

Weegee

As an adult, Weegee did not forget the cold-water tenements on Manhattan's Lower East Side where he came of age. He would come back with his camera to memorialize them as they were: overcrowded, freezing in the winter and sweltering in the summer (when children slept on fire escapes), subject to murderous fires, and witness to numerous murders. Weegee arrived in New York in 1910 when his family emigrated from Austria. He was born Usher Fellig; his name was changed to Arthur by an immigration officer at Ellis Island. His father sold merchandise from a pushcart and later became a rabbi. The young Weegee sold candy after school to help support his family and dropped out of school at the age of fourteen to find full-time work.

It was about this time that Weegee discovered photography through a street tintype operator, and sent away for his own kit. After three months of making portraits on the street, he found work as a factotum in a studio on Grand Street, where he spent two years doing odd jobs, finally becoming a camera operator. About the age of eighteen, he tried to set himself up in business: he walked the Lower East Side with a pony named Hypo, on whom he would pose neighborhood children, make their portraits, and try to sell the prints to their parents.

Although business was good, it was not adequate to keep the pony in hay, and Weegee soon found himself out of work. Over the next several years, he took a variety of odd jobs, working as a busboy in Automats or in candy factories and sleeping in Bowery flophouses. Eventually, he landed a job in a passport studio near the Customs House, where he worked for nearly three years.

Weegee's life as a photojournalist began at the age of twenty-four, when he left the passport studio and signed on with Acme Newspictures (later United Press International Photos). He worked initially in the darkroom, then began to receive night assignments, primarily covering fires when the regular photographers were off duty. It was during his Acme days that he was nicknamed Weegee (after the contemporaneous craze for the Ouija board) for his seemingly psychic ability to find stories and get photos first to the wire services.

Weegee left Acme in 1935 and began the most productive years of his life as a free-lance photographer. He stationed himself at Manhattan Police Headquarters, from which he covered the nightly murders, fires, and accidents. By day, he peddled his pictures to the newspapers and the wire services. He rented a room on the street behind police headquarters; to be first on a story, he had the room wired to pick up signals from the police radio dispatcher and alarms from the fire station. Later, he was

given permission to have a police radio in his car, a privilege he shared only with Walter Winchell, the newspaperman who became the father of the gossip column.

Between disasters, Weegee worked the nightclubs in Harlem, openings at the Metropolitan Opera, the beach at Coney Island, and the goings-on at Sammy's. He described this bar-cum-cabaret on the Bowery as "the poor man's Stork Club"; it was a place where the truly down-and-out rubbed shoulders with those just down for the evening. Beginning in 1940, Weegee added *PM*, the left-leaning picture newspaper and weekly magazine, to his list of regular clients. *PM* made him staff photographer and put him on a retainer, but Weegee chose his own stories.

Weegee enjoyed his greatest success in the 1940s. He was included in *Action Photography* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. He had his first solo exhibition the next year at the Photo League; it was called *Weegee: Murder Is My Business*. His first book, *Naked City*, appeared in 1945; it contained many of his most memorable images of New York—of the Lower East Side, of Sammy's, of Coney Island, of murders, fires, and paddy wagons, but also of Frank Sinatra and the Metropolitan Opera. Weegee arranged to have the publication party at Sammy's, where food and drink were on the house.

Naked City brought Weegee even more attention. The book was reviewed in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. *Vogue* offered him work, covering society affairs and doing off-beat fashion photography. In 1947, Weegee was made special consultant on a film, *Weegee's New York*, based on *Naked City* and shot in New York. After it was finished in 1948, Weegee moved to Hollywood, looking for new worlds to conquer; this proved his undoing as a photojournalist. Instead, he became an actor and an advisor on special photographic effects for films, notably on Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1958). He developed various kinds of trick photography, making caricatures of stars and, later, of political personalities. Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, he was back and forth between Hollywood and New York, with occasional forays to Europe on film or still-photography assignments. He died in 1968 in New York.

Solo shows of Weegee's work were mounted by ICP, New York, in 1977, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1984.

Source: Weegee, *An Autobiography by Weegee* (New York: Ziff-Davis, 1961).

Photo: Photographer unknown, *Weegee*. Courtesy Wilma Wilcox, The Weegee Collection.