

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 3, 2012

George Eastman and the Stanley Twins: George Eastman (1854–1932) of Rochester, New York, is the most famous name connected with photography in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Remembered for his invention of roll film, which, when perfected, made it possible for amateurs to take “family pictures” in small portable box cameras with no adjustments, he was a pioneer in all components of the picture-taking (and developing) business. This industry developed rapidly after 1900.

In the late 19th century, however, most film was manufactured for commercial photographers (such as F. E. Stanley), and they preferred glass plate negatives, the emulsion on which was more advanced and created more perfect images. Eastman recognized this and continued to manufacture glass plate negatives and the bulky reflex cameras that used them. In northern New England alone, there were perhaps a dozen small companies also manufacturing glass plate negatives, and the Rochester magnate was gradually buying up most of them, but he desperately wanted the business developed by the Stanley twins. It was well known that the Stanleys had a superior product.

Just before 1900, Eastman saw his chance when the twins became interested in building early automobiles. In 1899, when the twins showed little interest in selling their dry plate business, he figured he could “starve them out.” They had about 17% of all dry plate sales at that time, and with Eastman’s strong position in the field, he expected their share of the total to drop. Two years later, however, they had 19% of the market and appeared to be gaining. Eastman had to try another approach.

He bought one of the very first steam cars the Stanleys built and then two or three small Locomobiles while the Stanleys were still involved in Locomobile’s early success. He praised these cars as being fine performers and the very best of this new mode of transport for a reasonable price. Despite all this praise, the Stanleys were not moved to consider selling the Stanley Dry Plate Company.

Finally Eastman tried, through a “secret agent,” another approach. In those days well-to-do families would employ several weeks per year a seamstress, who would live and eat with the family while working there. F.E. and Augusta employed such a young woman who was not hard to look at, either. Eastman hired a man to ask her for one or more dates, during which time he would direct the conversation to what the Stanley family discussed over dinner. It was hoped that he could pick up discussions about the latest Eastman proposal and how it was received, thereby providing a new strategy toward purchase of the twins’ business. There is no evidence that this effort produced positive results.

In 1904, however, the Stanley twins did sell out to the Eastman Kodak Company, reportedly for \$3 million, which figure has been reduced in recent writings to something under \$2 million. None of the Newton (Massachusetts) buildings went with the sale, and two of these buildings were soon used exclusively by the Stanley Motor Carriage Company, along with six or eight new adjoining structures that comprised the “Stanley factory.”

Eastman moved the old Stanley business to Rochester, and for at least 10 years thereafter a customer could buy Stanley Dry Plates, manufactured by the Eastman Kodak Company. In 1914, photographer T. Clarence Marshall took excellent photographs of the new Yorklyn mills on huge dry plates (12 x 20) of this description. George Eastman made millions but committed suicide at the age of 78. His company was a major player in all phases of the industry until the success of digital photography less than a generation ago.