

the camera collector

by Jason Schneider

Half-frame cameras of the 60's, part 3. Wherein collectors immortalize the only SLR's of their kind.



You don't have to be a camera collector to love Olympus Pen F's and FT's. As many photographic dealers throughout the land can attest, these svelte, natty half-frame SLR's and their lenses and accessories

are presently the hottest property on the lately-discontinued camera market. They are also destined to attain more than passing fad status among hard-core camera collectors for several reasons: they're the only half-frame (18 x 24mm format) single-lens reflexes ever made which were designed as such from the ground up (unlike the half-frame Alpa, for example, which is simply a full-frame Alpa masked off for the 18 x 24mm format); they offered a wide range of interesting, well-made lenses and accessories; and they incorporated technically unconventional designs in the shutter, mirror and viewing systems.

The original Olympus Pen F—the meterless model with the gothic “F” on the front—arrived in late 1963—smack in the middle of the half-frame madness—at the pleasant price of \$149.90. It was billed as the “knight errant that half-frame enthusiasts had clamored for—the real half-framed contender against the precision full-frame SLR camera.” Considering that most full-frame SLR's at the time still lacked built-in



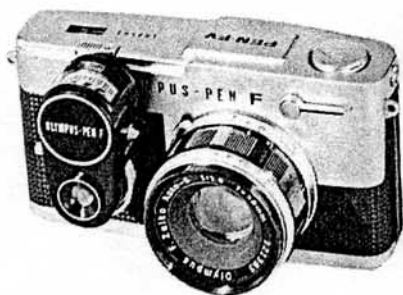
Utterly manual, the original Pen F was meterless but troublesome.

behind-lens CdS metering, it was just that. Its rotary-sector, metal focal-plane shutter was X-synchronized at all speeds from 1-1/500 sec.; its small instant-return mirror moved horizontally rather than vertically, minimizing camera shake; and its porroprism finder with full-focusing screen and fine ground-glass center was bright, and

decisive in action. An accessory-coupled CdS meter bayoneted in place over the shutter-speed dial.

Of course, none of these “advanced” features was exactly new even then. The F's shutter design bears more than a passing resemblance to the one in the American Mercury (produced by the Universal Camera Corp. of New York); and even swinging the mirror sideways, placing the focusing screen 45° to the left rather than above, and using a porroprism (constructed of mirrors) instead of a solid glass pentaprism, are hardly more than reshuffles of well-known optical designs. The genius of the Pen F's design team led by Y. Maitani was their integration of all these concepts into a beautifully functional 5 x 2¼ x 2½ in. whole (with f/1.8 lens) possessing a handy classical shape reminiscent of rangefinder Leicas and Canons. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the Pen F's staunchest devotees are drawn from the ranks of rangefinder enthusiasts.

Though barely up-to-date in the metering department when introduced, the coupled-meter “gothic F” Pen was soon eclipsed by the full-frame brigade's almost universal adoption of built-in behind-lens CdS metering. Could Olympus sneak one into the Pen F? They sure could, and as long as they were at it, they attacked one of the original F's few defects, occasionally erratic shutter operation, by redesigning the speed-governing mechanism. At the same time, they added M sync, a self-timer and, alas, a decidedly dimmer viewfinder.



Rarest Pen SLR? FV, shown with coupled CdS accessory meter, was basically a demeterized Pen FT.

This was the price they had to pay for building the meter in. The only way they could get sufficient light to a CdS cell located between the ground glass and the eyepiece was to steal it by making one of the porroprism's mirrors semitransparent. As a result, the 1966 Pen FT had a finder image about a full stop dimmer and noticeably less easy to focus. Of course, if you were particularly astute back in 1967 (and didn't particularly relish built-in meters anyway), you could've purchased a meterless Olympus Pen FV for \$20 less than the FT's \$169.95. That way you would've gotten the FT's improved shutter and self-timer, the gothic F's brighter finder, and the rarest of all Pen SLR's simultaneously.

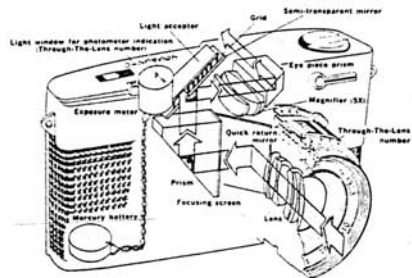
After having besmirched the FT's finder image, let's say a few nasty things about its metering system. Basically it's an open-aperture, transfer-the-number type. You first select a shutter speed, then bring the camera to eye level, read the number (zero to seven) indicated at the left of the finder image, and transfer it to the lens barrel. Oh,

Continued on page 75

THE CAMERA COLLECTOR

Continued from page 64

you want to find out what aperture you're shooting at? Then you have to flip the camera over and gaze at the underside of the lens—the "real aperture scale." While not the most convenient meter system ever devised, it works well except in dim light and at least has the virtue of full-metering compatibility with older Pen F lenses (provided you purchased special adhesive numeral strips for their aperture rings).



It's lots easier to show it, so here's the light path for FT's meter and finder.

Speaking of optics, this was, and is, the Pen F's *raison d'être*. While there were Leica and Nikon lens adapters, microscope and other eyepiece adapters, sundry flash brackets and even a motor drive available for the Pen FT, it was never really a system SLR in the Nikon tradition. All of its optics, however, were pleasantly compact, generally quite sharp, and were offered in a mouth-watering variety of speeds, focal lengths and physical sizes. We all have our

individual favorites, but who can forget the super-flat 38mm f/2.8 that converted your Pen F into a real pocket 35? Or that lovely trio of medium teles—the 60mm f/1.5, 70mm f/2 and 100mm f/3.5?

The Pens were less well-represented in the wide-angle department with only a 20mm f/3.5 (I wish it were an f/2.8) and a pair of 25mm lenses, an f/4 and an f/2.8. The teles, however, extended all the way up to an 800mm f/8 (equivalent to more than 1100mm on a full-frame 35), and included such "hand-holdables" as 150mm f/4 and 250mm f/5 Zuikos and a 400mm f/6.3 I've never actually seen. Nicely rounding out the Olympus optical array were two fine zooms, a sharp compact 50-90mm f/3.5 and a reasonably wieldy 100-200mm f/5, and a rather rare macro, the 38mm f/3.5. I almost forgot the 40mm f/1.4 and the rather uncommon 42mm f/1.2, but neither of these is quite as good a performer as the more familiar 38mm f/1.8 normal Zuiko.

Now that I've practically convinced you to run right down to your local camera shop demanding a black-finished Pen F with soft leather pouch case and flat 38mm f/2.8 lens, let me redirect you to the beginning of this column and reiterate a few unfortunate facts. Fact number one is that, unless you're very lucky, the collectors got there before you did, and now that everybody is wise to the Pen FT's desirability, you'll pay \$130 for a chrome-covered example in decent condition with an f/1.8 lens. Lots of luck to you if you fancy lens or eyepiece adapters of any kind, particularly the motor drive. The vast majority of the aforementioned delicacies have already

been snapped up. Even interchangeable lenses (especially the nice focal lengths) are selling at pretty close to their original list prices (\$90-150). It's almost enough to make you break down and buy an OM-1.

In fact, things are so bad on the Pen FT front, I think I'll conclude our half-frame saga by letting you in on a little secret. I just bought the *brand new* chrome Olympus Pen FT with a 38mm f/1.8 lens, case and original collapsible rubber lens shade for a



Most desirable Pen among Leicaphiles is Pen FT with pocketably flat 38mm f/2.8.

piddling \$130. How did I do it? That's easy—you see, I've got this friend named Frank Wolfe in Hong Kong, and as he was making the rounds of all 4,600 camera stores there, maniacally searching for Olympus Pen F's of any kind, he stumbled across an elderly proprietor. "Have you got any Pen F's—you know, those half-frame single-lens reflexes?" he quavered. "You mean like this?" the seller inquired. "I haven't been able to sell these damn things for over five years."—THE END