

Rolling down the years

Roll film is today a non-topic – there's 120, and that's it, no further knowledge required. But at one time there existed a multitude of roll film formats, 26 distinct varieties according to one authority, which were culled mainly in the 1940's and 50's, and what is left can be counted on one hand.



Kodak no. 4 camera, taking the mighty 5" wide '123' format (discontinued 1949) and yielding 5 x 4" images. Contrasted with normal 120 and 127 films.

But the whole roll system was a legacy left by Kodak, dating back to the dawn of consumer photography, and what we're left with is a mere appendix of what was on the market a century ago.

The first Kodak roll film camera was a 'back to base' model, taking 100 pictures on film which had to be factory loaded and exchanged, so there was no requirement to code the film inside it. The breakthrough was the daylight loading system of 1891, using film wound up with backing paper overprinted with frame numbers, exactly as used in remaining roll films still used today. There were only a few models of these earliest roll film Kodak cameras, and the films supplied to fit them had the cameras they were intended to fit printed on the cartons. As the camera market developed exponentially in the following few years some sort of syntax was required, as not all films for the same size pictures could be used interchangeably, and both image size and camera model had to be specified.

So straightforward 3 digit numbering was initiated, beginning with 101, which was allocated to the film used in the 1895 Kodak Bullet Camera. Numbers 106 through to 129 had been used up by 1913, after which time the system started to break down and haphazard logic was the order of the day. In 1916 a miniature box camera was introduced using unperforated 35mm roll film taken from cine stock and coded '35'. However the '135' code was given to perforated 35mm film when it eventually came out in cassettes in 1934. The idea of using the prefix number as indicating exposures was initiated in the 620 and 616 cameras of 1931, which employed a smaller diameter spool to allow the use of a smaller camera body. By the time the cameras came to market the number of exposures had been increased to 8, but the '6' endures there to this day.

All coding, spool design and dimensions were initiated by Kodak, although there were one or two rather abortive attempts by other manufacturers to hijack the system for their own ends. The British 'Amalgamated Photographic Manufacturers' company came up with 'Rajar no. 6' film, a spool similar to 120 but with a protruding square drive slot, and this was of course designed to be the only spool to fit their own camera. It didn't take long for 120 adapters to be devised, and the format died.

The design of the spool at first was a wooden core fitted with crimped on metal flanges. Later the flanges were spot-welded onto a metal core, while modern spools are extruded plastic. Possibly the costs of changing the spool from metal to plastic was what dealt the death knell for most roll formats, which dropped away especially quickly through the 1940's to 1960's.

One or two of these long-gone roll film sizes have a certain resonance with today however. The '122' format, dropped in 1971 was postcard size, 3.25 x 5.5" – what a wonderful format for contact printing. In the present age, when Lomos and Holgas are being used for their novelty value, would there not be great interest in a modern budget priced super-size roll film camera? It wouldn't be impossible to recreate a format, and at the time of writing there are good supplies once again of Efke '127' the little brother of 120, giving a new lease of life to all those 'Baby Rolleiflex' cameras out there, which should be used, not collected.

Web references;

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_format
- <http://www.nwmangum.com/Kodak/FilmHist.html>