

A Chronology of the Life of F. M. Steele **by Jim Hoy**

The outline of pioneer Great Plains photographer F. M. Steele's life is relatively easy to reconstruct: Francis Marion Steele was born on 14 September 1866 in Stanton, Illinois. In 1870, following the disappearance and probable death of his father in St. Louis, Steele's mother moved with her children to Urbana, Missouri. At age 14 young Frank took up the study of photography at the studio of G. T. Atkinson in Kansas City. In 1890 Steele arrived in Dodge City and set out onto the prairies to photograph cowboys at work. In 1895 he married, in 1897 he divorced, and in 1900 he married a second time. After operating from studios in a dozen or more towns in southwest Kansas and western Oklahoma, in 1925 he set up shop in McCook, Nebraska. In 1935 he moved back to Dodge City, and on 2 January 1936 he died.

These are the basic facts, but gaining a deeper understanding of the legacy of this "unnoted" (Steele's striking images are often published, uncredited, in books and articles about the West) photographer whose photographs are unquestionably noteworthy, as well as exploring his personal life and inner nature, is more complex. I am thus interested not only in seeking to enlarge the Steele canon but also in making his name as well known as such other pioneer Great Plains photographers as Erwin E. Smith, L. A. Huffman, and Solomon Butcher.

When my wife Cathy and I began this project in 2003, we were aware of about five dozen of Steele's photographs: the Berryman Collection at the Krier Pioneer Museum in Ashland, with copies also held by the Kansas State Historical Society. In the intervening six years we have uncovered, in private collections but primarily through county historical societies in southwest Kansas, some 350 additional Steeles,

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many (but not all) bearing his logo. Steele's best-known work, iconic photos of cowboys, has appeared in many books and articles about the ranching west. Rarely, however, is Steele given credit for that work. For example, a couple of years back the *Folklife Center News*, published by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, included a picture of cowboys around a chuck wagon with a caption stating that it was taken by an unidentified photographer somewhere in Colorado or Utah. Actually, the picture was taken by Steele on the XIT Ranch in the Texas Panhandle. Ironically, if the editors had consulted the Library of Congress catalog, they would have known both the location and the photographer for Steele had copyrighted this photograph, a copy of which is held by the Library of Congress.

Steele's itinerant work from the back of his buggy was similar to that of pilot-photographers today who photograph a farmstead from the air, then drive through the countryside selling those photos to the owners of the farms they have photographed. Steele in his early years, I believe, took photos, then sold them to the ranchers and cowboys who had participated in the roundups. That is most likely why three of his photos ended up at Kinkaid, a small town in southeast Kansas near the Missouri border. The man who owned the photos, and appeared in them, had in his youth worked on a ranch in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Between the turn of the century and 1925 Steele began to do more work from studios. Records and newspaper advertisements suggest that he had either permanent studios, or rented space for temporary studios, in Ashland, Bucklin, Coldwater, Dodge City, Englewood, Garden City, Greensburg, Hutchinson, Liberal, Meade, Montezuma, Mullinville, Plains, Protection, and Syracuse in Kansas and in Beaver and El Reno, Oklahoma. About this same time Steele enlarged his scope of interest to include nearly every facet of life in the southwestern plains: crop agriculture (including wheat, kafir corn, and sugar beets), irrigation and railroad construction projects, farm house and ranch house portraits, studio portraits, small town life. A few landscape and wildlife photographs are included in his known work, as well as several from the 1921 flood in Pueblo, Colorado.

In 1925 Steele relocated to a studio in McCook, Nebraska. Thus far

we have been able to locate only a few photos taken in Nebraska. We have also uncovered only three or four Steele photographs of American Indians, but he must have taken hundreds of Indian photographs while in Nebraska. Three years ago we went to McCook and while there interviewed a man who, as a young boy, had sent in cereal boxtops to get a camera, which he then took to Steele to ask for help in operating. Steele not only helped but befriended the boy, and when Steele moved back to Dodge City, he gave the young man, then in high school, two wooden egg crates (the kind that hold something like 50 dozen eggs) full of glass plates, many of them taken at the annual picnic at Massacre Canyon, site of a battle between Lakota and Pawnee. The owner of the property in the twentieth century invited tribal members to attend the picnic each year, which they did in large numbers, and Steele went each year and took photographs. When the young man's family moved to a smaller dwelling, he put the two boxes in a crawl space, then went back to the house a few years later, after high school and a stint in the navy, to get the pictures. Unfortunately, they were gone and the woman then living there had no idea when or by whom they had been taken.

Steele undoubtedly took scores, even hundreds of thousands of photographs during his 45 years on the Great Plains. An 1897 issue of the *Comanche County Clipper* (Kansas) newspaper, for instance, noted that Steele had finished processing in his Ashland studio some 4,000 photographs taken over a period of two weeks in the countryside near Coldwater and Protection and still had about 1,500 more to complete.

Thus far no glass plates or film negatives (should he have embraced that technology later in his career) have surfaced in our searches. Stories from Ashland, as with the glass plates in Nebraska, indicate that Steele had little use (or perhaps no space) for these materials. Shortly after he had moved out of his Ashland studio in an upper floor of the bank building, I have heard from at least three sources, the sound of tinkling glass was heard as glass plates were being scoop-shoveled into a wagon in the alley below and hauled to the city dump.

In May of 1895 Steele married Pink Fletcher of Meade, and seven months later their daughter, Edith, was born prematurely, weighing only three pounds. Although another daughter, Zula Belle, was born in 1897,

the marriage was apparently a troubled one, for later that same year the Steeles were divorced. In 1900 Steele married Sarah "Sadie" Harp from Mullinville. Four years later their son, Marion Francis, was born.

The Steeles spent some ten years in Nebraska, returning to Kansas in 1935. In September of that year he was engaged by Dodge City to set up a chuck wagon and related cowboy paraphernalia at Boot Hill in order to encourage tourism. In addition, Steele intended to give school programs with his photographs and the cowboy gear he had collected. Sadly, these plans were circumvented by Steele's death.

On the morning of 2 January 1936, living in rented rooms in Dodge City, Steele had gone into the kitchen to make breakfast. When he returned to the bedroom to check on Sadie, who was not feeling well, the coffee boiled over, extinguishing the flames on the stove and allowing the gas to fill the apartment. The couple died from asphyxiation. Frank Steele was 69 years old. He and Sadie are buried in the Mullinville cemetery.