

F. M. Steele – The Tourist Photo Artist by Larry Schwarm



My great-grandfather settled in Kiowa County, about sixteen miles south of Greensburg, Kansas, in the early 1880s. This photograph shows his cattle and farmstead in the distance, his neighbor and two daughters (one of which would later become a great-aunt) in the foreground.

The original photo belonged to an uncle and was one of many thousands pieces of history blown away by the Greensburg tornado. Even in my youth, before I had an interest in photography, I sensed something special about this photo and it sparked my imagination and told me stories about a family that was gone long before I was born.

I'd not heard of F.M. Steele until recently, but after looking at his photographs, I immediately sensed a connection. The style was unmistakable. Then reading that he worked in south-central Kansas and married his second wife in Greensburg, I knew that he had to have made some of those family images. One hundred years previously, his photographs made that part of my family's history visible to me. So, I am honored to be able to address the artistic quality of his work today.

Steele called himself a *tourist photo artist*, a title apparently unique to him, and used to describe what we typically refer to as an itinerant



photographer; one who travels to his subjects rather than having them

Larry Schwarm was awarded the Center for Documentary Studies / Honickman First Book Prize in 2002, and as a result, Duke University Press published a monograph of his work, *On Fire*, in 2003. His photographs reside in numerous important institutions, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He teaches photography at Emporia State University



Reenactment photo



Steele's wagon in mid-foreground

come to him. Imagine what his job must have been like. One hundred and twenty years ago he would have been traveling many miles to these remote areas on roads that were, at best, no more than paths through the grass. Given the equipment that he used, a camera the size of a small suitcase, a substantial wooden tripod, boxes of film that were actually coated sheets of glass, and a place where he could load film and camera, he had to travel in a horse-drawn boxed wagon that could serve as a portable darkroom.

In the United States during the late 19th century, there were hundreds of such itinerant photographers. Some continually traveled, making photographs wherever they went. Others, like Steele, worked in a general area and established a regular clientele. His intimate knowledge of the landscape and its people is much of what makes his work so revealing. His favorite themes were the cowboys and their animals, but he also made many photos of day-to-day farm and ranch operations, as well as portraits of individuals, couples, and groups.

F.M. Steele was more than a portrait and event photographer; he was an artist who used a camera to document the life of people carving out an existence in places far from east-coast society. In the latter part of the 19th century, he was using a relatively new medium. Photography had been invented only fifty years previously, so he did not have the benefit of a long tradition to draw from and had to invent his techniques and visual language as he worked. There were painters and sculptors who depicted Western life, but these scenes were almost always filtered



Remington - Breaking through the line



Steele - Cowboys on a round-up in Beaver County

through the artist's imagination, then translated and romanticized. There is a saying, not so true today as it was then, that photographs never lie. The camera was indiscriminate. What was in front of the lens was what was recorded. If we want to know what life was really like, we don't look to the romantic fantasies of painters, but to photographs.

Age can be reason enough for something to be historically interesting, but not enough to qualify it as art. Many factors go into elevating something to this level. Composition, or the design of the photo and how the visual elements work together, is perhaps the single greatest strength of Steele's images. In this photograph of cowboys branding cattle, every person, every animal, seems to be in exactly the right place. The balance is perfect. The eye first goes to the man dressed in a light colored shirt sitting on the dark horse. He leads us into the photograph. On the other side there is a man in dark clothes, on a white horse. Both horses and riders look intently towards the center and there is tension in their stances. Our eyes follow theirs, aided by the white line of the ropes, going towards the central figures. This is the focal point, or center of interest. Notice too, that the steer being branded is apparently the only completely white animal in the entire herd. If you changed any of these factors, the colors and placement of people and animals, the photo would not be as successful.

In this photograph, made in Beaver County, Oklahoma Territory, we see the same kinds of decisions being made. The dark shapes of the boy on the horse, the girl pouring water into a trough, the open door, and the shaded side of the sod house are equally spaced. The tree follows the contour of the boy, cradling him while complementing the oval format that Steele was fond of using. The wooden box that surrounds the well echoes the shape of the house, which, in turn, relates the foreground figures back to the house, connecting the two children to the mother standing by the open door. This composition did not happen by chance; it was made. It is possible that a photographer could take a picture where all these elements accidentally arranged themselves just exactly so, but for it to happen over and over is not an accident. Steele arranged the people and directed their actions. The result is that this photograph is much more than a portrait of family members; it is the story of



their life - a document of who they are, of their possessions, and their place in the world.

Since the Renaissance, artists have been defined by their personal styles. Most people can tell a Monet from a Picasso simply by looking at the work, and not by having to read signatures or labels. F.M. Steele's photographs have their own distinctive and identifiable traits that set them apart from others. One such trademark was his repeated use of compositional devices to effectively pull the viewer into the scene. With careful framing and the placement of objects in the foreground, he defined scale and created a sense of deep perspective. Having no way to successfully make color photographs, he had to think in black and white, and was masterful in the way that he broke up spaces with light and dark shapes.



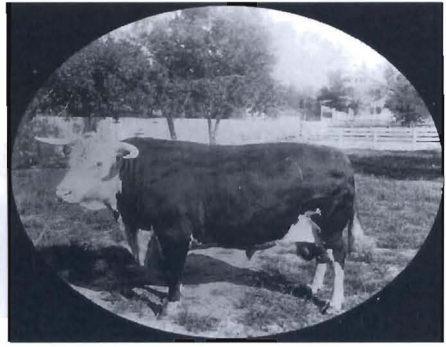
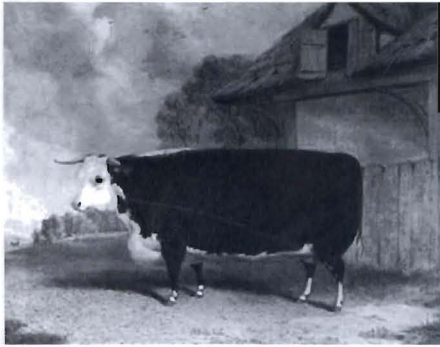
He used a similar technique in his photographs of farming practices. But instead of placing an object in the foreground, he photographed the land after the implement has passed, so that the foreground is filled with the newly turned soil. This gives the viewer a sense of place and includes them in the scene. One has to wonder if his decision to stand behind the machinery had anything to do with his knowledge that in the wake of the plow was the destruction of native prairie.

The repeated use and investigation of certain subjects contributes to an artist's style. Water lilies make us think of Monet and photographs

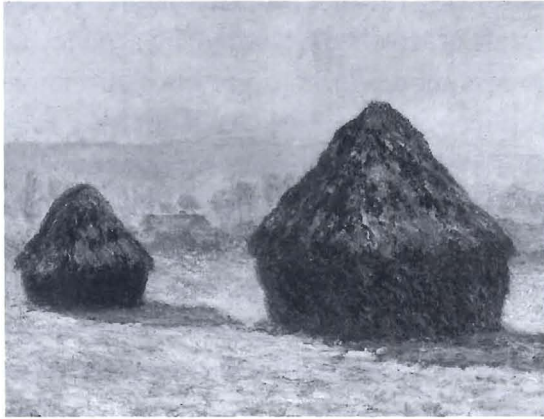


of pristine mountainous landscapes, of Ansel Adams. One can't help but notice Steele's fascination with cowboys, cattle, and horses. But another subject, less common for the geographical area, keeps showing up in his work. Anybody familiar with south-central Kansas and northern Oklahoma, the areas where he was working, knows that water is very scarce. Annual rainfall puts the region in the semi-arid category. There are no natural lakes and very few rivers or streams. One hundred years ago, before deep wells with diesel pumps and electric motors, water must have seemed like gold – and for a rancher or farmer, possibly more valuable. Over and over, almost in reverence, water appears in Steele's photographs, reminding us of its allure and importance.

Another subject, this one still popular today, was the portrait of the prize farm animal. The convention was to be straightforward and show the animal as clearly as possible, as seen in the 1865 painting of *Hereford Ox* by R. Whitford and a nearly identical pose in the 1890s photograph by Steele, titled "Hereford bull, which cost \$5,050.00 and weighed 2,200 pounds. Rockefeller Ranch, near Belvidere in Kiowa County."



Not much is known about Steele's personal life, but it is a reasonable assumption that he probably was not exposed to the contemporary art of his time. Still, similarities between his photographs and some of the compositions of more "famous" artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are uncanny. Compare this painting by the French artist Claude Monet, completed in 1890, to a photograph of the same subject



made by Steele around the same time period. Both chose to depict a pair of wheat-stacks, with one slightly in front of the other, almost as if they were a married couple. Backgrounds are more suggested than specific. Both artists put the horizon in the center of the composition, counter to the idea that horizon lines should follow the rule of thirds, one-third of the way from the top or one-third from the bottom, and both artists break convention by having the light source come from the rear rather than from the front or directly above.

In 1885, Thomas Eakins painted *The Swimming Hole*. At the time, as it might today, the painting, about male friendship and camaraderie,

caused some controversy because of the casualness of the men's nudity. Steele's photograph of cowboys bathing in a pond, taken about the same time, is no less modest with a group of spectators watching the presumably naked men in the water. (It is amusing to think about this being in a family album and having to be explained to children of later generations.) Both the painting and the photograph have the subjects carefully arranged, with perfectly spaced figures in varied poses to keep the composition from becoming static. The riders in the photo mimic the shape the trees in Eakins' painting, and the swimmers occupy nearly identical spaces in the two compositions. Mr. Eakins put himself into his painting as the man swimming in the lower right corner. Mr. Steele apparently stayed behind his camera.



F. M. Steele's photographs are visually accessible while being compositionally abstract and psychologically compelling. With their lush detail, they portray the immensity of life on the prairie with grace and intelligence. His work leaves a document of his world, and for us, a window into the past. For that, we are in his debt.