

Information provided by Joe Struble, Archivist, George Eastman House Photo Collection

They are gelatin silver dry plate negatives and were available commercially. I don't believe they were a Kodak product.

I have no good idea of how popular or common these were. Seems to be more of a novelty camera to me. There are only 12 vest pocket negatives in the Eastman House Collection, however, as compared to thousands of glass plate negatives of other formats..

The vest camera was designed by R.D. Gray and demonstrated by him to the New York Society of Amateur Photographers on December 22, 1885. The camera was a disc form fitted behind a rigid false shirt front with a lens that, disguised as a button, passed through the front. Six exposures could be made on the glass plate, rotated by a knob which also passed through the front. Turning this knob also set the rotary shutter, which was released by pulling a cord hanging below the false front.

In 1886 Gray altered the original design, eliminating the false front and making the camera slim enough to fit under an ordinary waistcoat. In that same year, Carl P. Stirn acquired the rights to the camera and patented the design in Europe, manufacturing the camera in Berlin. The camera was known variously as "Vest", "Secret", "Waistcoat", "La Cuirasse", and "Geheim". In addition to six circular images on a circular plate, other patterns or arrangement included truncated triangular shapes on a circular shaped plate, square plates on a cross shaped frame, and a circular plate carrying four circular images.

This collection was purchased by GEH in 1962 from a Syracuse family. It is comprised of twelve circular silver gelatin glass plate negatives, each measuring 5 1/2 inches in diameter. Each of these discs contain from two to six circular negative images measuring 1 3/4 inches in diameter. The thickness of the glass support varies among the twelve discs as does the spacing between the smaller negative images. Emulsion flaking, discoloration, and silvering out of image is apparent on several of the discs.

Oddly, these images appear to be vacation snapshots made by an amateur photographer at a resort location near the water. Activities associated with leisure time and recreation are pictured including sightseeing, swimming, boating and bicycling. People are informally posed alone or in groups on the boardwalk, against architectural structures and on boat decks. Images of animals such as a dog, kittens, geese, horses, and a monkey perched on a fence post are included. Other subjects include various modes of transportation including sail, ferry (identified as the "Rockaway") and paddlewheel boats (one identified as "Pomona") as well as surried horsedrawn carriages and a train. Nothing that couldn't (or wouldn't) have been made with an ordinary camera.