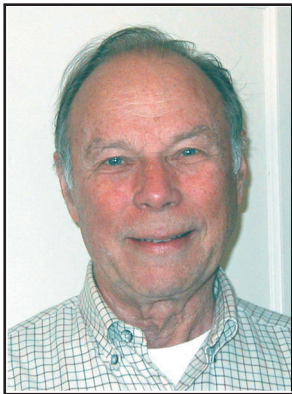


MAE STEARNS

Union County resident for 79 years

AN ORAL HISTORY

as told by James Bennett, her grand nephew



Mae Stearns in 1945

Interview in September 2003
in La Grande OR

Interviewer of James Bennett: Eugene Smith

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT

2005

UNION COUNTY, OREGON HISTORY PROJECT
An Affiliate of the Oregon Historical Society

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation formed in 2002

In collaboration with Eastern Oregon University
Cove Improvement Club History Committee
Elgin Museum & Historical Society
Union Museum Society

Purposes

To record & publish oral histories of long-time Union County residents
&
To create a community encyclopedia

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Preface

Much of the history of a place is stored in the memories of people who have lived there. Their stories may be told to family members, but, unless someone makes a special effort to record these stories, they become lost to future generations.

Each of the historical societies in Union County, Oregon has begun to make that effort. Tape recordings exist in several locations, some of them transcribed in written form, others not. A more ambitious and thorough effort seemed necessary so that more of the oral history of Union County could be captured and preserved.

The Union County, Oregon History Project, begun in 2002, is making that more ambitious effort. One of its principal purposes is to collect as many oral histories of older Union County residents as possible and to make them available in both taped and written form. This edited transcript is part of the series of oral histories to be produced by that project.

About the Interview and This Edited Version

We would like to have interviewed Mae Stearns so that we could have had her oral history at first hand. She died in 1961. Rather than ignore her formidable presence in Union County, we settled for her great nephew, James Bennett. He has lived in Portland for many years but returns to Union County for visits and high school class reunions. On one of those visits in 2003, he agreed to an interview that tapped his memories of Mae Stearns as he knew her in his youth. The inheritor of her large collection of photos, diaries, and other memorabilia, he generously shared portions of the collection for use in this transcript.

The interviewer was Eugene Smith, director of the Union County, Oregon History Project. He completed a one-hour interview on September 20, 2003.

Heather Pilling's full transcription (available for research purposes) presents the literal contents of both interviews. The edited version presented here differs from the literal transcription in the following characteristics:

- reorganization of content
- deletion of some extraneous comments
- omission of false sentence starts and other normal speech fillers that detract from readability
- normalization of pronunciation and grammar in conformity with standards of written English.

JB designates Jim Bennett's words, *I* the interviewer's.

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Stearns Family's Move to Cove, Oregon

- I: Do you know how the Stearns family happened to come to Cove?
- JB: Lawton Benson Stearns was a Civil War veteran. He and a brother established a wood-planing mill in Grand Haven MI. Somewhere around 1880 or 1881 it burned down. Lawton Benson Stearn's wife, Frances Caroline Payne Stearns, and her brother, James Payne, established a farm and creamery in Cove in the 1870s.
- I: Do you suspect that there was some kind of publicity about Cove that would have gotten to Michigan?
- JB: Yes. Edward, son of Lawton Benson Stearns and Mae's father, was turning to carpentry; he and his father built a large home in Cove. Lawton Benson Stearns and his son, James Edward, who was in his twenties at that time, built the house on lot number 1 in the McDaniel's Addition.

Mae's father, James Edward Stearns, after he built the house, went to work for the city of La Grande, becoming a city commissioner and then city manager in the early 1920s. The family moved to La Grande from Cove. His daughters were twins, Mae and Frances, born in 1878.

Jim's Mother, Niece of Mae Stearns

- I: Tell me about your mother and where she came from.

JB: My mother was born in 1901 in Promise, Oregon, a town which my great-grandfather, Daniel Mann, founded with John Phillips. They built the original log cabins there in 1892.

I: Did he go there because of logging?

JB: I think they just wanted to get a piece of land all their own. At that time, he got a homestead grant from the government for a one-hundred-sixty-acre tract that he had to live on, develop, and maintain.

I: Do you think they are the ones who thought of the name *Promise*?

JB: Yes. When my grandmother, Anna Mann, and family first went there with horse and wagon, they called it the Promised Land. It sounds like they were fairly religious because, besides the name *Promise*, there are other Bibli-



Stearns family, 1880s
l. to r.: Frances, James Edward Stearns,
Caroline Stearns, Mae
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

cal names in that area of Wallowa County.

I: From what I've heard about the way it worked out, the place held more disappointment than promise.

JB: That's true. They almost starved to death the first winter there. There are some interesting stories on that side of the family about the cattle falling off the bluffs and having to get into Wallowa [approx. twenty-five miles southeast of Promise over rugged terrain] for food when they ran out.

I: Was it later on that there was a lot of logging in that area?

JB: Yes, especially down around Maxville [five miles south of Promise]. My grandmother's brothers, the Manns, were loggers. They were born in the

1890s up there, so it was about 1915 when they began working in the forest. They finally all moved out of the Promise area by 1924.

When my mother, Jean, was to be born, James and Anna were in Promise to help. Shortly after my mother's birth, James and Anna moved back to their house in Cove, where Mae was living. So Jean was the niece of Mae Stearns.

In 1909 my mother's mother died, apparently of malaria she'd contracted after her family had been to California.

In all the pictures taken of my mother, she always had a dress on and a big bow in her hair; she was pretty well dressed and clean, even with all of the dust.

Mae's Early Interests in Music and Photography

JB: As Mae grew up and became a teenager, she went to work at the Layne Department Store in Cove. In the store, she found and bought a Hawkeye camera and began taking pictures of the customers. She probably told me about the Layne Store when I was four or five years old. While she was working at that store, a photographer came to town with a tent and a camera. This was around 1900.

I: Tell me the connection between Mae's working in the Layne Department Store, buying a little camera, and opening a studio.

JB: The photographer came to town and set up in a tent behind Layne store. When



Mae and Frances Stearns, 1884
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

he up and left, leaving all his photographic equipment behind, Mae negotiated with him to buy it.

I: Was she self-taught mainly? Did she ever mention studying other photographers' work or reading books about photography?

JB: No, she never did. I think she just experimented, though she had learned a little from the photographer whose equipment she bought. The family used to come to La Grande quite often, and I think she might have picked up some information from Harry Ritter, who was an early photographer in La Grande.

I: Please explain about Mae's partnership with Bess Fellbaum.

JB: The Fellbaums were a family from Texas who came into this area around Pendleton and Walla Walla. I'm still trying to find out how Mae Stearns



Mae as an admired violinist, 1900
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

met Bess Fellbaum, but they became very best friends.

I: Do you think they met in Cove?

JB: Either Cove or Walla Walla. I have a picture of them together, taken in 1902 in a photo studio in Walla Walla. In 1905, they became partners in a photographic business.

I: Do you think she started the studio in 1905?

JB: Right around in there, or maybe even a little earlier in the tent. I don't know how long it took to build the new studio for her in Cove. It was inaugurated in 1906.

I: She must have had a pretty good concept of photography as a business.

JB: I think so.

I: Do you think that by 1905 she was committed to being a photographer professionally?

JB: I think so because, before that, she was destined to go to a music school in Boston.

I: Destined by her mother?

JB: Probably. All the family was very musical--all playing the violin. I have pictures of her and her sister playing in the Cove Orchestra. They also had string quintets or octets. There was a big women's group, who were all musical. Mae had all these lady friends and was also very active in the church and Sunday School.

Beginnings of Mae Stearns' Career as a Photographer

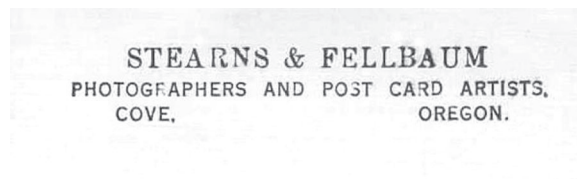
All three images courtesy of James Bennett



Business partners:
Mae Stearns (l.) and Bess Fellbaum, ca. 1902



Photographic studio in Cove, 1906, for Stearns & Fellbaum
from l.:
Willa Fellbaum (mother), Bess Fellbaum,
Jean Stearns (Jim Bennett's mother, five yrs. old), Mae



Impression used on photos produced in the Cove studio

I: Where did she get her musical instruction?

JB: I think a lot of that was pretty much self-taught since her father played. Edna Conklin probably taught her, too.

I: Did she play something besides the violin?

JB: Not to my knowledge.

I: When you said “destined to be in music,” what do you mean by that?

JB: I found an article in *The Observer* about a young Cove violinist, who was very proficient and was probably destined to go to the Boston Conservatory of Music. I guess somebody was going to sponsor her. As far as I know, she was never admitted to that school.

Photography as the Chosen Career Path

I: Do you think that she decided that photography might be a better route?

JB: I think she took a real liking to it. There are dozens of pictures of various parts of the Grande Ronde Valley, especially Mt. Fanny, Mill Stream in Cove, and pictures of Cove from the surrounding hills. There are many pictures of groups of girls and boys. In those days, you could collect most of the kids that lived in Cove into one group and get a picture of them. There are a lot of kids in those photos that I’m still trying to get identified.

I: What period do these photos come from?

JB: They come from 1905 to about 1910 or '12. For instance, at the Cove Cherry Festival of 1912, it was the first time a car was in a picture. Before that, most of the pictures of the Stearns family were taken in wagons and on horses.

I: Do you have any notion whether she was selling pictures at that point?

JB: I believe so. I don’t know what they were selling for. I know later on she used to make prints from all of those old negatives. My mother, Jean Stearns Bennett, started tinting those pictures probably around when she became a teenager. She was very artistic and learned how to colorize photos.

Adding Color to Black & White Photos

I: I think you should explain more about that because most younger people have probably never heard of tinting photographs.

JB: In those days the photographs were all black and white, printed up on nice matte paper that could be colorized. You could use any color to colorize them. My mother used to do a lot of water coloring. When she was twelve, she drew pictures and colorized them. For the matte finish on the photographs she used oils--not linseed oil but turpentine with oil-based paints. When I was young and we had moved away from this area, Mae sent pictures to my mother and had her color them, with instructions on how she wanted that done. Sometimes she sent them back, saying, “This has to be tinted more here and there,” or “Change this color.”

Mother wiped out the original color with turpentine and put in another one.

I: Did you have the impression that, when Mae was giving those instructions, she wanted the color to be as close to Nature as possible?

JB: Yes. Especially in portraits she was very specific: she wanted the eye, hair, and clothing colors to be correct.

I: Would it be true to say that their aim in creating colorized photographs was very much the same we have now in taking colored photos?

JB: Yes, although I think in those days they tended to give a more brilliant color than the subject might actually have had.

I: To improve on nature?

JB: Yes. Somebody gave me a print that



Photograph by Mae Stearns of trillium, hand colored by Jean Stearns Bennett, 1942

Photo courtesy of James Bennett

was done by my mother; you can see that the background colors could be anything that would offset or enhance the portrait.

I: [looking at a colorized photo] Is this a photograph of you?

JB: Yes, that's my graduation picture from La Grande High School, tinted by my mother.

I: It's a good job of coloring, I'd say. It looks very natural.

JB: I thought her tinting was very good. Later in life, my mother became a professional artist.

Jim's Memories of Meetings with Mae Stearns

I: When did you first become acquainted with Mae?

JB: We had moved to Wallace, Idaho, where my father had a grocery. Mae sent pictures to my mother there for tinting. Occasionally, we drove to La Grande to visit, especially when my mother was pregnant with my brothers, or I came alone or with my brother. We stayed with the Stearns family, and, of course, Mae was right across the street in La Grande. So I became acquainted with her. She let me be in the darkroom with her while she developed film and printed it up. Once they were developed and printed, they were put on drums to dry.

I: To the extent that you can remember, tell me in more detail about an experience in the darkroom with her.

JB: It was a dark place that smelled like chemicals. She'd take a film and show me how she dried out the negatives by hanging them up. Then she'd put them on a printer and show me how to put the paper in. After she put the paper in, she pushed down on a foot pedal and said, "Now you have to count: 'one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three.'" Then she took it out and placed it in the developing solution to see if the time was right. If she was going to make a bunch of prints, the timing was just by trial and error. It was all in the learning how to count. I still work at counting: one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three.

I: Describe her voice.

JB: It was a musical, feminine voice--not really high, a medium tenor, you might say. She was usually, around me anyway, an upbeat woman, who was always pleasant.

The main lesson I got from her was not to smoke. My father smoked. She always said, "Jimmy, I hope you never smoke. It's such a filthy habit. I don't like your father's habit of smoking." I remembered that lesson. Lo and behold, when I turned twenty-three or twenty-four and tried to learn how to smoke, I couldn't do it.

I: Tell me more about Mae.

JB: She was a very humorous person, always telling us riddles. Her main riddle was "Why does Uncle Sam wear red, white, and blue suspenders?" I'd always hang up on it, and pretty soon she'd say, "Well, it holds his pants up." That fam-

ily had a large bunch of riddles. "What happens to the white dog when you throw him in the Red Sea?" They go on and on. Sometimes she would get out her fiddle and play "Turkey in the Straw." I don't know where the song came from--maybe from Promise, Oregon. She used to sing it to us. The song goes:

The turkey in the straw.
We didn't have any money
So we fed the baby hay,
And the poor little darling's
Getting weaker every day.
Toodle-doodle-dum,
Toodle-doodle-day,
Getting weaker every day,
The poor little darling.

I: The events you've been describing took place in about 1933?

JB: Yes 1933 through 1940. We were in La Grande almost every summer when my brothers were being born.

I: How did Mae dress, at a time when women's skirts were getting shorter?

JB: She dressed fairly conventionally in those days.

I: Did she wear a skirt that went down to the floor or did she wear pants?

JB: No, she wore skirts, but they were mid-calf, if I remember correctly.

I: Even when she was working in the dark-room?

JB: As far as I can remember. I have a few pictures of her in pants when she was

working. Often when she took pictures of groups, though, she wore dresses.

I: Did she have long hair?

JB: Medium-length hair.

I: What color?

JB: Brown.

I: Did she wear it up on top of her head?

JB: I have a beautiful picture of her at the age of twenty, with her hair pulled up around her head. She was a beautiful lady when she was young.

I: Did she ever wear make-up?

JB: That I don't know. She may have, but not much; she didn't overdo it.

I: Would you call her physically robust?

JB: Moderately robust in later years. When she was about twenty, the pictures of her show her quite skinny and wiry. She used to chaperone my mother and father when they were courting here in La Grande. When they went to Morgan Lake, Mae wore hiker pants.

I: Was she a horseback woman, or did she do other kinds of physical activities?

JB: She was pretty much a horseback woman. I have a picture of her on a horse in Cove. The family had a horse named Henry in Cove. There is a dramatic picture of her on top of Mt. Fanny on a horse. There are pictures of horse trains packing into the Minam. They went, I suppose, up around Mt. Fanny into the Minam.

I don't know if the Stearns family ever really owned a car in Cove, but some of their friends or relatives took them up, in a big, open touring car for a ride.

I: What else can you tell me about her personality and her habits?

JB: She was a classical old maid; she never married.

I: Why do you say *classical*?

JB: I tell my friends she was a classical lesbian of the Grande Ronde Valley. She was friends with all the unmarried women of her age.

I: I think that's well-known.

JB: Mabel Morton, the Herzinger sisters, and Mabel Doty. Mae lived with Mabel Doty for years.

In that day and age I think it was a normal activity in every sense. My mother used to tell me that Mae had boyfriends way back when, but nothing ever really panned out and who knows why.

I: I think we can infer why.

JB: She really was an upbeat person and very positive, very forceful. She attended church regularly and was very philanthropic. I can show you summaries of what she used to donate to people who needed it. She established a scholarship for Cove girls at Eastern Oregon College.

In 1920 or '30, she was in her darkroom one day and grabbed hold of the water faucet at the same time as the old brass-chain light; it almost electrocuted her.

She fell to the floor and couldn't work for quite a long time after that.

I: What were the long-term effects of the shock?

JB: I was told she was having a nervous breakdown. When women were going through menopause in those days, they called it *involutional melancholy*. She was about the right age to go through menopause. She wrote in her diary through that period that Bess Fellbaum Stearns--her old friend from Cove, who was now married to Ed Stearns--came over and stayed with her all night. She wrote, "Bess came over and stayed all night, and it really helped," or something like that. Those notes in her diary are the only clue we ever had about her physical and mental state.

I: Do you think this accident occurred when she was maybe in her mid-forties?

JB: Yes.

I: Did it occur in La Grande or Cove?

JB: It was in La Grande. She moved over from Cove about 1924, and her brother built her a house that still stands on Oak Street.

I: Tell me a little more about that. Might she have come to La Grande because there was more business here?

JB: I am not sure why she came to La Grande. At some period during the 1920s, I think they came to La Grande and built a house. Mae stayed in the old Lawton Stearns' home in Cove. During that period though, she was fairly active in photography. I don't know how much Bess Fellbaum Stearns helped her in that activity in Cove. We have pictures dating from 1917 that were taken in Cove; we see the whole



Early 20th century photo of Cove by Mae Stearns
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

family in a big touring car, which I don't think belonged to the Stearns but to friends or neighbors. Mae was still active in Cove, taking photos in her studio. I am not sure exactly when the cut-off came for her, or why she decided to move to La Grande to be with Ed and Bess.

Mae's Photographic Techniques

I: One more thing about the Cove studio: was that set up so that she could both take photographs there and process the negatives?

JB: Yes. I have saved everything including the posing chairs. These chairs had a stand they'd set the kids in, since she took many pictures of children.

I: What kind of a camera do you think she was using then?

JB: I'm not sure. I still have one old camera of hers--the big, wooden, fold-out camera which sits on a tripod.

I: Was there a black cloth that went over the photographer's head?

JB: Yes. I don't have the cloth, just the camera and the tripod.

I: Is that the camera that would have used glass negatives?

JB: No. Later, she learned how to load film in black film carriers. They were about eight by ten; or was it six by eight? You loaded those and slid them in. First you focused your camera, slid in the film holder, and pulled the black sheet out. Then you opened the camera,

counted one-thousand, etc., and everybody had to hold still. I learned that: "You have to hold still, Jimmy," and "Hold real still. Now don't move." I have a great picture of me she took. I see the same chair from the Cove studio that was in her La Grande studio and the same backdrop.

I: Do you have any guess when she stopped using glass negatives and switched over to film and paper?

JB: Maybe about 1906.

I: Wasn't it silver nitrate film?

JB: As far as I know. It probably occurred about the time the technology came out. I only have a few of her glass negatives. There are one or two of them that are classical pictures.

I: Do you think during the time that she was using the kind of photography mechanism that required a long exposure time, there was a rod attached to the back of the chair or couch to hold the person in place, to keep them from moving?

JB: I don't know. I don't recall it from her studio.

I: In the late 19th century the rod was used commonly.

JB: Yes, that's probably true.

I: I think maybe by the time she was taking portraits the process was a little faster; they didn't have to pose for several minutes.

I: Do you remember anything about

any kind of scenery or backgrounds that she might have used?

JB: No. In her studio was just a plain big black cloth that had a white hazing to outline the head. Of course, when you tint the print, you can lighten it up or darken it down.

I: Did she use any sort of floodlight?

JB: Yes. In La Grande she used a floodlight. In Cove she used flash powder.

More about the Move to La Grande

I: We were talking about the move from Cove to La Grande. You said she wanted a house in La Grande.

JB: Yes, her brother, Ed Stearns, built her a house. Their father had died by then, and I think that was probably another reason for her to move.

I: If the house in La Grande was built for her to live in, I suppose there was also a studio that was planned in part of the house.

JB: The early pictures of her house show that it didn't have a studio with it. When she first came to La Grande, I think she worked for the Red Cross Drug. They built her a house and added a studio where she could have her own business. I don't know how much independent work she might have done through the Red Cross Drugstore or Henry Ritter's studio.

I: You think that happened in 1924?

JB: Yes.

I: She would have been forty-six then since she was born in 1878.

JB: Maybe she started having that involuntional melancholia then.

I: That's quite likely, yes.

JB: I'm not exactly sure when she got shocked in her Cove studio. I can remember her telling me about it. When I was in her darkroom, she'd say, "You don't do this or that; don't grab the water and the chain at the same time like I did."

I: If you were born in 1928, obviously all of the work in the studio was in La Grande.

JB: Yes.

I: Had the studio you saw been built onto her house?

JB: Yes. It was not too long after 1924, I'm sure, that she had the studio built on.

I: Is the studio still there?

JB: No. They've taken the studio off and the house on the north side is gone. They've put in a business on that corner.

I: Do you remember well enough to describe the studio's size and how it was fitted out?

JB: You went in a little side door that opened into a room. The studio proper was probably about fifteen feet wide and twenty feet deep, and all the props,

chairs, and lights were there. Part of it went on over into her garage back of the house, where the darkroom part of the studio was. That was probably about twelve feet long by five feet wide. It was a small developing studio, and you really felt like you were in a cave. It smelled like chemicals for the developing of pictures. Several pans were laid out; I still have some of her old pans that she dipped all the films in. There was a sink set-up to wash the pictures. At the far end of this developing room she had a drum drier. She put the pictures out on a drum and pulled a canvas over them to get the water out; I think there were light bulbs inside the drum to heat them up. Pretty soon the pictures would be dry, and she would pop off the polished stainless steel cover. It was not a very big developing room but adequate for one person.

I: Do you assume that people called on the telephone to make appointments to come and have portraits made?

JB: Yes. Somewhere I may have her old phone number. I know, even as a teenager here in La Grande, one needed to get the operator on the phone to make a call.

I: Do you have any idea how much of a business she had in studio portraits as opposed to going out on location to do shots of school kids?

JB: I know she had some, but I don't know just how many. Most of the pictures I have are just of our family--my mother when she was young; she and her brother were the most photographed kids in the USA. When my brothers and I came

along, we were the most photographed kids and grandkids in the USA. So we have dozens and dozens of family pictures. I have many dozens of old packets of film that I've never analyzed to see if they're out on location.

I: You mean negatives?

JB: Negatives, yes. Picture of a family in front of their house or family reunion snapshots.

I: They weren't called snapshots, were they?

JB: No, they were big formal pictures of family weddings. I have a picture of the Tommy Conklin wedding over in Cove. There were dozens of people at the wedding in front of the house. She advertised herself as specializing in kids. She did portraits. The picture she took of me when I was about two-and-a-half or three years old was really a classic picture.

I: Both from your experience of being photographed by her and from whatever you know about her photographing other children, do you think that she had some special ability with kids?

JB: She may have; she sure took a lot of pictures of kids.

I: My understanding is that, if you're going to be a successful photographer of children, you have to have a way with kids. You have to quickly set them at ease and make them smile and generally be appealing.

JB: Yes, I got a great picture of me. I can't

remember the time she took the picture. She had to really work hard to get me to sit still, because I was blowing a bubble with a pipe. I didn't know how to blow bubbles, but I was learning fast. She finally got a classic picture of me blowing a bubble with one of those old bubble pipes we used to have. As we got older, every Christmas she'd take a picture of the four of us boys and use it for Christmas cards. I have dozens of pictures that were put on postcards. The postcards have stamps, and that's how I dated them.

I: In that connection, do you think that she took any photographs of places in the valley that were put on post cards?

JB: Yes, she had pictures of Mt. Fanny and Mt Emily.

I: Was that part of her business?

JB: Yes. Some of them were imprinted with gold lettering that said, "Mt. Fanny, 7,146 feet."

I: Do you think Mae typically signed her photos or otherwise identified herself as the photographer?

JB: Very definitely. There was an imprinting device for photos. I have a classic picture of a steam field mower that fell through a bridge, with a guy standing over it, looking at the camera. For a joke on some of my stuff, I made a copy of the picture and then I put a bubble above his head saying, "Oh, heck!" She got several classic pictures of things like that.

You've probably seen the picture of the

Indians in the plum orchard. I have a wonderful card with a picture of a slipper full of porcupine quills. She took a picture of that.

I: A bedroom slipper or a woman's ballroom slipper?

JB: I think it was a bedroom slipper because they had gone out camping, and a porcupine came wandering into the tent. They threw something at it and the slipper was full of porcupine quills. She took one of the quills and she poked it into the postcard. The quill is in the postcard.

When she was here in La Grande, she took many school pictures.

I: I'm wondering if Mae might have known or been influenced by some of the well-known outdoor photographers.

JB: I have no idea of that. The biggest collection I have of Mae's is her wildflower pictures. She won a lot of ribbons for her flower pictures, especially at the Union County Fair.

I: Were most of those tinted by your mother?

JB: Yes.

I: Did she focus on whole banks of wild flowers or on one or two?

JB: Specific flowers. She took photographs of the garden that used to be at Ed Stearns' place. They had a big garden with all kinds of flowers. My mother tinted those up. I don't recall any pictures of a big nursery anywhere.

- I: Do you think she photographed animals?
- JB: Occasionally. There is a classical picture of Mr. McDaniel in Cove, with a cow that was put on a postcard, and I have that. There are dogs and donkeys, tiny burros [see p. 22]. Then she put out a famous postcard--I think she did dozens of them--that said, "When shall we three get together again?" Sometimes you have to think a while.
- I: Now that suggests that when she photographed animals she was looking for a humorous animal.
- JB: She was a very humorous person.
- I: That also would be the kind of animal picture that would sell back then, I suppose.



Mae's photo of the aftermath of an encounter with a porcupine
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

Activities in Later Life

- JB: She was also in the women's group here that put on plays. She played the men's roles, such as minister or a logger. I have pictures of her in all these different get-ups. She did black face as well, playing the fiddle as a black face musician. Mabel Doty wrote a play called "Barbara Fritchie Slept Here." Mae played a handyman in that, I think.
- I: Are you aware of her efforts to extend her reputation in any way beyond Union County?
- JB: No, I'm not aware of that. I know she copyrighted her pictures. She copyrighted all these as well as some early animal pictures--gaggles of kittens, dogs, and chickens. She had quite a few of those, come to think of it. I know one that was copyrighted in 1914. But the flower pictures were all copyrighted 1941.
- I: Do you think that worked to her advantage as far as sales were concerned?
- JB: They have. A lot of those were entered in county fairs.



One of many animal-photograph postcards produced about 1912 by Mae
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

I: What other county fairs besides Union County?

JB: She never branched out beyond La Grande that I know of. I know the Rotary Club had an art show where she won a ribbon. She entered her things in the various events around here, but I never knew her to enter anything outside of this area.

JB: Come to think of it, if she was forty-something when she moved to La Grande, she didn't have a very long professional life left. She finally had to give up photography somewhere between 1947 and 1950. at which time she went into the magazine business, selling magazines. I think in the last fifteen years of her life she didn't do much photography but concentrated on selling magazines.

I: You mean house-to-house solicitation?

JB: No. She set up her car that was from the

1940s, and had a "Mae Stearns' Photography" sign on the back. In the '50s it was the Mae Stearns' Magazine Agency. She had a lot of friends she'd call up and say, "Do you want to renew this?" or they'd they call her and say, "I need a subscription."

I: Did she also go around to stores and stock the shelves?

JB: No.

I: Do you think that the agency for her meant she just sold to individuals?

JB: Yes, especially to all her lady friends; they all bought from her.

I: What's your inference about why she quit photography? Was she getting old and tired?

JB: I think so. She physically wore out. I don't know when she gave up the camera with the big black hood over it. Even in her studio here, she focused on ground glass, put in the film holder,



Mae attired as a male character in one of several plays produced locally
Photo courtesy of James Bennett



Car Mae used for her magazine-subscription business in the 1950s
Photo courtesy of James Bennett

- aimed, cocked it, and then developed.
She had lenses that had an air pressure
thing to click it.
- I: She never had an Argus, or 35mm camera, as far as you know?
- JB: I think later on she got some kind of a camera like that, but I think it was just for personal use. I don't think she did it for professional use.
- I: What would she think about digital photography?
- JB: She'd be really excited about that.
- I: What would appeal to her about it?
- JB: Just how creative they can be--what you can do with them. If she were twenty years old when all this came out, I'd bet she would have jumped into it with both feet. She was a very creative person and always wanted to know things. I bet she'd do really well.

Representative Selection of Mae Stearns' Photographs

All images courtesy of James Bennett



Mae in 1930, six years after moving her photographic studio from Cove to La Grande





Cove children, c. 1912

Jean Stearns (later Jean Bennett, Jim's mother), second row, second girl from right
Lawton W. Stearns (Mae's nephew), front row center, with Indian headdress



Unidentified Cove girls, ca. 1912



Unidentified Cove children, perhaps on 4th of July, ca. 1912



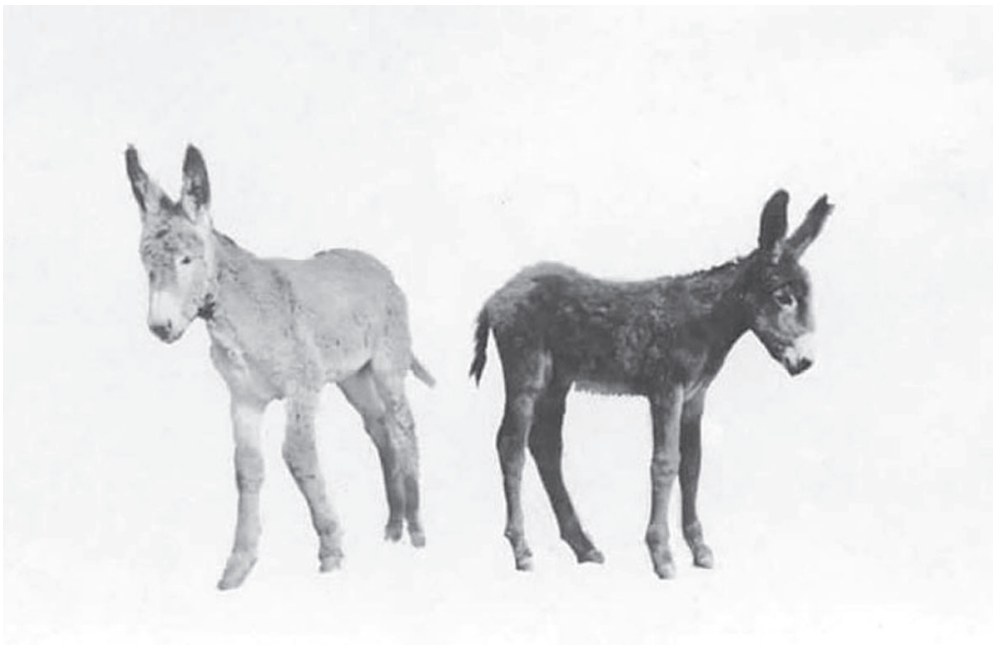
Grandmother Daugherty (Mae's sister's mother-in-law),
with family and their friends, ca. 1912



Early Cove teenagers, ca. 1913



Postcard photo by Mae Stearns of Royal Anne cherries from Cove



Postcard photo by Mae Stearns, with caption, "When shall we three get together again?"

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