

# An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

## What Media Did Clarence Stearns Use?

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Clarence Stearns and his wife Inez moved to Alpine in 1953, where they built a beautiful retirement home on Zumbrota Road. An artist friend of ours now lives in the Stearns house and she told us that when she first saw this house she knew immediately from its design and features that it was originally created by a person of artistic talent and insight. And she was so right. You see, Clarence Stearns was a highly talented and much sought after master of the photographic arts. At his studio in Rochester, MN he made portraits of babies and engaged couples, college graduates and retired workers. He also travelled far and wide to photograph Presidents and famous men and women in the arts, sciences, sports, medicine, religion and politics. He was called the “Photographer for Everyman”.

Although we don’t know for certain what camera equipment he used in his illustrious career, we know that his first camera was given to him at age 15 as a premium for subscribing to the Youth’s Companion Magazine. Since this was in 1892, it could have been a Kodak “Brownie”, introduced in 1888 and described as the camera that made a cumbersome and complicated process easy to use and accessible to nearly everyone. Of course, as his skills and experience grew, he would have moved up to more sophisticated equipment, perhaps like some of the cameras in our newest exhibit “Cameras from the Fred Bray Collection” on display in the Beaty House at the Alpine Historical Society’s John DeWitt Museum.

While in Alpine, Clarence and Inez were active in civic affairs and were instrumental in founding the Artists Association. In 2010, the Alpine Artists website remembered Stearns with this tribute:



*“The Alpine Artists Association was founded over a half-century ago by Clarence Stearns, of Zumbrota, Minnesota. Clarence Stearns, an avid photographer, studio owner and friend of George Eastman of Eastman Kodak fame, created a roundtable of art and artists in the town, built one of the first houses on Viejas Mountain, and established a history of bringing fine art, world experience and expert craftsmanship with him.”*

When he retired, Clarence Stearns made reference to a 1,000 photograph collection that he intended to donate to a Minnesota Historical Society, but that collection has never been located. The Olmstead County Historical Society graciously offered digital copies of several of his photos which you can see on display at the John DeWitt Museum located at 2116 Tavern Road in Alpine. The museum is open the last weekend of each month from 2:00 to 4:00 pm. Admission is free, but your donations help us maintain our facilities, develop new exhibits, and preserve our collections.