

[Stearns, Omar P.]

Father's Day Celebration Originated in Honor of Late Omar P. Stearns First Observance of Date in Winthrop 32 Years Ago

Few people realize that the nation-wide celebration of Father's Day to be observed throughout the country on June 17 was originated and founded by Mrs. Maude Stearns Ellison of Winthrop in tribute to the sterling character of her father, Omar P. Stearns, poet, preacher and salesman, whose travels up and down the North Country left a trail of good deeds and pleasant memories with all with whom he made contact.

Fathers' day was founded thirty-two years ago and the third Sunday in June was chosen as the day on which homage would be paid to those fathers who have been an inspiration to their children. The first Father's' Day was observed in the Winthrop Universalist church with a service planned by Mrs. Ellison to honor her father, and to give opportunity to others to honor theirs.

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For the first 15 or 18 years Father's Day gained little popularity, but in 1928 a story was carried in the Winthrop Free Press giving the background of the movement which gained wide notice throughout the nation...The chronicles of the man who inspired the day prove very interesting.

Omar P. Stearns was born March 22, 1848 at Holmes Hill, Stockholm, in a small house at the corner of the Southville and Hopkinton roads. The house still stands but it has been moved halfway down the hill and is now used as a tool house.

He early proved his strength; for on the day of his birth he was placed on a pillow in a rocking chair and "Uncle Peter Bresee," a neighbor weighing some 200 pounds came in and sat squarely on the baby. An early discovery of the mishap showed no harm to the youngster. Omar P. Stearns was the son of Ralph P. Stearns and Clarissa Holmes Stearns, both of pioneer stock. His father was the son of Abel H. and Deborah Kelsey Stearns and was a wheelwright and farmer. His mother was Clarissa Holmes, daughter of Benjamin and Eunice Hawley Holmes. Benjamin Holmes was a Whig and Republican and represented his district as assemblyman at Albany. All of the ancestors came originally from Vermont and settled in the township of Stockholm while it was yet a wilderness.

As young Omar grew into childhood he lived a hardy life, sleeping in a room where small drifts of snow crept across his bedroom floor in the winter. On Sundays he attended the Old Baptist church and listened to a "four hour service of continuous goodness" which seemed an age to children. If no service were held there he walked to the Presbyterian church at East Stockholm, (now the Winthrop Congregational church.)

¹ two paragraphs about Father's Day omitted here

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His schooling was limited. He attended the district school at Holmes Hill, one term of Select School at East Stockholm, and one and one half terms at Lawrenceville Academy. (Expenses for half term \$17.00.) While there he gave an oration "Time Brings All Things to Light." In the winter he taught a term in Scotland district (now Brookdale).

From diary entries his life goes on:

Clerk at Wilson J. Culver's store at West Stockholm receiving \$100 per year and then received a \$25 bonus for "Done so well." Later he clerked with Clark Sumner of West Stockholm staying two years. The Culver store was absorbed and the new store was known as Sumner and Stearns' General Store.

He then went to Moira and bought out Edson C. Clark and Co. staying two years, at which time he came to Stockholm Depot and went into business with Spencer H. Stearns in Shaw and Stearns brick block where he remained for five years.

In 1877 he went to Black Hills, Dakota, but found it too wild and stayed only a short time. When he returned he bought the Lyman Foster farm, bought the Lyman Foster farm, (now the John Page farm on the Potsdam road) living there for two years.

In 1879 he began traveling on the road with a line of boots, shoes, and rubbers for Kelsey and Brodie, traveling for them for five years. He then traveled for a Boston firm, Haynes, Sparrell and Co., for 45 years.

On May 9, 1870 Omar P. Stearns took as his bride Miss Alma Eldridge, a daughter of George W. and Mary Landon Eldridge of West Stockholm. The wedding was performed at the home of the bride by the Rev. Mr. Hathaway, pastor of the Potsdam Universalist Church.

In 1884, by then the father of two girls, he contemplated a move to Potsdam to enable his children to receive a better education. But after being instrumental in gaining the erection of the Brasher and Stockholm high school he built the family home in Winthrop.

Other gleanings from his diaries reveal his travels and his widespread influence. In 1890 he went to the National Democratic Convention, in Chicago, at the time that William Jennings Bryan was nominated.

In 1901 he published a book of poems, "Tracks From the Trips of a Traveling Man." In that same year together with his brother, Spencer Stearns, he agitated a cemetery for Winthrop and as a result the Winthrop cemetery association was incorporated in September 1901.

He was in the nucleus of the little group which planned the Winthrop Universalist church. On March 10, 1888, together with Delos D. Kelsey, H. W. Stearns and S. H. Stearns he attended the first public meeting to further the plan. On August 30, 1888 the church was completed and dedicated.

In 1902 we find that he journeyed to Washington and in 1904 he again broke into print with a widely, read book "What I Would Do If I Were a Pastor."

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In 1905 he bought land in Saskatchewan with his cousin, Edgar J. Stearns of Hutchinson Mines, and in 1906 he made the trip to Saskatchewan with Harry E. Townsend, returning again to Canada the following year.

In 1908 he spent a vacation at Pine Point, Maine, with his family and the Rev. and Mrs. H. E. Townsend. In 1909 he returned again to Saskatchewan with his son Ralph in the month of August. In September he went to Mount Clemens, Mich., for treatment for rheumatism where he obtained much relief.

After trying since 1914 to get the village interested in getting fire apparatus, a fire department was finally organized in 1918. He was also one of those who agitation for a local bank resulted in the opening of the First National Bank of Winthrop in 1915. He also was one of several who worked to obtain the brick pavement that extended from the corner of Massena street to the "Covered Bridge" at Brasher Falls, which was also built in 1915.

In the winter of 1915 he took part of his family and visited his brother, Webster and wife in Loughman, Florida. He visited Boston twice each year that he traveled, (fifty years in all).

On August 8, 1917 he sent check for a Life Membership to the American Red Cross, writing in his diary of the act, "They are doing great good and do not limit their help to any sect, class or nationality."

On December 21, 1917, now in his 70th year, he received a check for \$100, from the Pilgrim Shoe and Rubber Co., for selling more goods than in the previous year. Quite a record for a man of that age.

On April 25, 1918, he wrote in his diary, "Have stopped driving horses in my business, barns turned into garages and no feed. Will travel by car with Warren C. Goodnow. I have driven a team more than 100,000 miles. I have still good health and strength."

Omar P. Stearns passed away February 16, 1929 at the home of his daughter, Mena Stearns, who had cared for him through three attacks of pneumonia. He had traveled continuously until the last of October, 1928.

His daughter, Mena, writes of him: "He was the finest father anyone ever had, patient to the nth degree, very affectionate, had a host of friends in every village he visited, and was always interested in anything and everything that was good and for the betterment of mankind."

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