

An Alpine History Mystery – Solved!

How did Zumbrota Road get its Name?

June 2014



Several years after his retirement, Clarence Stearns, the highly acclaimed and well-traveled photographer, moved to Alpine. He purchased land on Victoria Hill where he and his wife, Inez, built a fine home. They lived here most of the year except for their annual summer get-away. The name of the street on which they built, Zumbrota Road, was selected by none other than Clarence Stearns – but that’s not the end of our story.

At age 15, Clarence received a camera as a promotional gift for subscribing to the *Youth’s Companion Magazine*. He had a talent for photography and two years later a photographer in his home town took him on as an apprentice where he learned photography techniques using professional equipment. During the Spanish American War he enlisted in the army as a company “drummer boy” and later became the official photographer for the regiment. After the war, while working as a photographer in Yellowstone National Park, Clarence met George Eastman, who later hired him to work for his company: KODAK. Then in 1913, he established a photography studio in Rochester, MN, which he operated for 17 years.

During his career, Stearns photographed many of the world’s rich & famous celebrities in politics, sports, religion, art, science, and medicine. Subjects for his work included President and Mrs. Coolidge, Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt, President Elias Calles of Mexico, and President Machado of Cuba, heavyweight champion Jack Dempsy, Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne, the baseball player turned evangelist Billy Sunday, dancer Ruth St. Dennis, famed pianist Dame Myra Hess, and the list goes on and on. Stearns became great friends of William and Charles Mayo, founders of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN where he photographed four generations of the Mayo family. His photograph of Eleanor Roosevelt was selected by the former first lady to be the photo used in her autobiography.

The Stearns moved to Alpine in 1952 and became very much involved in this town of about 450 people. They were active in the Alpine Community Church and the Alpine Artists & Writers group. We searched the archives of the Alpine Echo Newspaper (that was before the Alpine SUN) and found more than 25 references to the Stearns civic activities during their short stay here. Clarence Stearns died on September 30, 1962, at the age of 85, but not without leaving a lasting impression on our small town. You see, when the Stearns built their home in Alpine, they petitioned to change the name of the street running past their home. The new name, approved by the county, was the name of the Minnesota town in which he was born and was later to be buried, the only town in the USA that carries the name that he gave to the road in Alpine where he lived: ZUMBROTA.

We hope that you enjoyed this Alpine History Mystery. If you would like to become a member of the Alpine Historical Society to receive our newsletter and to help support our mission and programs please send a note to: membership@alpinehistory.org or call 619-445-2544 and we’ll send membership information to you right away.