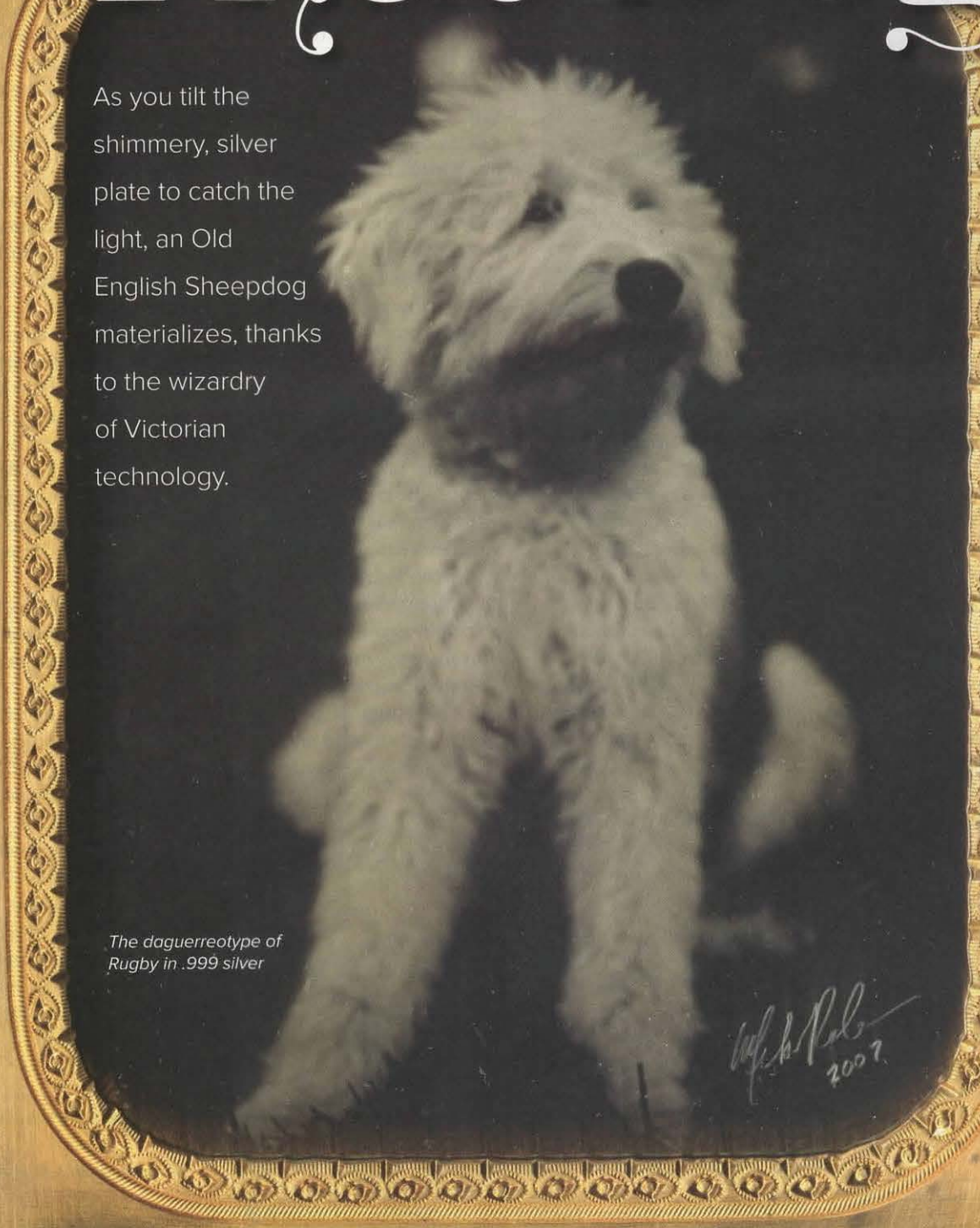
That Dog

As you tilt the shimmery, silver plate to catch the light, an Old English Sheepdog materializes, thanks to the wizardry of Victorian technology.



The daguerreotype of Rugby in .999 silver

By
Brian Patrick Duggan

Rugby between exposures and developing sessions

in the Daguerreotype

The Old English Sheepdogs in *The Shaggy Dog* (1959) and *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (1960) fascinated young Mike Medhurst and he always knew he'd have his own someday. Aware of this, a good friend gave an OES to Mike and his wife, Linda, on their wedding day in 1982. Six months later, the couple got another. Frodo and Sam cemented the Medhursts' fondness for the people-loving breed and they've been hooked ever since.

Since 1991, Medhurst has been a passionate collector, dealer, and appraiser of 19th-century daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and paper images, and delights in discovering fine images of dogs. Through a common interest in historical photography, Medhurst became friends with Mike Robinson, Ph.D., a master artisan-photographer from Toronto who makes modern daguerreotypes—exquisitely detailed, black-and-white images on highly polished, silver-coated copper plates.

Mike Robinson focuses the lens before inserting the sensitized plate into the camera.

OPPOSITE: COURTESY MIKE ROBINSON'S CENTURY DARKROOM; THIS PAGE: COURTESY MIKE & LINDA MEDHURST

In 2007, both men were going to the annual meeting of The Daguerreian Society, in Kansas City, Missouri (near the Medhursts' home). The couple thought it would be wonderful to have a daguerreotype portrait of Rugby, their 6-month-old OES. Robinson pulled up in a truck loaded with a hand-built mahogany, rosewood, and brass camera, along with a tripod, boxes of silver plates, chemicals in glass bottles, a portable darkroom, and a very necessary fume hood.

Young Rugby's Daguerreotype

One of the earliest photos of a dog dates to the mid-1840s—a spaniel dozing in the English sun. In the very early days of photography, to make a good image of a dog (or child) during the long exposure, the subject had to be obedient, tuckered out, or asleep. Some photographers were known to position a covered birdcage with a canary just off-camera where an assistant revealed the chirping bird during the exposure to engage the dog's gaze. (Of course, owners held the dog's attention with treats—a technique that never gets old.)

In preparation, Medhurst put Rugby through a week-long, intensive course in sitting and staying put. How long Rugby needed to be still would depend upon the quality of the sunlight. His wife bathed and brushed the youngster to look his best for "picture day."

Rugby's two-image session was an elaborate and painstaking process and took a couple of hours from start to finish. Once Robinson sensitized a silver plate, he had only 15 minutes to make the exposure. With the tripod-mounted camera and Rugby in position, after framing and focusing the image, he inserted the plate into the camera.

Picture day turned out to be bright and breezy,

Gift to the World

When Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre perfected his photographic process, there were other experimenters working privately with different methods and degrees of success. However, Daguerre's technique of capturing a likeness on a light-sensitive, silver-clad plate was the first practical, commercial photographic method. In 1839, he gave his rights to the process to the French government in exchange for lifetime pensions for himself and the son of his deceased partner. As a gift to the world, France magnanimously made public the instructions. As the new art of photography was faster and cheaper than commissioning an oil painting, Daguerre's invention instantly democratized portraiture and people flocked to "daguerreian rooms." With portrait exposures taking from seconds to minutes (depending upon the light), a sitter's head had to be steadied with a hidden stand—fidgety dogs were a definite challenge.

Dave Rambow and his first 19th century camera

The silver photographs have incredible resolution and wonderful tonal range despite the image being only microns deep. Because it is exposed directly onto the silvered plate, the picture is reversed, as a photographic negative would be, but each of these photographic jewels is unique—a captured moment in time. The successful daguerreotypist was equal parts artist, craftsman, and chemist.

Mike Robinson cautions that the sensitizing, developing, and fixing chemicals—iodine, bromine, fuming mercury, and gold chloride—are just as toxic today as they were in Daguerre's time and not safe for amateurs. The daguerreotype's heyday lasted only about 16 years. It began to be superseded in the mid-1850s by new photographic processes on glass and paper. These lacked the stunning quality of Daguerre's methods but were less expensive and somewhat easier to make.

Daguerreotype of a proud owner and his Old English Sheepdog—dating to 1848; it is the oldest known photograph of the breed.

so both men worried not only about Rugby twitching but that his blowing mop of fur might cause additional blur. Judgment and timing were going to be critical. With plenty of sun, they would start with a one-second exposure—far longer than the average camera phone snapshot, which is typically a fraction of that. With his wife making grooming touch-ups, Medhurst stood behind photographer and camera. Rugby, who liked to perform, was attending to the *sit-stay* command while Robinson watched for the magic moment. When the breeze slackened and Rugby was perfectly still, he deftly removed the lens cap, counted "one-one-thousand," and refitted it. Rugby was told to relax with *OK!*

Securing the exposed plate in its light-tight holder, Robinson removed it and moved to the fume hood. After several minutes of chemical manipulations, the silver image materialized—but due to the bright sunshine Rugby's white fur was overexposed, making him a ghostly Old English Sheepdog. They started the whole process over. (It's worth noting that hundreds of thoughtfully composed digital pictures can be taken in the time it takes to complete one daguerreotype).

This time, a half-second exposure was perfect. The

Sepia Christmas greetings from Dave and Scout

Medhursts were delighted and a few days later the clean dog was happily rolling in mud. Rugby's portrait is one of only two known daguerreotypes of Old English Sheepdogs and Medhurst owns the other, dating

TOP & BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY DAVID C. RAMBOW; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY MIKE & LINDA MEDHURST COLLECTION

to 1848—arguably the oldest photo of that breed!

Rugby lived over 13 years and is gone now, but his portrait is protected under glass in a traditional daguerreotype case of wood, leather, and velvet. It is still treasured by Mike and Linda Medhurst.

Paper fades and digital photo files can be corrupted, but with a bit of proper care, Rugby in silver will be as vibrant 200 years from now as he was on the day he did his best-ever *sit-stay.* **FD**

Brian Patrick Duggan is the award-winning author of General Custer, Libbie Custer and their Dogs: A Passion for Hounds from the Civil War to Little Bighorn. *He writes about canine history and is the editor for McFarland Publishers'* Dogs in Our World *series. Brian is currently working on a book about dogs in horror movies.*

Rugby's daguerreotype session can be seen on Mike Medhurst's website: *mikemedhurst.com* under the "Traveling Daguerreotypist" tab.

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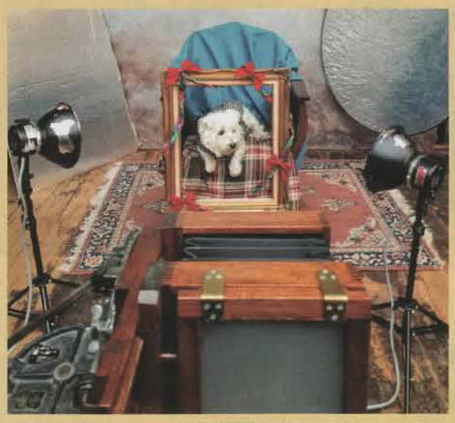
COURTESY DAVID C. RAMBOW

The Christmas Dog Tintype

Dave Rambow and his dog, Scout, are frequently in period costume at Civil War reenactments (well, Scout has a period collar). As a photographer, Rambow creates modern "tintypes"—wet-plate, collodion portraits of contemporary Yankees and Rebels, but he's also the manager of the historic H.H. Bennett Photography Studio *(shop.wisconsinhistory.org/tintype-experience)* in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin.

In 1999, well into his career as a museum professional, Rambow was fortunate enough to have learned the wet-plate process by a self-taught photographer considered to be a living link to the nearly lost art. It took two years for Rambow to equip himself and gain enough experience to hang out his shingle. Over 20 years later, his singular talents have even been commissioned by Hollywood when prop tintypes of Western film characters are needed.



The studio setup with lights, wet-plate camera, and Poppy for the Wisconsin Historical Society holiday greeting card

Correctly known as ferrotypes, these inexpensive photographs on thin iron plates became popular in the late 1850s. Tintypes lacked the image resolution of previous methods but were very cheap, so many soldiers and their families (dogs, too) had their portraits made in studios or by traveling photographers during the Civil War and in the decades after. Heat and wind can be an adverse factor for the photographer, as the collodion exposure must be made quickly while the plate is still wet with sensitizing chemicals—and chance also plays its part. Each plate must go through 15 minutes of developing and fixing to see if it turned out well.

Ranbow comments on the lack of tintypes of Scout, "As you might expect, a terrier just has too many important things to do and think about to sit still for three to six seconds. Recently, he has slowed down a little bit (he's 12 this year) but it is still quite rare to get a nice, clean image of him." However, for the Wisconsin Historical Society's Christmas card in 2019, Ranbow made a festive tintype of Poppy, a calmer rescue dog, but resorted to an electronic flash to greatly shorten the exposure time for the restless pooch.

The patient but fidgety Poppy in tintype