

# My Father's Photos

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After my father passed away in 2014, I was at the family home in Aomori sorting through his belongings, when I discovered some prints and a small number of negatives in a closet. I was surprised, because my father had said he had no more remaining photographs worthy of showing anybody. The prints showed Aomori people from about seventy years prior, and were passed on to the Aomori Prefectural Museum for safekeeping, as historical materials. As for the negatives, whose contents we could not make out, these were simply left in the closet.

Then in 2018, as I was sorting through luggage ahead of my mother's move to a residential facility, I discovered more than ten color negatives, or slides, in the corner of a drawer. These were quite dusty, but somehow still able to be developed by a photo studio on request. The scenes they showed were of my elder brother as a one-year-old with our mother, the *To-o Nippo* newspaper's offices, and working people, presumably in the city of Aomori.

My mother's great pleasure at seeing these photographs prompted a curiosity—perhaps those other negatives contained further interesting material? And so another, fuller search of the closet began, unearthing boxes and boxes of barely covered negatives.

I could not see how we could develop such a large quantity of film, but my husband (a TV cameraman) suggested digitization rather than printing, and promptly bought the necessary equipment and took it upon himself to scan the images. All of the negatives were sent to Tokyo, where my husband worked tirelessly at scanning them, while I nursed my mother in Aomori. She was delighted when shown the pictures my husband would send. Since my father never spoke much of his photography at home, and quite some time had passed since he stopped taking pictures, these images evoked nostalgic memories for her.

Most of the images were digitized by year's end, and we were able to show many of these to my mother while she was still well. As a family, we had discussed how nice it would be to eventually have a published collection, but this was left to one side as my mother's condition deteriorated.

In 2019, my mother passed away. I returned to work, yet due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the resulting Emergency Declaration, my work was cancelled. So I unexpectedly had some time on my hands, taking the opportunity to set up an Instagram account under my father's name, where I started to share his photographs.

Many of the pictures date from the early 1950s, and appear to be snapshots taken en route to work at *To-o Nippo* in Shinmachi from the house in Kitakanazawa where he lived before he was married, or from Okidate, where I grew up. Prior to purchasing a car, it seems my father walked to work each day, with his camera. Others pictures may come from vacations taken with photographer friends, or during breaks on news assignments, but we can only guess.

During that time, between 1951 and 1957, my father submitted his work to magazines such as *CAMERA* (ARS Publishing) and *Nippon Camera* (Nippon Camera Company) where it was highly rated, frequently being selected for monthly features judged by the likes of Ken Domon, Ihei Kimura, and Hiroshi Hamaya. When these men visited Aomori on photography tours, my father would accompany them as a guide. He was invited to Tokyo for a ‘Gathering around Ihei Kimura & Ken Domon: Top 10 Prizewinners’ Symposium as part of a feature in the January 1954 edition of *CAMERA*. Yet he later told me he felt he could not measure up to the other young artists there, who were engaging in high-minded debates on social issues, while he came from a poor family, lacked academic qualifications, and was only capable of taking snapshots around Aomori. And although he was making a name for himself in the photographic magazines, after a while he began to struggle to reconcile this with his main job as a newspaper photographer, and so abruptly stopped submitting his work. In other words, he decided to give up his artistic aspirations as a photographer, and to remain in Aomori. Given this, releasing my father’s work now in this way may not accord with his own wishes. Yet, the fact that the negatives remained for decades in a closet suggests that they were important to him; he could not abandon them.

I decided as a daughter to release my father’s work because I myself thought they were fine photographs, and wished for them to be seen by many people. And if people should discover their old selves and their families in those pictures, deriving joy and nostalgia from them, then I think my father would be happy too. I also felt grateful to think that this release might help to attract information about the period and locations of the photographs, enabling a deeper appreciation of them, and provide an opportunity to examine the history of the region.

To my surprise, the Instagram account has drawn a large response from overseas, suggesting these photographs resonate even for people who do not know Aomori. I have been particularly touched to receive comments from the many followers in Santiago, Chile, saying “this looks just like my own village today.” I believe there is something powerful in these photographs, that they are able to bring joy to many people internationally, vividly and wordlessly conveying the social setting of the Tohoku region at that time, and some of the forgotten culture of Aomori.

In Aomori immediately after the war, it seems hardly anybody possessed a camera. Given

this context, I do not know how it was that my father, still only in his 20s, could become drawn so passionately towards photography, yet he worked and worked until he finally managed to acquire a camera himself. Film cannot have been cheap either. My father's photos convey a youthful energy and joy, just to step into town and snap whatever he happened to see.

It is also striking that so many smiles are pictured. Although people at that time were not accustomed to photography, perhaps my father addressed and approached them with a smile before snapping them.

As I recall my father, he was like many Japanese men of that time—practically a workaholic; barely taking a break 365 days a year; not saying much, certainly not about his work; not one to chat casually around the house. When he did speak, he could be abrupt and stern, and I imagine he may have struggled in his social life. Morning and evening he would go sea fishing; at home he specially made a greenhouse where he would immerse himself in cultivating orchids and chrysanthemums; these were the solitary hobbies which he loved. So it is hard to imagine my father chatting and smiling as he took photographs, but these pictures show me what he was like as a young man.

After he stopped taking photos, my father would go sea fishing every single day, in rain or snow, by the ferry port or lumber yard. Rockfish, Japanese halfbeak, horse mackerel, black porgy—he enjoyed drying or pickling his catches and offering them to the neighbors. He continued even after he became unwell, his fishing companions accompanying him. When he became immobile, he still continued to watch programs about fishing and the sea. (He loved the NHK's serial morning drama *Amachan* but was angry when its setting moved away from the Sanriku coast—they stopped showing the sea!) For the funeral, the funeral director heard about this and kindly decorated the altar with flowers in an ocean-like design, and even prepared a display showing leaping fish. The casket travelled specially by the seafront route to the crematorium.

Finally, a little over a year since the initial release on Instagram, that it has been possible to put on exhibitions and publish a book has been thanks to the many people who have kindly offered their support. With this encouragement, I have been able to continue posting the images from day to day. I offer my heartfelt thanks. I am delighted that my father's photos are available for your enjoyment.

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