

Free Press Flashback: Their wooden box camera was big hit at 1974 Michigan State Fair

Barbara Henning Special to the Free Press

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Editor's note: Barbara Henning is a poet, writer and teacher living in Brooklyn, New York. Born in Detroit, she met Allen Saperstein at Cobb's Corner bar on Cass Avenue in 1972. They fell in love and later married. In 1973, she and Saperstein bought a wooden box camera from Art Frazier, an elderly man who had built the camera and peddled photos in the Cass Corridor and near the Detroit Institute of Art. In this excerpt from her memoir, "Make Your Mama Proud," Henning writes about adventures with the camera in the Corridor and at the Michigan State Fair. This excerpt has been slightly edited for clarity and accuracy.

Allen struck up a friendship with Art Frazier. He wanted to sell his camera, and Allen wanted to buy it.

We had some money left after our trip to Montreal, so Al made a deal with him, and in the spring of 1974, we went to his room in an old hotel, near Stimson and Myrtle Avenue. The room reeked of bug spray and alcohol. His camera, he explained, was the prototype for the Polaroid. I took notes as he explained to Allen which chemicals to buy, how to mix them and how to use the camera.



Barbara Henning and Allen Saperstein posing together for a photo in 1973. Provided By Barbara Henning

When we left with the camera and bags of supplies, I never saw Art again, but I'm sure Allen stopped by to see him now and again because he was like that; he liked listening to people tell their stories. He had a very heartfelt way of connecting with others.

At first, we experimented with the camera, setting it up on its wooden tripod in the yard of our flat and on the streets in the Cass Corridor. We practiced mixing the chemicals and playing with the settings until we learned how to use it.



The homemade camera Allen used operated like a self-developing Polaroid.
Provided By Barbara Henning

There were three small stainless steel tanks under the wooden box. We would reach inside the sleeve into the box, clip the photo in front of the lens, pull the lever to take the photo, then we'd move it into the developer tank, then lift it from there to the tank with the stopper, and then the bleach fix.

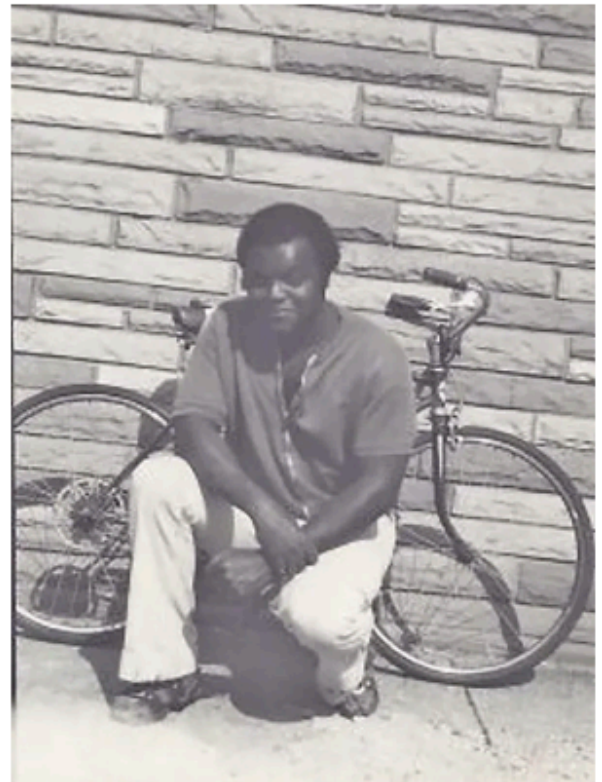
When the photo was ready, we would take it out of the sleeve and put it in acetic acid and water (or vinegar and water if we didn't have the chemical). Then, at the end, we'd put it into a small plastic container with water and color, either black or brown for a sepia finish. The customers would watch as their images slowly appeared. Even though everyone was familiar with Polaroids, it was still like a magic show.

Allen and I had been storing our motorcycles in a city warehouse on Third Avenue. We received a call from a neighbor saying the garage doors were wide-open and they could see our cycles. Someone might steal them. Allen was out of town, so I called a friend, Joe Hendricks, to come with me.

As we were walking the bikes west on West Forest Avenue in the dark, the Detroit police stopped us. They refused to look at the titles I had in my pocket. Instead they handcuffed both of us and put us in the back seat of a police car. Because Joe was Black — we were sure of that — he was locked in a cell in the basement while I was handcuffed to a chair in the station.

The police laughed at me. Then they made some phone calls and discovered that the motorcycle was indeed mine. So they delivered both of us and the motorcycles, now with new dents, back to our flat.

On Sunday mornings, a group of friends would often gather at our flat for brunch. Allen loved to entertain. One Sunday, Billy Reid, table tennis star and historian of the lineage of the hip, brought a friend with him, Halima Bunnell. We were looking at some of the photos from our camera adventures on the streets when Halima started telling us how she had been working in the ethnic festivals on the waterfront, selling astrology charts and reading palms. She had done very well and was thinking about working some county fairs. She talked about how much money we could make with this camera by taking it to the ethnic festivals and county fairs.



Joe Hendricks, a friend of Barbara Henning. *Provided By Barbara Henning*



Allen listened intently. Years earlier, he had worked with circuses and what she was saying interested him. “You could dress them up in antique clothing. You’d have lines of people with this camera.” They were both drinking vodka and talking excitedly.

We reserved our spot at the Michigan State Fair about five spaces away from where Halima would set up her booth. Then we had to figure out how to build a booth. Brad Decker, a young man who had some carpentry skills, came by and helped us build it out of plywood and 2-by-4s. It was literally an 8-by-8-by-8 wooden box that we could take apart and reassemble. We painted it bright red. Later, we learned that we should have slanted the roof. The top protected us only from sunlight, not from rain. Allen put in the electricity. I think our landlord, Eric Shreve, must have come downstairs and put his two cents in.

Our friend David Snow painted the sign: “Make Your Mama Proud.” I don’t remember how we came up with the name for it, but there probably was a group discussion. The drummer, Bob Meek, made a bebop mix tape that we played over a speaker hooked on the front of the booth. In this technological age when everyone is photographing everything, it seems odd, but we never photographed the booth or the sign. Even the tape has disappeared, as well as parts of the camera.

We scoured the secondhand stores and put together a box of clothes and props so we could dress people up, as a farmer and his wife with a pitchfork, Bonnie and Clyde with machine guns, the roaring '20s with a tuxedo and top hat. We had lots of weird purses and hats. At the Michigan State Fair in August 1974, Detroiters loved the camera and the idea. We did very well. We sold lots of photos. I remember friends and family coming by. They took their best shots home with them; we kept the test photos. That’s why so many of ours are dark and blurry.



People dressing up for the box camera to have their photos taken, their names are lost to time.
Provided By Barbara Henning

If we were to make money everywhere like we did at the state fair, we thought, we wouldn't have a problem paying for motels while working in the county fairs. On Labor Day, when the state fair closed, we packed up our trailer with all our planks, boards and boxes. We led the caravan in our rusty old Ford galaxy and trailer and Halima followed in her little rusty Karmann Ghia.

In Allegan, we paid for a motel room for a few nights, but we quickly learned that we were not going to do that great there. We sold some photos, but not enough. The people were not as excited as Detroiters about dressing up in front of an old camera. Allen went to a sporting goods store and bought a three-person tent and three cheap sleeping bags. We put the tent up in a nearby campground, and that's where we slept for most of our trip.

Just before we arrived in Allegan, the weather turned cold. Everyone was wearing winter jackets. We had a lot of trouble finding the right settings on the camera. Finally, we started heating the chemicals with a light bulb. I found a big horsehair coat for sale in another booth and added that to our costumes. Maybe country people would like the coat and the pitchfork better than the gangster look that appealed to Detroiters.

Henning's memoir is available at <http://makeyourmamaproud.org>.



Patti Henning, Barbara Henning's sister, posing to have her photo taken. *Provided By Barbara Henning*

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