

“Famous Local Photographers Just Fade Away  
From Franklin’s Past...Underwood & Underwood, Part I”  
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The children playing on the Hawthorne schoolground don’t realize it. Nor do their teachers, parents or others in the neighborhood.

But just across the alley from the school, at 520 E. 5<sup>th</sup>, is a modest little house that for years has been holding a secret. For within the walls of the tiny structure was born one of the most famous photography studios in the world.

The story begins with the home entertainment craze that was sweeping America in the 1880s and ‘90s, the stereopticon. This hand-held instrument allowed the viewer to see a pair of matching photographs in “3-D”, and in effect was the “television” of the Victorian parlors.

In 1882, two Ottawa boys, Elmer and Bert Underwood, began selling stereopticons and the photographic views door-to-door for three manufacturers. Their salesmanship was so effective that in just six months they oversaw the companies’ sales for all the western half of the entire nation.

As a result of this success, the Underwoods in 1883 built a small frame office and supply depot next to their parents’ home at Fifth and Mulberry. The original building is the west half of the present structure at 520 E. 5<sup>th</sup>.

The brothers soon set out in business for themselves, and Underwood and Underwood began making its own stereopticons and photographic views. Elmer and Bert personally traveled the world in search of interesting scenery, events, and people to capture on film and bring back to American armchair travelers.

In the years that followed, the Underwood and Underwood name covered the globe at an astonishing rate. They quickly opened a branch in Baltimore then expanded to Toronto, Canada, and Liverpool, England. Additional branches and supply agencies were later located in Paris, Manila, Stockholm, Cape Town, Melbourne, Shanghai, Berlin, Moscow, Singapore, Bombay and other cities.

Although the company’s headquarters moved from Ottawa to New York in 1891, Ottawa always remained one of their main branches. The brick building on the southwest corner of Third and Main was built in 1901 to house the local Underwood offices.

At its peak, Underwood and Underwood made nearly 300,000 stereopticons and seven million photographs a year. As a result, there are millions of stereoptic views scattered around the world today that read in their margins: “Underwood and Underwood, publishers, New York, London, Toronto, Canada, and OTTAWA, KANSAS.”