Just at Sunset

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EACH EVENING ... JUST AT SUNSET ... Nature unveils a new work of art on her broad canvas of western sky. With the wind as her brush, she continually changes the clouds and colors in this kaleidoscope of wondrous beauty. Look quickly for it will soon be gone.

Spring is yellow. And just as each evening brings new scenes, each season secs a change, too. Spring's early displays frequently feature some form of bright yellow or light pink because the atmosphere is relatively dust free. Late spring sunsets tend toward richer pinks and reds as atmospheric dust a< cumulates. But whatever the dust content, sunset colons nearest the horizon are usually reddish, with yellow slightly higher.

Summer is red. Summer often finds the sun cither sliding down the sky in a fiery red ball behind a curtain of haze or slipping into a pocket of thin clouds. Dust and haze — so prevalent in summer — are responsible for the extreme redness of the sun at this time of year. The haze and dust particles scatter the sun's light and cut off many of the short wave length colors, such as blue and purple, from the earth's surface. Because the yellow and red rays have longer wave lengths, they are able to penetrate the earth's dusty atmosphere.

During summer months the common phrase "Red sky at night, sailor's delight..." is frequently heard. An older version of this, spoken by Jesus, is recorded in Matthew 16:2 — "When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red."

The truth of these statements lies in the fact that there is clear weather to the west and an absence of moisture in the air. Since weather systems move from west to east in this part of the world, this means fair weather is on the way. However, if air to the west is laden with moisture, the sun may appear gray — a warning of rain.

Autumn sunsets are much like those of summer at first, but as the sun slides farther south they become more like those of winter. Many light shades of all colors form striking designs, each seemingly more beautiful than the one before. Each a wonder in itself.

Clouds: autumn aids. The most beautiful designs are formed only when clouds are present. Cirrus clouds often make the most colorful sunset displays. Swirling in from a height of 25,000 to slightly over 50,000 feet, these clouds are composed of ice crystals and are the highest forming type of clouds. Their wispy curls are an added attraction to the creamy look the sun's light ordinarily gives them.

Cirrus clouds also give magnificent beauty to the sunsets of late fall and winter. At this time of year the sun is near its southernmost position in the sky, and is directly in the path of cirrus clouds as they spiral up the south-western horizon of storm systems. The ice crystals in these thin clouds diffuse the light and cause the delicate shades of pink, lavender and orange.

Guided by the hand of Nature, the sun's rays spread across these clouds in a fan-like array of soft colors, while tiny curls of cirrus clouds, looking like the hair of angels, spread themselves out in a long row above the glowing horizon. All too soon, though,

these warm, ever-changing colors become more and more pale until they fade away into darkness. Another winter sunset becomes a memory.

Below the cirrus clouds are the middle clouds, mainly altocumulus and altostratus. Water droplets instead of ice crystals compose these clouds. As the sun's last rays of light strike puffs or bands of either type, orange, red and yellow lines may form across the entire sky.

A dull Indian red sky of altocumulus clouds at sunset foretells rain within twenty-four hours. The same holds true if dark altocumulus clouds are seen against a background of brilliant white light.

Lower, thicker clouds often produce majestic scenes as yellow sunlight thrusts between two broken cloud bands. Suddenly, the bands appear to have been rent asunder by a flaming spear of yellow light. Then, almost as quickly as it came, the spear of light fades away into the night's dark veil.

Pink cotton clouds. Occasionally a large, cotton-like cumulus cloud, drifting lazily overhead, will be tinted at its top by pink light from the sun which has already set. But soon this, too, will disappear.

Clear skies may bring sunsets which have added attractions. Windows take on golden or red hues. Trees appear to be on fire as the sun slips down behind them. Fields bask in the last pale glow of yellow light.

Even volcanoes occasionally lend an added touch of beauty to a sunset. In September, 1963, a dust cloud from the eruption of Mount Agung on the island of Bali in Indonesia produced a late twilight glow in Arizona, thousands of miles away! The eruption of Katmai in Alaska in 1912 produced a succession of spectacular sunsets.

When the island of Krakatoa in the Sunda Strait between the islands of Java and Sumatra blew itself away in 1883, it sent volcanic dust high into the stratosphere. This dust took more than two years to disperse and affected sunsets all over the world.

Folklore answer. Fascinated by what happened to the sun after it disappeared in the evening, Eskimos formerly believed it went on a boat trip under the northern horizon, and that it formed the northern lights.

The beauty of sunsets has been written about, talked about and thought about for ages. In February of 1932 a particularly beautiful sunset was observed in Ohio. People looked with awe at its radiant colors, and some even took time to write about it.

But sunsets never really end. They remain in the minds of men long after their colors have gone from the sky, for as long as men admire the wonders of Nature, they will stop for a moment to admire the beauty of a western sky ... just at sunset.

Your sunset photos. Confident that readers would like to know more about photographing sunsets so they could produce finer pictures themselves, the editors asked Tom Myers to share some of the professional photographer's trade secrets. Here's what he said:

Ever since color film was invented, the favorite subject of a photographer — after his family — has been sunsets. Great sunset pictures can be taken with every type of camera, from the least expensive box to the $600 professional model.

There are several ways to make a good sunset photo. If you are using a light meter and normal lens (for example, a 50mm lens on a 35mm film camera), point the meter directly at the scene and use the highest light value it shows. With telephoto lenses it's different; pictures directly into the sun can be taken with these lenses if the sun is almost on the horizon or partially screened by clouds or smoke. Take the highest reading with the light meter and — with a 135mm lens (21s power) — cut down two stops on the exposure, for example, from /.8 to f.16.

With a 1000mm lens (20 power) you have to cut down a full seven stops while photographing directly into the sun. Water enhances sunset scenes. The reflections are often as beautiful as the sunset. Five of the six pictures shown on these pages were taken from the levee of the Sacramento River within a mile and a half of my house. The sixth sunset (middle right, page 37) was taken near the Snake River, Twin Falls, Idaho.

The upper left picture on page 36 is a navigational light in the river; the fishing boat scene next to it was taken with a 1000mm lens to bring the fishermen and their boat close to the sun; the upper right photo on page 37 is another 1000mm shot, this time of a tug boat crewman and rigging. The bottom picture on pages 36–37 and the picture on page 39 were both made with the 1000mm lens as the sun went down behind the California Coast Range of mountains forty miles west of my home.

Actually, recording a sunset in California is just like recording a sunset anywhere else. It's always the same sun, but never the same atmosphere. The sea of air surrounding our earth is much like a sea of water — all light coming from space is blurred by its ripples. Clouds, dust, humidity and other elements distort light rays into a myriad of scenes, shades and colors. The unreal elements and tonal qualities only add to the lustre and ever-changing beauty of a typical sunset.

Learning to understand the qualities of light and lighting, and the workings of a camera, are universal problems. But the greatest problem most of us have with sunset pictures is not a technical one. It's utility wires ... good luck keeping them out of your photos.

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