Reflecting on F. M. Steele
by Tom Rankin

Like other nineteenth century photographers—or many anyway—the legacy of F.M. Steele is more in his photographs than in the biographical details of his life. And maybe that is as it should be. While we do have some of biographical details, it's his work that has the final word. But we can't help but try to imagine his motivations to photograph on the Plains, what it was like to move around, how he gained access to ranches and the work of ranchers, and just what he was like as a working photographer. What if he'd left us with some reflections on his life and work, not unlike the 19th century photographer William Henry Jackson did in his autobiography *Time Exposure*? Or something like Jacob Riis and his autobiography, *The Making of an American*, which also recounts the discovery and use of photography in the 19th century? Perhaps one day, like the discovery of his pictures in this place and that, we will come across more information about his life and image making.

In Steele's images, however, we learn a great deal about him. We see his abiding interest in the land and the social/occupational interactions within it. Always the domain of documentary photography, Steele seems to have had a deep attraction to cultural landscapes of the Great Plains. Steele left us a visual record—albeit nearly nothing else—that is at once beautiful and engaging, but also fueled by detail and nuance of the occupational, domestic, and agricultural worlds of his time and place. To be sure, Steele is a landscape photographer, his interest in the land and the settlement of the land so prescient. A profoundly beautiful example of this is his image of St. Jacob's Well, so carefully composed

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Tom Rankin is Director of the Center for Documentary Studies and associate professor of the Practice of Art and Documentary Studies at Duke University. A photographer, filmmaker, and folklorist, Rankin has been documenting and interpreting American culture for more than twenty years. A native of Kentucky, he has curated a number of exhibitions and published numerous articles and reviews on photography and Southern culture. His photographs have been published widely in numerous magazines, journals, and books, and he has exhibited throughout the country. His books include *Sacred Space: Photographs from the Mississippi Delta* (1993), which received the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Photography; '*Deaf Maggie Lee Sayre': Photographs of a River Life* (1995); *Faulkner's World: The Photographs of Martin J. Dain* (1997); and *Local Heroes Changing America: Indivisible* (2000).

and taken at the ideal instant to perfectly frame the horse and rider, tiny creatures in a vast landscape. One can imagine a compelling image made of this place that showed no sign of man or ranching culture. But that was not, it seems, the intent or aesthetic of F.M. Steele.

As Robert Adams has written, landscape photos offer three fundamental "verities": "geography, autobiography, and metaphor." Adams writes, "Geography is, if taken alone, sometimes boring, autobiography is frequently trivial, and metaphor can be dubious."

Taken together, Adams contends, they can coalesce, strengthening one another, into a powerful commentary on the affection for life in a particular place. And it does seem that Steele's work--as an artist and documentarian—is quite affectionate.

In 1942 Roy Stryker, who directed the Farm Security Administration photographers in the 1930s and '40s, put forth his idea of documentary in an essay for *The Complete Photographer:* "Documentary is an approach, not a technique; an affirmation, not a negation. . . . The job is to know enough about the subject matter to find its significance in itself and in relation to its surroundings, its time, and its function." In no way does Steele seem the least bit critical; he's not indicting a system or way of labor that he finds exploitive. He's not calling for reform with his pictures. He's basically an optimist, a celebrant, at least in his pictures. More than 'documents,' much more than reportage, these images recall Walker Evans's notion of the lyric documentary or documentary art.

Since we are not certain of the reasons for his particular photographs, we have to imagine that many were commissioned, the result of a typical business arrangement. And in those moments Steele would certainly want to please his customers, put the 'best face' possible on those he photographed and the lives his images were to represent. So one possible way to think of his optimism is that he is reflecting the emotion of his subjects, that he needs and wants to please his clients.

While often 19th century images create the photographic illusion of the invisible photographer, Steele seems to have wanted to acknowledge his own presence. His ranch scene images showing his wagon-mounted photographic studio is such a poignant acknowledgement of the role of the photographer in influencing the natural order of things on the ranch.

This image is the seminal self-portrait of the landscape photographer, with Steele behind the camera, but his wagon front and center in the image.

Much of what Steele would have encountered on ranches across the Great Plains would have been people engaged in making new lives there, in discovering new places to live and work. It was a changing place, an evolving life, and photography, for all its limitations, can be an ideal medium to measure this kind of change. For instance, Steele's image of a dehorning near Englewood portrays the shift from open-range cattle ranching to corrals and squeeze chutes. And it also depicts a moment of plenty, with an abundance of horns in the foreground affirming a good, healthy herd and also a fruitful, if also hard, day's work.

Images of people idealized in a land of plenty have been a favorite for photographers for the entire life of the medium. Steele's image of fields of produce, of the Miner twins dwarfed by stalks of kaffir corn, of huge piles of sugar beets in Garden City, all suggest great abundance, hiding no doubt the vicissitudes of daily life that the camera doesn't see and that, perhaps, wasn't for the camera. Idealized or not, though, these images and many others document a time that was fleeting. We know that F.M. Steele was a collector of cowboy artifacts and paraphernalia and just by looking at a small group of his images we can see he's also a collector through his photography. Did he intend for these images to last, to become part of the historical record, to find a place in the Kansas State Historical Society? We may never know completely, but it's clear that he knew the times he lived in and appreciated full well the change all around him. That many of his images survived is something of an accident, I suppose, but in the moment they were made they were intended to 'fix' that moment for those he was working for and also for himself.

As a photographer of the vast Plains, Steele, like any image maker, was challenged to find order in a day-to-day of disorder, literally organizing within the frame an understandable reality of what he saw happening, of trying to reverse the scale, making people at times more prominent than the land. This is the photographer's act, his mysterious challenge, confronting human actuality in such a way as to take the

personal to the universal, the particular to the metaphoric. And doing so in a way that, as Eudora Welty has written about her own photography, has given us a chance to know a particular time and place: "If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn't happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly." That, it seems, is what is happening now with the "rediscovery" of F.M. Steele.