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As a congressman, Sam Farr has a front-row view of history. Often, he watches through the viewfinder of his camera.

He has captured scenes that are off-limits to the media -- Bill Clinton holding court on Air Force One, George W. Bush hand-shaking his way through the inauguration crowd, a smiling Fidel Castro entertaining visitors in Cuba.

But mostly Farr, whose district stretches from Santa Cruz through Monterey County, has focused his 35mm Canon camera on less sensational subjects: his colleagues performing the daily rituals of Washington political life. He has become a kind of unofficial photographer for many in the House of Representatives.

"Sam has a romance with history, and he is the one amongst us who documents it constantly," said Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, a longtime friend. "It goes beyond someone with a camera just happily snapping away. He understands these are important moments in time and he captures them."

An amateur photographer inspired by a family friend who was pretty good with a camera -- the legendary Ansel Adams -- Farr has become a bit of a legend of his own in Congress. Pacing the perimeter of official events in search of the best angle or simply approaching colleagues at parties and coaxing a smile, the 62-year-old Farr is constantly snapping pictures.

His low-key demeanor puts his subjects at ease, Eshoo said.

"There's Sam, smiling 'How are you?', lumbering through the crowd and snapping away," she said. "Most people don't really like to have their pictures taken, but if it's Sam doing it, they can't help but comply."

Farr takes about 7,000 photos a year. Then he gives most away, distributing 5-by-7 prints to whoever appears in them.

"It's something that I can do that gives me pleasure because I make my colleagues happy," said Farr, a passionate but soft-spoken Democrat. "It's a happy little thing."

But it's become much more than that -- for his colleagues and for Farr.

Farr's photographs grace the walls, mantels and campaign brochures of dozens of members of Congress. As he shares them with Democrats and Republicans alike, he spreads a bit of good will in a place famous for its bitter partisan battles.

For Farr himself, photography has become a passion to rival politics. His only child, Jessica,

25, jokingly refers to his camera as her sister. Photographing his colleagues and then presenting the pictures to them gives Farr a sense of daily accomplishment in Congress, where it often takes months if not years to push legislation into law.

“Whenever you're doing something, you like to get positive feedback, and God knows you can't get much in this job,” said Farr, who has labored in the minority for most of his decade in the House.

Photography is more than just a change of pace from the frustrations of lawmaking -- it's become a way for Farr to fulfill his romance with both history and nature.

When not photographing colleagues or family, Farr takes his camera outdoors to capture everything from the grandeur of Big Sur to the delicate elegance of a rose.

“When he was a little boy, his love of nature was collecting bird's nests and keeping them under the bed, and I think this is just an extension of that,” said his wife, Shary. “It's just Sam's way of honoring nature.”

Farr is an avid environmentalist, just like his late father. Fred Farr, a former state senator, was architect of California's scenic highway program.

It was during ceremonies in 1966 to dedicate the first highway -- a stretch of Highway 1 through Big Sur -- that Adams, a longtime friend of Fred Farr's, made a lasting impression on Sam Farr. After a party at Hearst Castle, the younger Farr hitched a ride back to Carmel with Adams. Their chat about the environment helped inspire Farr to take up photography.

“I bought a still camera and started taking pictures and never stopped,” Farr said while sitting in his Capitol Hill office, decorated with prints of Adams' nature photography.

Farr honed his political-picture-taking skills for 13 years as a member of the state Assembly. When Farr went to Washington in 1993, he brought his camera with him. As a congressman, he often can brandish it closer to presidents than anyone in the media.

But mostly Farr takes pictures of his colleagues and staff, whether attending stately congressional ceremonies or flying home to California.

“He comes up on us on the airplane and just, click, takes the picture,” said Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Santa Rosa. “Maybe he throws the bad ones away, but he really takes a great photograph. I have one of a rose that he took framed in my apartment. It's so beautiful.”

Farr, though, describes himself as a “struggling artist.” He hopes to take his first photography courses and dive more deeply into nature photography when he retires. Until then, he continues to snap away in the halls of Congress, capturing the moments small and large that form the capital's political panorama.

“My pictures,” he said, “are history.”

