

Blinded in Beating, Photographer Still Presses a Crusade

By DEIRDRE CARMODY

It is 40 years now since W. Eugene Smith used to dash out of the classroom, clutching his camera, when the great brownish pallor that presages a dust storm would start its sweep across the Kansas sky. In the years since then, his photographs of World War II—recording the bloody invasions of Tara-

wa, Guam and Iwo Jima—and his intense photo-journalistic essays have ranked him among the greatest living photographers.

In the last two-and-a-half years, Eugene Smith and his Japanese-American wife, Aileen, have been living in the Japanese fishing village of Minamata. They have become passionately involved in exposing and photograph-

ing the death and anguish caused by the mercury poisoning of residents who ate fish from the polluted waters there. The Smiths are now completing a book about it.

On July 7, 1972, during the course of a protest against the Chisso Corporation, a chemical company in Minamata that had been dumping industrial waste into the water, Mr. Smith was severe-

ly beaten by six men. As a result of his injuries, he is now almost entirely blind.

Two weeks ago his condition worsened considerably. His failing vision disappeared and he was suffused with such violent pain that he kept blacking out.

"The pain is constant," he said the other day. "At the worst of it, I contemplated suicide."

Colleagues Are Helpful

He telephoned from Minamata to Jim Hughes, editor of Camera 35, a photography magazine at 132 West 31st Street, which devoted most of its April issue to the photographs and text by Mr. Smith and his wife on the Minamata tragedies.

"Gene called me and told me that he was going blind, that he was desperate, impotent and that he is penniless," Mr. Hughes said.

It was the middle of the night, but Mr. Hughes began telephoning photographers all over the country. He finally reached Lawrence Schiller, a former photographer and now a publisher, who says he has been "very much emotionally moved" by Mr. Smith's work even though he has never met him.

Mr. Schiller called a friend in Tokyo and, although it was then after 2 P.M. on a Friday, the friend made a frantic round of banks and government offices before they closed for the weekend and obtained visas, airplane tickets and money necessary to bring Mr. Smith here for treatment. Then, when it became evident that Mr. Smith could not make the trip to New York alone, Paul Fusco, a photographer and an old friend, flew to Japan from California, went to Minamata and picked up Mr. Smith,

then immediately turned around and accompanied him back here.

Mr. Smith is now being treated by Dr. John J. Lalli, an osteopath. As a result of the beating, the vertebrae in Mr. Smith's neck have been jammed together so that they are pinching two nerves and a blood vessel and preventing the flow of blood to his eyes.

In addition, the muscles that control the fingers in his left hand were also affected and he cannot raise his hands high enough to use his camera.

Beaten at Plant

The beating occurred when Mr. Smith, his wife and some of the victims of the poisoning were waiting to see a union leader at the Chisso Company. According to Mr. Smith, he was suddenly surrounded, kicked in the stomach and then slammed across a chair. The six men grabbed his legs and swung him—like a cat, he says—onto the cement courtyard. He landed on his neck as his assailants jumped on him.

He said he did not press charges because he did not want to divert attention from the crusade to get Chisso to concede its moral and financial obligations to the victims. The company newspaper later said that Mr. Smith's injuries were caused by cameras swinging about his neck.

Pain is not new to Mr. Smith, who is now 55 years old. He has survived six plane crashes and a number of battles when he shuttled from invasion to invasion during his wartime coverage for "Life" magazine. He was severely wounded at Okinawa and unable even to pick up a camera for two years thereafter.

Then one day he had the urgent realization that he must get back to work and he became obsessed with the thought that his first photograph should be a success. Painfully, he followed his two children, aged 3 and 5, outdoors and took what was to become perhaps his most famous photograph, "The Walk to Paradise Garden." It shows the children toddling purposefully off into a wooded glen filled with sunlight and it was used as the concluding picture in the "Family of Man" exhibition staged by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

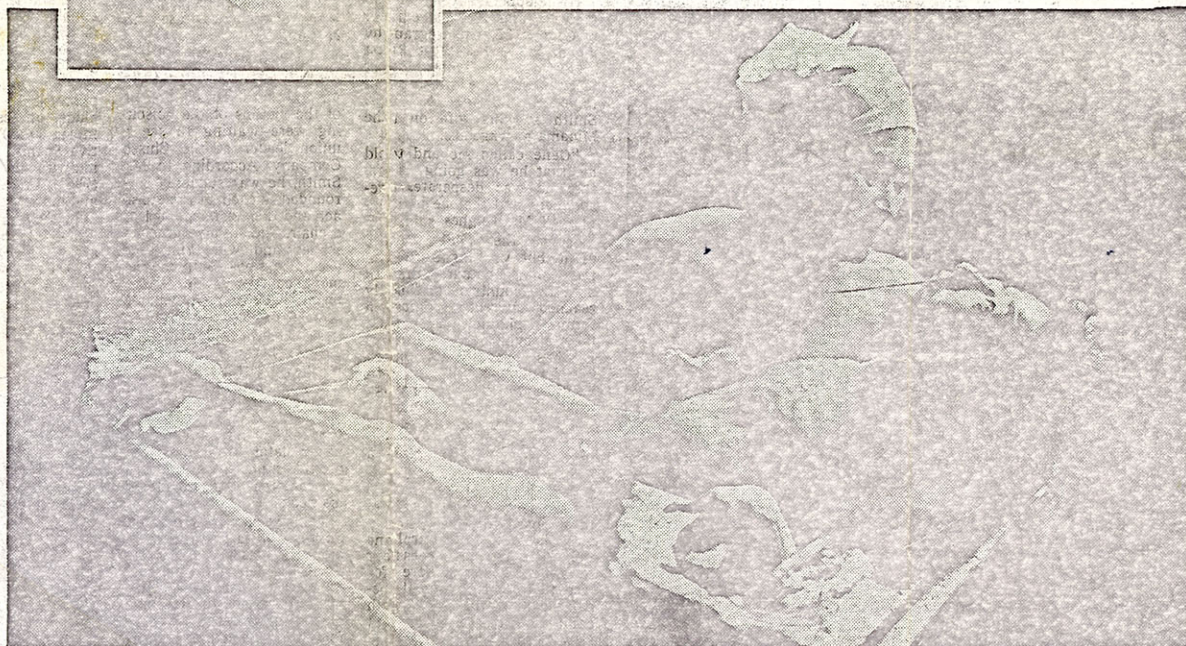
Some of his memorable photographs for "Life" include an essay on Welsh miners (1950); life in a primitive Spanish village (1951); a midwife in North Carolina (1951); Dr. Albert Schweitzer and his work in Africa (1954).

In 1955, after he had left "Life," he began a massive essay on Pittsburgh. "In Pittsburgh, when you could see the moon, it meant poverty because the mines were still and the people were out of work," Mr. Smith recalled the other day. "They were trying to clear up the city so that you could have the moon and prosperity at the same time."

A Victim Remembered

Mr. Smith first went to Minamata, which is on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu, in 1971 with his 21-year-old bride.

"We did not go to take sides, although it became pretty obvious which side we would end up on," he said. "We rented a small place for \$9 a month where the first recognized victim of the Minamata disease had lived. It was a child—about five years old—and when she died, they were too poor to bury her. When the money settlement came through later, one of their first acts was to dig up the bones and



This picture by W. Eugene Smith, of a mother with her girl, 16, born retarded, paralyzed, blind and deaf, is considered by its maker, top, to be one of his strongest. The girl's illness resulted from her mother's having been poisoned by mercury in fish that fed on chemical waste discharged into the water at Minamata, Japan. The picture was taken shortly before Mr. Smith was beaten, virtually blinded and disabled at chemical plant.

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The disease had caused death, brain damage, paralysis, loss of hearing, speech and sight to the bewildered residents of Minamata. It had attacked fetuses in the womb, who were born damaged for life, and there were instances when the mysterious sickness caused by the organic mercury waste impelled humans and animals suddenly to spin into a frenzied dance of death.

The disease, which is now officially called Minamata disease, was first observed in 1951. The dumping was discontinued in 1968, when the old process was replaced by a newer one, and Chisso has since paid a total of \$3.6-million to 138 plaintiffs representing 30 families. Mr. Smith contends that there may actually be as many as 10,000 people affected by the disease.

'That Damn Beating'

The other day Mr. Smith who has been profoundly moved by the anguish of Minamata, held up the photograph of a moon-faced, young Japanese girl, who is a victim of the disease, and he read from his forthcoming book:

"Jitsuko-Chan... a breathing, haunting, beautiful 19 year old young lady who will never know a lover... She cannot walk. She cannot talk. It is said if she were to fall into a fire, she would not realize her pain.

"Jitsuko-Chan: no involvement with a human being reacting to their world even has disturbed me as do you," he read, and as he read, his voice broke.

"That damn beating," he said. "It gets all the publicity and I think it can be used against the Japanese, whom I love."

"But really and truly, all I want is to get my Minamata book done," he said. "None of this stuff about 'dying with his boots on' or 'He was a photographer until his dying day.' We just must finish that book."