

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.