



## Celebrating Free Enterprise and One Hundred Years of Kodak Moments

by Lawrence W. Reed

### Summary

One hundred years ago, Eastman Kodak Company founder George Eastman introduced the Brownie, the camera that put photography within the financial reach of average Americans for the first time. Eastman's story is an inspiring example of what is possible when people have the freedom to work hard and reap the rewards of their efforts.

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This month marks a centennial anniversary that deserves to be noted. It was 100 years ago, in February 1900, that George Eastman first introduced the Kodak Brownie box camera. The price tag was one dollar, and film sold for 15 cents per roll. For the first time, taking pictures was within the reach of almost every American family.

Whether you are a camera buff or not, you probably have seen and perhaps even used a Brownie. Nowadays, they show up at rummage sales and antique shows, but I can remember when they were still widely used in the 1950s during my childhood. They were simple to operate and took great pictures.

The Brownie did not just inaugurate the era of modern photography; in America, it became a genuine cultural phenomenon. Millions were sold, and thousands of American youngsters signed up as members of The Brownie Camera Club and entered Kodak photo contests. Men and women who later became famous photographers got their start with Eastman's little invention.

The man who gave us the Brownie camera was no stranger to photography in 1900. In the 1870s, when Eastman was in his 20s and picture-taking was not much older, photography became his hobby and later, the passion of his life. Cameras in the 1870s were as big as breadboxes. The tools of the professional photographer's trade, including a bulky, unreliable camera, a tripod, and various liquid chemicals, were more than a single man could carry—"a pack-horse load" as Eastman described it. He resolved to downsize, simplify, and reduce the cost of the "burden" of taking pictures.

Though he lived his entire life in the area where he was born—upstate New York—Eastman traveled widely. He once visited Michigan's Mackinac Island, where he set up his camera equipment to take photos of the natural bridge, a stone landmark. A crowd of gawking tourists gathered,



Photography was an expensive, cumbersome, and time-consuming hobby strictly for professionals until George Eastman introduced the Kodak Brownie camera in February 1900.

assuming Eastman would take their pictures and offer the photos for sale. When he informed them he was making pictures for his own purposes and not for sale, a disappointed tourist chewed him out: “Then why did you let us stand in the hot sun for a full half-hour while you fooled around with your contraptions! You ought to wear a sign saying that you are an amateur!”

Eastman experimented endlessly and discovered new techniques and processes for producing better film and lighter, less expensive cameras. A self-taught chemist, he ended the era of sloppy, wetplate photography by inventing a process that utilized dry chemicals, though not without many disappointments. His Eastman Dry Plate Company almost went bankrupt in the 1880s, in spite of his hard work and sleepless nights. But in America’s golden age of invention, when taxes were low and rewards for persistence were often great, this man who had dropped out of school at the age of 13 went on to build an extraordinarily successful business.

By 1888, Eastman had simplified the camera into a small, easily held box measuring three and three-quarter inches high, three and a quarter inches wide, and six and a half inches long. He needed a name for it, a catchy trademark that could be easily pronounced and spelled. He believed “K” was “a strong, incisive sort of letter” and so, after toying with various combinations of letters, he hit upon the short, snappy name, “Kodak.” But the first Kodak camera, priced at \$25 when it debuted in 1888, was still unaffordable for most Americans.

Eastman worked feverishly to cut costs and improve quality. The result was a camera that would reach people, in Eastman’s words, “the same way the bicycle has reached them”—the Kodak Brownie. It took the world by storm. A new term was coined in 1905 to describe the millions of people caught up in the craze: “Kodak freaks.”

The estimated 70 billion pictures Americans alone will take this year are the direct descendents of the Kodak Brownie, the first mass-produced camera in history. Its creator, George Eastman, a superb businessman as well as a talented inventor, became one of America’s wealthiest citizens and gave away more than \$100 million to universities and charities before his death in 1932.

This month, Americans snapping photos at family reunions, weddings, birthdays, vacations, and anywhere else should pause to thank George Eastman, the man who made all of their “Kodak moments” possible 100 years ago with his great invention, the Brownie.

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**(Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. More information on entrepreneurs and economic history can be found at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)**

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