\textsuperscript{42}

Life ran the Schweitzer essay, "Man of Mercy," in its Nov. 15, 1954, issue. The story had 26 photographs, and although Smith was not satisfied with it, it would be judged as one of his best. The pictures show a diversity that hint at the complex nature of the subject. The essay contains two portraits of Schweitzer at work that are poetic in their composition. They could also be difficult to photograph as Smith related in a Popular Photography interview in 1956.

In the one Schweitzer picture the oil lamp dominated the scene. It was the main light source. I gave a quarter of a second exposure, it may have been a half-hand held, to photograph with this light.\textsuperscript{43}

Smith admitted that it was difficult to resign from Life. But he felt that he should have been given more latitude in his Schweitzer essay. About his resignation he wrote:

Superficiality to me is untruth when it is of reportorial stature. It is a grievous dishonesty when it is the mark of any important subject . . . I do not accuse them of a lack of integrity, for as they relate within the concept framework of their magazine factory, as they relate to its dominant precedents, they are apparently sincere and honest men. However, I cannot accept many of the conditions common within journalism without tremendous self-dishonesty and without its being a grave breach of the responsibilities, the moral obligations, within journalism, as I have determined them for myself.\textsuperscript{44}
Smith: 1955 - 1970

This is an interesting time in Smith's career. He was on his own, without a contract to supply a steady income. It was a difficult time, but it was also a creative time. He was not as productive as in earlier years, lacking the editors' assignments, but what he did do was his. If there is one word that could be said about his work during these 15 years it is--consistent.

Smith's first project after leaving Life was a three-year affair with the city of Pittsburgh. Eventually, it would be published in the 1959 Popular Photography Annual under the title, "Labyrinthian Walk." The essay contained 89 photographs and took 38 pages of the annual. Smith received two Guggenheim Fellowships during the three years to help him complete the essay. It is monstrous.

Flip Schulke, a photojournalist, was a 24-year-old student when he went to assist Smith with the hanging of the Pittsburgh exhibit. In an interview with Jim Hughes Schulke recalls the time:

There were hundreds of prints, covering every inch of floor. If he could have done a book on Pittsburgh, all these people who have been screaming about changing the American city could have seen the beginnings; the old cities, how the changes occur, the power structure, it was all there like a dictionary, like an encyclopedia. It was a much more massive story than Minamata.

When he shoots, he has a layout in mind, a feel for which pictures will go with others, which will stand alone. Then he works hard to light one thing.

Nobody has seen Pittsburgh. He had a linear story there... He changed my life.45

The Pittsburgh essay opens with a photograph of a steel worker with the flare of a vesper furnace in his face. The viewer can almost feel
the heat and smell the acrid smoke. Another picture shows the University of Pittsburgh setting on a hill, smoke from factories in the foreground shrouds the picture. Yet another captures a black child climbing a street sign. The street's name is Pride.

Symbolism and emotion are the forces that move the viewer through the Pittsburgh essay.

Prior to the completion of the essay, Smith started another project. In his loft on Sixth Ave. in New York, he set up a camera so that it looked down on the street. He then proceeded to photograph the street scenes for the next year. Life published several of his street pictures under the title, "Drama Beneath a City Window," in 1958. They are distant, as they have to be, but the technical and artistic quality is present.

From 1959 until 1969 Smith did not produce very many photo essays. He concentrated on exhibiting his work, giving lectures, conducting classes and taking an occasional freelance assignment.

Life published a few of Smith's photographs in an essay, "Colossus of the Orient," in 1962-63. Smith had been working in Japan for Hitachi Limited. But this was as close as he got to the photo essays of the '50s until 1970. His exhibits contained parts of earlier work and some of the newer pieces, but he never was able to get a publisher for some of the work.

Sherry Suris recalls how Smith would talk of his favorite unpublished essay:

He went to Haiti in 1959 or 1960 and photographed a mental clinic. It started as an assignment for someone, but never did come together. I have seen the photos, though,
and there are hundreds of them. If pressed, I would have to say that the Schweitzer essay is my favorite, but I agree with Gene, Haiti is my favorite unpublished essay. It would have been a remarkable one.

Smith and Minamata

Smith sent the first photographs back from Minamata, Japan, in 1971. They were single images. Smith was testing the water for the release of a major essay. In the spring of 1972, Life editor Phil Kunhardt contacted Smith and asked for the story.

Kunhardt recalls:

We gave Gene the space he needed and left him alone with it. It was, and is, a powerful piece of photojournalism.47

June 2, 1972, Life published Smith's photo essay on Minamata. The story ran for seven pages and contained 11 photographs. The reaction was immediate. The world's first council on environmental problems met later that month in Europe and the essay was used to introduce a study on chemical pollution in the world.48

Smith continued to expand his Minamata essay throughout 1972. It was picked up in several European and Asian magazines, and some of the single images, most notably, "Tomoko in Her Bath," became famous.

In 1975 Smith, just returned from Japan, went looking for a magazine to publish another essay on Minamata. Life was out of the question, having died in 1972. Smith turned to Camera 35, a small specialized photography magazine, edited by an acquaintance, Jim Hughes. After several discussions, Hughes relinquished 26 pages of the April 1975 issue to Smith. It was unheard of, Camera 35 usually only averaged 32 pages,
and Hughes had some doubts.49

But the essay and the magazine was a success. A. D. Coleman, reviewing the essay for the New York Times, wrote:

... As an example of what can be achieved by an articulate photojournalist in full control of his/her work from start to finish, the Minamata essay entirely justifies not only the space devoted to it but the effort expended by Smith over the past two decades to achieve that very control.

The essay provides information, understandings and warnings with clarity and power. It seeks to be, and succeeds in becoming, not a product but a process, a tool for change. As such it challenges photojournalists to redefine themselves as moral and political forces in a world which is shaped in part by photojournalism's description of it.50

The idea for a book followed the publishing of Camera 35's essay. Minamata, the book, was published later that year by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. It contained 185 pictures; and while it added depth and a clinical understanding to what happened in Minamata, it really didn't add to the photographic impact that the Life and the Camera 35 essays possessed.

Julia Scully, in an August 1975 review of Smith's Minamata essay for Modern Photography, called the pictures, "powerful emotion, impeccable technique."

Some critics believe the Minamata work to be Smith's finest, and all agree that it is equal to the Life essays in the '50s. The images are some of the finest examples of composition and control of lighting that Smith ever accomplished. The emotion that the pictures have, is explained by Smith's personal involvement with his subjects for over three years.
In an interview with author Ken Kobre, Smith told how the pictures have helped get new laws passed in Japan to stop the chemical pollution. The book is used in court for litigation in Japan and the United States.51

Smith and the Photo Essay

In summation of this chapter on the survey and analysis, the author felt that an explanation of Smith's philosophy on the photo essay would be useful. Smith was asked to write, how he thought about the picture story, in a 1959 article for Popular Photography.

Smith wrote:

For me, a photographic story must become within itself a living fact of life.

The photograph of its independent right must cause to happen, must compel action and participation from a part of those who experience the photograph. The photograph itself must compel the observer while remaining in the image and likeness of its inspirational counterpart. The photograph must do more than remind the observer of knowledge he already possesses. The photographic essay I strive to create is one with many individually strong pictures in a complex inter-relationship, with each photograph intensifying the meaning of every other.

If I am charged with doing a story, I spend a great deal of time in research on that story. I spend a great deal of time with the people involved. All of that time, the final statement, which both the individual pictures and the story as a whole must make, is being formed. I endeavor to be thorough and fair in forming that concept.52

Several years later, in one of the last interviews he would make, Smith talked again of the photo essay:

I can best describe the relationship (between pictures) as something that is both optical and mental at once. One photograph says something about the subject. The next photograph may amplify on that subject, or the picture may add its own dimension to the subject.53


11. Ibid., p. 105.

12. Ibid., p. 106.


24 Ibid., p. 15, afterword.

25 Ibid., p. 1, chronology.


27 Aileen Smith interview, June 1980.

28 Suris interview, June 1980.

29 Aperture, p. 8.


34 Chapnick interview, June 1980.

35 Aperture, p. 55.


37 Suris interview, June 1980.

38 Ibid., June 1980.


40 Aileen Smith interview, June 1980.


42 Ibid., p. 289.


44 Aperture, p. 2, chronology.

45 Hughes, *Nine Lives*, p. 139.

46 Suris interview, June 1980.

47 Phil Kunhardt telephone interview, New York, June 1980.
48 Aileen Smith interview, June 1980.
49 Hughes interview, June 1980.
50 Coleman, At Last, p. 73.
51 Kobre, Professionals' Approach, p. 305.
52 W. Eugene Smith, "How They Think About the Picture Story," Popular Photography, June 1959, p. 50.
53 Kobre, Professionals' Approach, p. 286.

In the early June morning in 1976, he told a group that he did not believe he could go on much longer, and that he needed help in testing everything in order. He said he wanted someone to sit in with the photographer he wanted to be hampy-bared by.

The group believed that those who were close to Smith—and the others who followed the photography—and already made a visual sorting of Smith's work, could not vouch for the best of Smith's photography was something else. We were all part of Smith's world, and with Smith's work, there was no way of the essays finding their way into the world of the new photographer. "The Village," "The Story," "The Women," and "Man of Action," were the stories of the essays that Smith told us. Within each person's mind, it was apparent that Smith's work would be included to agree with those beliefs. His style, techniques, and social orientation were seen in Smith's photography.

So it was that one by one all of Smith's photo essays, when it would be apparent that his work in photography, did not always exhibit the relationships of form, composition, and social structure working in one. This
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

The relationships between technical and artistic quality, and visual impact and social statement, work as one, in the photography of W. Eugene Smith, according to all those interviewed for this study.

When Smith contacted his friend Jim Hughes early one morning in 1976, he told Hughes that he did not believe he could go on much longer, and that he needed help in putting everything in order. He said he wanted assistance in sorting out the photographs he wanted to be remembered by.¹

The author believes that those who were close to Smith—and the others who followed his photography—had already made a mental sorting of Smith's work. What they considered as the best of Smith's photography was remembered. When they thought of Smith's work, they thought of the essays for Life that were the most popular—"Country Doctor," "Spanish Village," "Nurse Midwife," "Chaplain at Work," "My Daughter Juanita," and "Man of Mercy." They thought of the essays that Smith did later—"Pittsburgh," "Drama Beneath a City Window" and "Minamata." Within each person's frame of reference, the author would be inclined to agree with those interviewed, that the relationships of technique, artistry and social statement work as one in Smith's photography.

But if one were to review all of Smith's photo essays then it would be apparent that Smith's photography did not always exhibit the relationships of technique, artistry and social statement working as one. That
was apparent to the author. This is not criticism; photographers operating within the confines of journalism are often faced with assignments that stifle or negate both the photographer's artistic quality and social statement. Technique, however, is usually a different matter. The professional photojournalist, having mastered the equipment of the profession, will usually exhibit fine technical quality, whatever the assignment. This seems to be particularly true in the case of W. Eugene Smith.

In a 1952 article for *Popular Photography* Smith wrote:

> Whenever possible, I try to learn of and from the subject before I start shooting. This is an absolute law of mine. From this preliminary knowledge I make an outline, as a playwright does, of the situations I believe should be watched for in the building of depth, traits of character, and of inherent relationships. I strive to become hypersensitive to every shading of the situation.

> This leads toward making the photographic process as automatic as possible, and usually to a close, wonderful interrelationship with the subject. I become emotionally quite involved, but I never let this involvement interfere with a cold critique of the success or failure of my interpretive mission. I am an idealist; I often feel I would like to be an artist in an ivory tower. Yet it is imperative that I speak to people, so I must desert that ivory tower. To do this, I am a journalist--a photojournalist. But I am always torn between the attitude of the journalist, who is a recorder of facts, and the artist, who is often at odds with the facts. My principal concern is for honesty, above all honesty with myself.2

In his article for *Popular Photography* Smith seems to suppress the significance of technique. The photographic process should be automatic so that the photographer can concentrate on and become involved with the subject. This concentration and involvement, Smith admitted, led to emotionalism, but in deciding whether to photograph his subjects as an artist or a journalist, he chose to be factual, with honesty as his chief concern.
In looking back at Smith's work, two essays come to mind that, given the right circumstances, could have been of the same magnitude as "Country Doctor" or "Man of Mercy." The essays "Woman's Prison" and "Trial by Jury" both had the potential for Smith's involved style of work and his social concern. But in both essays the social statement, the depth and traits of character that Smith talked about in the Popular Photography article are kept at bay. Possibly, the prison officials wouldn't let Smith get close enough to or involved with the inmates. In many of the photographs, the subject's back is to the camera, a situation that is usually not present in a Smith essay. The editors, possibly at the request of prison officials, faded out the faces of the prisoners, further reducing the impact and personal appeal of the essay. Two other times Smith would attempt a prison essay ("Prisons Turn to Sports Programs," May 5, 1941, and "Prison War Work," Dec. 7, 1942). Prisons and prison life have always been a topic of social concern and the author would not be surprised if Smith had a hand in determining these Life assignments.

In "Trial by Jury," again the essay does not pull the viewer into the situation. The series is missing an ingredient, although it seems to have most of the characteristics of a Smith essay. It is understandable that Smith was unable to become involved with the essay due to the procedure of the court.

The common thread that appears to link Smith's most remembered essays together is his level of involvement. Smith spent almost one month with the doctor in the "Country Doctor" essay, two months with Maude in
Jim Hughes described time as Smith's greatest ally. Smith's Pittsburgh essay took him two years to complete and Minamata consumed three and one-half years of Smith's life.4

Peter Martin, a friend of Smith's for over 40 years, noted the photographer's concern in an article shortly after Smith's death.

Martin wrote:

To Gene, a photograph was no simple matter of tripping a shutter. It was a profound personal experience. He insisted on becoming, through his camera, intimately involved in his subject. He approached the scene of picture-making with a "desperate terror" that he would fail to record the perfect picture. The perfect picture, he explained with passionate vagueness, was a "three-dimensional, or mental essay" on the inner characteristics of the subject, and anything less than this, to Smith, was a humiliation just short of death.5

In some of Smith's essays it is easy to understand how the photographer could come into the situation with preconceived social concern. This is especially so of Smith's war-time tour in the Pacific. And knowing his attitude on war, based on his writings during and after World War II, one assumes that he was concerned during his coverage of the anti-war demonstrations in the 1960s.

But the photographer's involvement and concern is more often not preconceived, but a factor of the situation influencing his subject or subjects. It is probable that this was the case for Smith in "The Midwife" essay, the "Country Doctor" essay, the "Man of Mercy" essay and his documentation in Minamata. In other words, when Smith received an
assignment or began looking into a subject as a possible essay, he did not already possess the involvement or concern that would later be revealed in his photography. Aileen Smith, in talking about the Minamata project, stated it clearly:

We weren't that committed to Minamata when we first heard about it. We knew that there was a story there and that we would go and look. Once there everything changed. It was so dramatic. There were so many questions of life in Minamata. I mean, what is life? What is the 20th century? The commitment grew as we became involved and concerned.

Possibly, the author's original statement—Smith's photographs were made primarily for their visual impact and social statement and secondarily for their technical and artistic quality—was stated too strongly. Smith suggests, in one of his writings, that he is not consciously aware of why his photographs must make a statement—but only that they must. In his Aperture Monograph Smith wrote:

There had been the war—now it seems a long time ago, that war called World, volume II—and during my 13th Pacific invasion shell fragments ended my photographic coverage of it. Two painful, helpless years followed my multiple wounding, during which time I had to stifle my restless spirit into a state of impassive, non-creative suspension, while the doctors by their many operations slowly tried to repair me . . . But now, this day, I would endeavor to refute two years of negation. On this day, for the first time since my injuries, I would try to control the mechanics of the camera; and, as well I would try to command my creative spirit out of its exile.

I was determined that this first photograph must sing of more than being a technical accomplishment. Determined that it would speak of a gentle moment of spirited purity in contrast to the depraved savagery I had raged against with my war photographs—my last photographs. I was almost desperate in this determination, in my insistence that for some reason this first exposure must have a special quality. I have never quite understood why it had to be thus.
Smith's first photograph after his recovery, later titled "A Walk to Paradise Garden," remains as one of his most powerful single images. It pictures his two children walking out of a darkly wooded area into the bright sunlight. The symbolism of Smith coming out of the war and into a new phase of his life is clearly stated. This photograph was selected by Edward Steichen as the closing piece of his "Family of Man" exhibit.

Smith's explanation of the taking of that photograph, suggests that he was not totally aware of his reasons for wanting this first photograph to make a statement. In that light, the author's contention that Smith's photographs were made primarily for visual impact and social statement is lessened to a degree. But evidence still remains that supports the author's point that Smith's photography was made for impact and social statement, whether Smith was conscious of it or not.

Aileen Smith, in a telephone interview from her home in Kyoto, Japan, talked of her former husband's commitment to photography and what was involved.

Aileen Smith said:

I think his (Smith's) brilliance is that, somehow, in himself, he was so committed to photography that he kept doing what he did until he was 59. I can say that now. When I was with him during Minamata I felt that the commitment made was only natural. But I was very young then, and now that I'm 30, I can't stay up all night and go on all day, over and over again. He used to do that and probably did until he died.

It (the motivation) was something that stirred inside of him. It was very consuming and in some ways very self destructive. Just what this thing was, is hard to say. I don't mean this as a criticism of him, but in some ways it is, but Gene was very grandiose in the sense that he really felt out of touch with reality that he actually thought he was
saving the world. But it was that approach of, sort of saying, I have to do this because people have to know. It was a crusade.

He used to say that he wasn't a martyr or that he had a martyr instinct, but in a way it wasn't unlike martyrdom.

But the fact that he kept saying he didn't have it, made me feel that he was obsessed with that. I feel that he did have the martyr instinct. All through the work in Minamata he didn't care about where his next meal was coming from, or how the bills got paid. When he was beaten in Minamata, I felt he didn't mind because now everyone would see that what was happening here was wrong. His commitment to photography centered around what he could do to right social wrongs.

Several others who were interviewed by the author expressed similar feelings. Initially, many of those interviewed felt that this study was an attempt to separate the elements that make up Smith's photographs thereby detracting from the whole. That was not the intent of the study. Rather, it has attempted to isolate the elements of Smith's work only for observation and discussion and in so doing, to suggest that Smith's primary objective in photojournalism was to make statements on, or about, social conditions.

Smith said it best in a newspaper story he wrote while recovering from injuries received during World War II. The story was later reprinted in a book on photography and photographers by R. Smith Schuneman.

Smith wrote:

These things I photographed with hating wrath. When I had such subjects, my camera and some film were my only fragile weapons of my good intentions. With these I fought war. But my camera and my intentions stopped no man from falling, nor did they help him after he had fallen. Yet, all that I could offer of value, whatever that value to the world, were my photographs.
Photographs be damned if they would bind no wound, for they can cause an emotional reaction, can show and remind. I could not prevent the wounding of the man, yet the image of his suffering might help to show compassion, to soften hatreds, even in hardened minds, and strike up other hatred not directed against man, but against what is done to man. If I could photograph powerfully enough, I reasoned, I might, just might, help a little to change this.

If my photographs could grab the viewer by the heart, making the enormity of the terribleness of war lodge heavily, they might also prod the conscience and cause the viewer to think. The photographs might cause us to think beyond righteous chips on nationalistic or political shoulders and beyond racial or religious gripes that usually fade when understanding is allowed, is gained or is applied.

In highest achievement I could do no more than strike another call, for there is not within me the magnitude of brain to guide the way other than a beginning; idealism is not enough. Yes, my attempt, for even when man knows he must fail, there are times he must continue, for he has never done his share.9

Future Study

This paper provides an overview of Smith's life and looks at an aspect of his work, but there are a number of facets of Smith and his work that remain. The author plans to continue with the research, looking at several areas that are only briefly mentioned in this study and in other areas suggested by persons interviewed.

Specifically, the author would like to explore Smith's early years in detail and investigate the impact of his father's suicide on his work, or philosophy of work. Another area of Smith's life that needs illumination is the period following his last resignation from Life until the beginning of the project in Minamata. Smith produced very little during this time and little has been written about it, by Smith or others.


7. Aperture, p. 16.


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Life. 1938-1972. Selected volumes 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 35, 37, 42, 44, 55, 72.


APPENDIX A

PHOTOGRAPHS PUBLISHED IN LIFE 1938-1954

1938

"Old Age," 5:66, November 7, 1938, 1 photograph.
"Gas Masks," 5:57, December 19, 1938, 2 photographs.
"Life Goes to a Rubber Ball," 5:56-58, December 26, 1938, 9 photographs.

1939

"Voder, the Machine That Talks Like a Man, Duplicates the Human Throat," 6:24, January 30, 1939, 1 photograph.
"Russell Dunn," 6:61, March 6, 1939, 1 photograph.
"Baseball Season Opens. . .," 6:15, May 1, 1939, 1 photograph.
"Maryland Schoolboys Crack Skulls and Shins in a Rough Game of Lacrosse," 6:57, May 29, 1939, 6 photographs.
"Daniel Webster Outwits a Boston Devil in a New American Folk Opera," 6:37,38,40, June 12, 1939, 9 photographs.
"Broadway Likes Miranda Piquant Portuguese Songs," 7:34, July 17, 1939, 1 photograph.
"World's First Autogiro Air-mail Service Starts at Philadelphia," 7:20, July 17, 1939, 2 photographs.
"Clifton Webb and Libby Holman," 7:58, July 31, 1939, 2 photographs.

"Australia May Well Lift Davis Cup," 7:22-23, August 7, 1939, 12 photographs.

"After Her 16-year Retirement, Irene Castle Dances Again," 7:19, August 21, 1939, 1 photograph.

"The Week the War Began," 7:75, September 18, 1939, 5 photographs.


"Bud Kerr," 7:96, November 20, 1939, 1 photograph.

"Betty Grable," 7:cover, December 11, 1939, 1 photograph.

1940

"Cromwells Arrive in Ottawa and Take Over U.S. Legation," 8:24, February 5, 1940, 4 photographs.

"Francis Biddle," 8:23, February 19, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Mercury, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter and Venus Line Up as Evening Stars," 8:33-34, February 26, 1940, 2 photographs.

"Betty Hutton Rips Into Miss Muffet," 8:51, March 11, 1940, 12 photographs.

"The Queen Elizabeth," 8:30, March 18, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Taft and Taft," 8:91, March 18, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Girl Swimmers from New York Set New World's Medley Relay Record," 8:69-70, April 29, 1940, 6 photographs.

"Milwaukee's Lyric Mayor Lifts His Voice in Song on Day of Inauguration," 8:35, April 29, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Moe Annenberg Pleads Guilty in Biggest Tax-evasion Job in History," 8:36, May 6, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Psychology Professor Hypnotizes Student in Class Demonstration," 8:78-80, May 20, 1940, 7 photographs.

"Roller-Skate Dancing Starts a Bloomers Fad," 9:68-69, July 8, 1940, 4 photographs.

"U.S. Army Doctors Investigate the Punishment a Pilot Takes in Flight," 9:34,36-38, July 22, 1940, 8 photographs.


"Army Uses Tower to Train Its New Parachute Troops," 9:cover,18-19, August 19, 1940, 4 photographs.

"Port Churchill, Manitoba, Canada," 9:111, September 9, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Series Tragedy," 9:28, October 14, 1940, 1 photograph.

"Bases That Keep the Fleet Afloat," 9:92, October 28, 1940, 1 photograph.


"U.S. Sailor," 9:cover, October 28, 1940, 1 photograph.


"War Speeds Careers," 9:90, October 28, 1940, 3 photographs.


"Ribald Tobacco Road Has Seventh Broadway Birthday," 9:30, December 16, 1940, 8 photographs.

1941

"Cameraman on Ship Shoots Launching in Reverse," 10:47, January 13, 1941, 6 photographs.


"These Pictures Show How to Salute," 10:33, January 27, 1941, 2 photographs.


"Senator Tinkham of Massachusetts," 10:19, February 3, 1941, 1 photograph.

"12,000 Civilian Spotters Ward Off a Mock Air Invasion of the U.S.,”
10:24,25, February 3, 1941, 2 photographs.

"Winter at Yaphank," 10:72,74, February 17, 1941, 7 photographs.

"Willkie and Clare Boothe," 10:31, February 24, 1941, 1 photograph.

"Mrs. Abbie Tyler of Newbury, Vermont," 10:46, March 17, 1941, 1 photograph.

"Secret and Official Missions Take Americans Across the Sea to Lisbon," 10:44,46, March 24, 1941, 3 photographs.

"Louisiana Plants Its No. 1 Hero Amid the Illustrious Dead in Statuary Hall," 10:33, May 5, 1941, 1 photograph.

"Prisons Turn to Sports Programs," 10:49-55, May 5, 1941, 10 photographs.

"Boston Transcript Folds After 111 Years of Genteel Journalism," 10:34,35, May 12, 1941, 10 photographs.


"British Sailor Boy Gets His First Look at U.S.,” 10:cover, 45,46, 
June 16, 1941, 7 photographs.

"Harlem's New Congeroo Gives Girls a Workout," 10:49,50, June 16, 1941, 
6 photographs.

"Life Goes Calling at an Officer's Club," 11:99-101, July 7, 1941, 
9 photographs.


"Bob Falkenburg," 11:30, August 4, 1941, 2 photographs.

"Deadpan Buster Keaton in The Gorilla," 11:57, September 1, 1941, 1 photograph.
"Life Goes to a Party With Manhattan Cafe Socialites," 11:108-111, September 8, 1941, 14 photographs.


"Woman's Prison," 11:80-86, October 6, 1941, 14 photographs.


"Hypnotism," 11:77-79, November 10, 1941, 2 photographs.


"Sons O' Fun Panics Boston," 11:44-45, November 17, 1941, 10 photographs.


"Power Blackout," 11:41,42,44,46,48, December 1, 1941, 10 photographs.


"OCD Co-ordinators Keep Selves Fit While People Fume at Boondoggling in Defense," 12:102, March 30, 1942, 1 photograph.


"Hero's Homecoming," 13:45,46,48, October, 12, 1942, 6 photographs.

"Francis Biddle," 13:107, October 26, 1942, 1 photograph.


1943

"London Theater," 15:82, August 2, 1943, 1 photograph.


1944

"Raymond Clapper," 16:34, March 13, 1944, 1 photograph.

"Navy Attacks the Islands," 16:22-25, May 8, 1944, 6 photographs.


"Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II," 16:110, May 29, 1944, 1 photograph.

"Land Fighting on Saipan," 17:24-25, July 17, 1944, 3 photographs.


"Japanese Civilians on Saipan," 17:45-50, November 6, 1944, 14 photographs.


"Hospital on Leyte," 17:13-17, December 25, 1944, 9 photographs.

1945

"Carlos Romulo," 18:2, February 5, 1945, 1 photograph.


1946

"Ethel Merman," 21:85, July 8, 1946, 1 photograph.


1947


"Folk Singers," 23: cover, 63-66, October 20, 1947, 7 photographs.

"Dr. John Mott," 23:113, November 10, 1947, 1 photograph.


1948


"Edward, My Son," 25:111-114, October 18, 1948, 7 photographs.


"Joe Gatto, Primitive," 25:73,78,80, November 8, 1948, 3 photographs.


"President Truman," 25:cover, November 22, 1948, 1 photograph.


"Monica Dickens," 25:77, December 27, 1948, 1 photograph.

1949

"Hard Times on Broadway," 26:87-95, February 14, 1949, 21 photographs.

"Death of a Salesman," 26:115,117,118,121, February 21, 1949, 8 photographs.


"Lost in the Stars," 27:143-146, November 14, 1949, 6 photographs.


1950


"Welch Miners," 28:34, February 20, 1950, 1 photograph.


1951


"The King and I," 30:79-87, April 23, 1951, 9 photographs.


"A Play for Churches," 31:73-77, November 12, 1951, 8 photographs.

"Dennis Stock," 31:15, November 26, 1951, 1 photograph.


1952


1953


"Maude Gets Her Clinic," 34:139,140,143, April 6, 1953, 6 photographs.


"Real Gone Gal Quits the Met," 35:209, October 12, 1953, 1 photograph.

1954


Photo Essays, 1957 - 1972


"Drama Beneath a City Window," Life, 44:107-114, March 10, 1958, 14 photographs.


APPENDIX B

LIFE GOES TO A RUBBER BALL, 1938
A WALK TO PARADISE GARDEN, 1947
COUNTRY DOCTOR, 1948
"Spinner"
SPANISH VILLAGE, 1951
PITTSBURGH, 1955
"Tomoko In Her Bath"
MINAMATA, 1972