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Classic photo booths still churn out memories

September 28, 2009 By The Associated Press RYAN KOST (Associated Press Writer)



Photo credit: AP | This photo taken Sept. 18, 2009 shows photo strips of Evelyn Weston taken in an old-fashioned photo booth in Portland, Ore. The old-fashioned booths are back in vogue in some American cities, like Portland, where one particular booth gets a regular daily workout.(AP Photo/Don Ryan)

photos



PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — In a corner of the airy, wood-paneled lobby at the Ace Hotel stands a big black booth with a curtain for an entrance and a mirror with delicate script that reads: "You are beautiful."

Two young girls duck inside. Who are they to argue? They sit on a pedestal, pay \$4 and wait. POP — a flash goes off. POP. POP. POP.

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A machine inside whirs and clicks, and clicks some more. They wait, like hundreds of other people every week, for it to spit out a slender strip of paper with four little pictures in black and white.

Photo booths — the old-school, dunk-and-dry kind — are at the same time ubiquitous and endangered. The experience of waiting for that strip, small little moments in time, is nearly universal, yet the classic-style booths are hard to hunt down.

The boxes, full of wires from disparate decades, aren't in production any longer. A Web site devoted to the booths puts the number at about 200 in the [United States](#) and about 300 worldwide. No doubt there are more of them out there, gone unreported and possibly unused, but whatever the number is, it's only going down.

They're being steadily replaced by digital booths. In the classics — both black and white and color — an image is projected onto a single strip of photo paper and then developed as you wait. The digital doesn't get much fancier than a home set up. A camera takes your photo, a printer sends it on out.

The difference between the two is becoming less and less discernible, at least as far as quality and waiting time are concerned. But enthusiasts of the older booths, dependent on photo chemicals, will tell you something gets lost in the transition from grains to pixels.

Their future relies largely on people like Will Simmonds. He owns Photobooth Services, which operates classic booths in [Seattle](#), Portland and [Hawaii](#). He bought the business, a fleet of 25 booths, about five years ago. Despite all the practical concerns about maintaining aging machines that are out of production, the booths keep finding patrons.

Simmonds has about doubled the number he owns. He has increased his booths in Portland from one to 11. There are more than just those, of course, operated by different hands than his.

It's not an easy thing to keep them running — "You're always scrounging for parts," he says — but in the right location, a booth can take hundreds of images a week and gross nearly a thousand bucks.

"You can go into a really happening bar where we have a classic photo booth, and there's a line of people who are waiting to jump in with digital cameras in their hands and phone cameras," Simmonds says. "That doesn't make sense. It shouldn't work."

But it does. Why?

"You're asking the guy behind the desk why people are using them," he says, suggesting I ask the people who are using them instead.

The front door of the Ace Hotel opens. A mom, her 2-year-old daughter and a baby sitter walk in. The child and sitter step inside the photo booth, and the light flashes through the curtains.

"I just like the old black-and-white photo booths," says Posy Quarterman as she watches her daughter, Frances Rudy, totter around the lobby. "It's just classic. I know that's cheesy."

She looks over the photos and smiles.

"See, they're awful and washed out," she says. "And I love them."

The very first photo booth appeared in 1925 on New York City's Broadway, between 51st and 52nd streets.

A Siberian immigrant, who struck up a childhood romance with photography and never left it behind, figured out how to rig a machine that would produce a series of photos on a small piece of paper, no negative needed.

Reports from the time say thousands would show up each day. For 25 cents they'd get a small piece of themselves back, a memory of a birthday, a first kiss, a graduation.

The machines have changed. But maybe the motivations haven't.

"They're spontaneous, there's no preview, there's no delete, you don't have any idea how they're going to come out," says Brian Meacham, one of two men who run Photobooth.net, which keeps tabs on the machines.

"It is fascinating that it does still have some kind of voice," adds Tim Garrett, Meacham's partner. "People are more uninhibited. There's no photographer looking through the lens."

These two men — Meacham out of [Los Angeles](#) and Garrett out of [St. Louis](#) — are doing what they can to prop up the fading industry.

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Photobooth.net features artists and galleries that have somehow come to cross paths with photo booths, in addition to keeping up their catalog. They've also helped organize the annual photo booth convention. And Garrett runs PhotoboothStL, which rents the booths for weddings and other occasions.

"The health of the photochemical photo booth industry, as it were, is declining, to put it nicely," Meacham said.

Garrett adds: "They're a real pain when compared to digital photo booths. It just doesn't make sense unless you really love them. It's kind of an industry fueled by love."

Then he laughs. "That sounds pretty cheesy."

—

On a recent Friday evening, the Ace Hotel photo booth produced a strip of photos for Bernadette and Todd Donovan.

It probably wouldn't look like much to just anybody. The couple have fun in the photos, but they don't do anything too spectacular. And yet, as they study the photo, their smiles broaden.

"The first one, look at your face!" Bernadette says. "Aww, that's cute. That one's my favorite."

They were about to wrap up a cross-country road trip. It's not so much about the pictures themselves, they said. That strip, it's a memory.

—

Evelyn Weston pushes a key into a small hole just to the left of the photo booth camera. The case cracks open.

The inside of a photo booth is a mess of gears and springs and wires and dust. The machines need constant loving. Chemicals age, water evaporates and the images grow murkier.

"I'm gonna need to change these chemicals pretty soon," Weston says. "It's getting a little hairy in there."

She has worked for Photobooth Services for about three years. She maintains all the booths in Oregon. She knows these machines better than anybody else.

Give her a strip and she'll tell you, within a guess or two, which booth it's from.

Each time Weston adjusts a machine she has to take a set of test pictures, sometimes two. She has thousands of them at home. The best ones she puts in a box. There was the time she brought a plant in with her, the time she dressed up like an Egyptian pharaoh, the time she brought in a pair of oversized scissors.

After she has filled the chemicals and the door is shut, she takes her place before the camera. The box lights up.

"Photos Delivered Here in 3 Minutes," the sign over the photo drop reads.

"I think it's a little bit longer. It's like 3 1/2," Weston says. She pauses. "It's less than five."

—

Sara Kemple looks over her shoulder at the machine.

"Is it there?" she asks. "No."

Kemple, 21, is waiting with her friend, Lauren Karcey, 19, for a set of photos they just took. The booths are fun, they say. Uninhibited. Random. Old-fashioned.

"You have to wait for it, too," Kemple says. "It's not instant."

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Silence.

Then she responds, "A good thing."

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