Photography: Fran Ortiz

Reflections Of The Street In One Man's Eye

By Ira Kamin

■ Joe Selle, street photographer, sits in a swivel chair in his darkroom on Market Street (near Fifth). He remembers when Market Street was all lit up by movie theaters, forty years ago. When the streets were so crowded — everyone dressed for downtown — he had a twenty-five-man crew taking pictures on the street.

Fox Movie Flash, he calls the company. In those days the darkroom was going day and night, four- or five-men crews mixing chemicals from scratch and turning out pictures as fast as they could. A volume business, Joseph Nicholas Selle calls it. A real photographer couldn't do it, he says. They'd try and make the print too perfect.

With Joe's system, what you see on the negative, you get. Then people would pay a quarter to get a postcard print, and they wanted it in a hurry. And sometimes if the prints didn't come to their homes in a couple of days, they'd come to Joe, demanding them. He had rooms on either side of the darkroom then, at ten bucks a room, all spilling over with these postcard prints, millions of them, spilling onto the floor, coming out of the fix too fast for the crew of women to stack and send off.

Yes, it was a big business then. People hadn't seen too many box cameras before. People weren't used to having their pictures taken by any kind of camera. And everyone was dressing up to be in the movies anyway. Those were the glamour years of San Francisco, the thirties, stylish and swift and full of slick, flickering movie images. And Joe Selle, who learned his craft at the Chicago World's Fair in 1934, was out on the streets, dapper and dark-headed, taking everyone's picture — 1500 snaps a day, his arms out wide, ready for business.

He has a high, sweet voice, singsong, and a tall gracious figure. His hair is white. He is seventy-five years old. The skin of his face is baby-soft and pink. He was born in Minneapolis, the son of a portrait photographer born in Strasbourg, Germany. He says his father's business wasn't an easy one. "We used to chase down brides," he says. The family shot weddings and babies, and had to hustle to make a living. Joe's older brother was a portrait photographer, too. His other brother, a carpenter, is now dead.

Joe Selle says he's retired; he says he retired twenty years ago. "Practically all finished now," he says. But he still comes downtown everyday and shoots for a couple of hours. When he's out on the streets — almost always now on the corner of Geary and Stockton — he sees people from the old days, people he has shot over the years, people whose children he's shot and whose grandchildren he's shot. He says, "That's why I can't quit. All those people I know in the street out here. I sure as hell don't make any money out here. I never learned to play golf or tennis or all that sort of thing. So I come out here to see all these people I wouldn't ordinarily see."

Many of the people over the years have died. Joe Selle takes good care of himself. He hasn't smoked in over fifty years, and he says he drinks only on occasion, when he's with someone else who drinks.

Joe works all seasons, still. The only time he took off was several years ago when he was working around his beef cattle ranch in Sonoma. Standing atop a bale of hay, he fell off, shattering his collar bone and forcing him eventually to invent a tripod for his fifteen-pound DeVry newsreel camera (which he uses to shoot stills).

He managed to rig an aluminum stick to the bottom of the box camera, using an inventive system of screen-door locks and chains, thereby taking the camera's weight off his already well-rounded shoulders. He has been bending into this camera's viewfinder since 1936. The camera was made in Chicago, and Joe Selle got to meet its maker.

"I got to know Mr. DeVry eventually. He came out with a young woman, going on a honeymoon to Honolulu. He was a great big man. I took a picture of him and his bride on the street.

"He says, 'Is that one of my cameras?'

"I thought he was pointing a finger at me. I wasn't sure what he was going to do.

"He says, 'You know, I made a mistake making those cameras so good. They're made to last a lifetime.'

"They were used as newsreel cameras in those days. News people threw them around, in wet weather, rain, and football games. They had to be made good. And those people who bought them had to rely on them. In those days, newsreels were shown late at night at theaters.

"This was the theater district. There were dozens of theaters along the street. In those days people went to theaters. There was no television, so people depended on theaters for newsreels and movies and that sort of thing.

"The streets were crowded, even at night. The theater marquees were lit up so bright, it was just like the Great White Way in New York. So you could work night or day. It didn't matter. We had cameras on the street at night."

Joe Selle owns so many old cameras he can't count them all. Almost as many old cameras as old shoes, size eleven-and-a-half.

Shoes are all over the darkroom. Joe changes shoes three, four times a day. "A fresh pair of shoes seems to feel better," he says.

In the old days, he'd go and buy shoes, four pairs at a time, at the sales. Sturdy Regal shoes, at $6.60 a pair. He says they sell now for $65 a pair. He's got pairs hanging in his closet that he's never worn, and he laughs about the time, recently, when he found some old shoes, never worn, hanging in a bag. What a treasure they are, he says.

He wonders about the day he will actually stop taking pictures, and what he'll do with all the old equipment — the Pako dryer, the old strobes, the old drying tins, the DeVry cameras, the old jugs of chemicals still sitting upon his radiator so that they might keep near seventy degrees on cold days. Maybe, he says,

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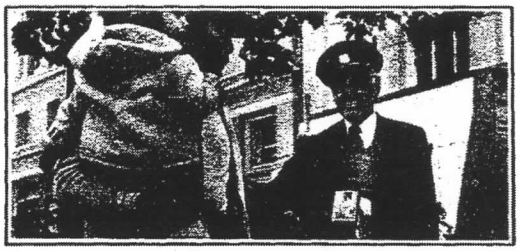

he can sell them to an antique dealer. He certainly doesn't want all the old stuff messing up his house in Forest Hill. He says he has always left his work right here, never has taken it home with him. At home are his wife Augusta and their two Boston terriers he had to travel to Los Angeles to purchase. Hard to get, he says. It's poodles now, he says. Nobody breeds Boston terriers anymore. He's got lots of calendars around the darkroom, lots of pictures of voluptuous females, and one picture of his two small dogs. His home, he says, is like any other home, with a bed and a stove and a kitchen.

He doesn't have any children. Not yet, he says.

He is wearing wide maroon suspenders today over a blue sweater tucked into his suit pants. He wears a pale blue shirt and a red and white polka-dot tie. When he's ready to go to work, he drops on his Fox Movie Flash gold-braided, billed cap — a makeshift cap, he says; all the old caps are gone now — leather camera strap, which is more like a halter than a strap, and the gray and blue plaid suit coat. In the cold days — today is a warm Monday before Easter — he wraps himself in a sheepskin vest, "almost like a bullet-proof vest," he says.

There are pictures of horses on the wall near the door. In the old days, Joe had horses up on the ranch. Now it's just beef cattle. There is something sturdy about Joe Selle. Steady and sturdy as a horse — he just keeps going. And there is also something clown-like and bubbly, in his shy blue eyes and polka-dot tie and big suspenders, in the gesture with which he greets and solicits customers, the open-armed, come-to-me posture.

There aren't as many people on the streets as the old days — "They didn't have all the shopping centers in the old days," he says, "everyone had to come to San Francisco" — and Joe misses the dress-up days, the elegant days, and the safe days when he says there was no fear of getting mugged, no matter how much cash was in your pockets. Though Joe Selle, walking the streets daily, has not had any trouble. And sometimes, even in these slower, more dangerous days, dollar bills are handed to him so quickly — the price is now $2 a shot — the money drops out of his hands and falls on the pavement between his feet.

It's a good day to take pictures. Store windows are decorated for the holidays. People are out. Families are out. Joe Selle, on the corner of Geary

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and Stockton, tells them he can get them all in the picture. He waves to them and talks to them in his singing voice. Most just walk on. "Why not get a picture first?" he tells them. His camera is focused for fifteen feet. The few who stop and agree to have their picture taken pose quickly for him, give their names and addresses, and then go on to the stores. He tells them his name is Joe Fox, probably because it's easier to remember.

He has taken millions of pictures. The tickets are alphabetical; he started with A forty-five years ago, and to each letter there are a million numbers. He's on the J's now.

"I don't know how it happened but somebody from the Smithsonian Institution got ahold of me and found out I've been operating a long time and they wanted to know about it. They began phoning me from Washington, D.C. Eventually they wanted to know if they could have my old film. I said, 'Sure.' I said I had so much of it. This was three years ago, maybe four. I said, 'Send a man with a truck and a half dozen fellas. I'm not able to handle it, it's too heavy for me.' So they sent four or five fellas with boxes and hauled all the film away, cans and all." Joe Selle says the film was appraised by the Smithsonian, and eventually he received a tax write-off of $8,800 for the donation.

"I don't know what they'll do with that many negatives," he says. "So many are practically alike."

In his own way, Joe Selle has documented his time. In the boom days, he and his crew went to Fresno and San Jose and Sacramento and Stockton, small towns then, he calls them. And once a week he went to Sather Gate in Berkeley to shoot the students at the University of California. Shooting everyone. Now, he says, you never know who wants his picture taken. Sometimes a man walking alone will approach him and ask for a dozen pictures, $15 a dozen. Recently a man and a dog posed on Stockton Street. The man wanted a dozen pictures. In the old days, he says, everyone wanted a dozen pictures. That's when cameras were so new and mysterious. Now when Joe Selle stands on the corner, he is elbowed by tourists, with good expensive cameras, shooting their friends and family. In the boom days there were amateurs with box cameras, too, but the fly-by-nighters, he says, were driven off by the hand-bill ordinance and a bonding system to protect the consumer.

There used to be dozens of street photographers out here in the old days. Joe Selle is the only one left. All the frauds and the phonies, and the few other professionals, have come and gone. Now the living's good, he says. If he makes lunch money he's happy, and then there's the joy of seeing the old people on the street and discussing the ones who've passed this way and won't pass again. You can spot the old people; they're the ones who still dress up to come downtown. Some have cigars peeping out of their vest pockets and gold chains across their tummies. Some tap Joe on the shoulder and say, "You don't remember me, but you took my picture when I was at Cal." He used to shoot commencement day at Berkeley. "All white-headed now," he says.

People smile at him, as if he were as strange as an old wooden horse on a merry-go-round. But he's for real, his big hands motioning clientele, offering tickets . . . "A motion picture of you has just been taken." In a couple of hours he'll take his lunch around the corner at Day's or down near his office at The Main Stem, and he'll go for a swim at the Elk's Club on Post Street — he can see the open windows of the building from his working corner.

Tomorrow, he says, he is off to Sonoma, driving up in the air-conditioned car with Augusta, going to fix some fences and mend some barns.

The day after that he'll turn on the old Emerson radio in the darkroom and do some printing, and then, when the pavement warms up, near noon, he'll hit the streets with the old DeVry. □