Steele, Photography, and the Difficulty of Context
by John Carter

Our task with F. M. Steele is really archaeological. We are looking at photographs that are intellectually comparable to what archeologists deal with in pot shards, ashes, and beads. We must extract large meaning from what we know is a very small piece of a much larger body of work. We have but a few hundred photographs out of what assuredly was an oeuvre of hundreds of thousands of images.

Steele made many photographs and we are extrapolating a lot of information based on a small percentage of them. And so if we are going to look at this as archaeological exploration, which is the way that I am going to put it, we need to think about some really important and really basic questions that are philosophical in nature.

Looking at the past can be a rapturous affair. It is a process perfectly capable of creating mirages in which we see what we wish to see. Take for example the photographs of early plains settlers. The standard iconography asserts that the stoically posed pioneers with their humorless countenances reflect the hardships of their lives. We want those settlers to be of a different genetic caste, a race of heroes. The reality is less the stuff of legend but more interesting: These folks are not suffering, they are proud. They have land.

Or look at 19th century photographs of American Indians. Many good, solid scholars have taken them as anthropological studies, missing the point that they are crafted by Euro Americans for sale to Euro Americans. They meet the expectation of the consumer and were never intended to explore the nuances of culture.

John Carter is currently the Senior Research Folklorist at the Nebraska State Historical Society and Associate Editor of *Nebraska History*. He holds a B.A. from Nebraska Wesleyan and an M.A. in American Folk Culture from State University of New York, Cooperstown. His publications include, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream*, University of Nebraska Press and *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (with Richard Jensen and R. Eli Paul), University of Nebraska Press. He is a frequent presenter at the American Folklore Society, Western History Association, and the American Association for State and Local History. He has served as consultant to over a dozen major television productions including Ken Burns's "The Way of the West," and Time/Warner's "The Wild West."

So we must rightly ask: Was Mr. Steele photographing for history? If not, how can we use his photographs to understand the past? Such questions are ontological and require philosophical underpinnings.

Let us start with meaning. We need to have something that assures us of the rightness of our perceptions.

In the mid 1960s an architectural historian by the name of Christian Norberg-Schultz published an astonishing book entitled *Intentions in Architecture*. He set out the daunting task of explaining how it is we can actually look at a building and know whether it's good or not. While his exploration is not within our bailiwick, his process applies to a broader array of objects, photographs included.

Norberg-Schultz based his theories on a perceptual psychologist from the 1950s, one Egon Brunswik. To oversimplify a bit, Brunswik looked at perception as a system, not unlike biologists who look at, say, prairies, as more than an assemblage of grasses. Our perceptions are instructed by other people, which leads to values which leads to value systems which lead to cultures within which one finds shared collective meanings.

Let me just adapt a little bit about how Norberg-Shultz saw meaning creep into things. He crafted this analogy from Brunswik, and one that I will now expand upon. Imagine you're a spider and you have made a spider web and your desire as a spider is to entice a juicy bug to fly into your spider web so that you can dart out and crunch this juicy bug and have a good supper. Now the spider has a limited perception.

When the web moves, the spider goes scampering out. Now when it goes scampering out, sometimes the thing that caused the web to move is a bug and sometimes it is a leaf. So the spider gets out there and then it discovers whether a bug has been ensnared or not. And so you can imagine there is a lot of therapy that goes on with spiders because of their frustration in choosing badly, scampering out, and getting the leaf. It errs regularly.

That is one level of perception. Imagine then the next level, a fish in a pond. Now, unlike the spider, the fish can distinguish form and color. When a leaf falls on the pond, the fish is not fooled into thinking

that it is a bug. The fish knows that it is a nice juicy bug that will make supper because it, the fish, can make distinctions regarding the particular shape and color of the bug. In other words, it's applying values to its perceptions, and thus it errs less frequently.

Now picture that a fisherman on the bank looks out and sees what the trout is doing in the fish pond, and then that fisherman takes a piece of string and a piece of bent wire and some feathers and fur and ties them all together into an abstraction of that bug and the fisherman throws that abstraction of the bug onto the pond and it is a good enough abstraction for the trout to believe that it is a bug. And so it bites on the bug that turns out to be a fishing lure and the trout becomes supper.

You can see how we project our perception into things that then mean something. This fisherman who has been throwing artificial flies out on the pond learns which ones really work. And so over time he takes that artificial lure, that abstraction of a bug, and fixes it to his hat. It becomes jewelry; it becomes art. In other words, the perceptual transcends the utility of the object until it is no longer important that you used that artificial fly to catch fish. Now it's something else; it's a badge, a thing that has meaning beyond the utility of the object.

Norberg-Schultz argues, and I agree, that in our perceptions we take those kinds of associations and we compound them in our objects. We take them and pull them together so that we know the difference between a house and a church. We know those associations and those associations get clustered together into value systems. And value systems get gathered together and become what we call cultures. It is in that way that we can understand the world that we collectively create.

What does that have to do with photography? What does that have to do with Steele? Photography, in essence, is a massing of those perceptions. Here we find two issues that we need to deal with. One is ontological. Ontology is simply questioning the nature of the beast. What is this thing?

The physical nature of the photograph is very simple. It is animal, vegetable, and mineral. It's a piece of paper, made of wood or cotton

pulp (that would be the vegetable) upon which you slab an emulsion, a coating of gelatin or egg white-the animal. Early on it was albumen and later gelatin, boiled cow hide. It is a binder, and into that we dump the mineral, silver, which is light sensitive. That material gets darker in relative proportion to the amount of light that falls upon it. We learned that with the intervention of a lens we could organize that darkening process so that we could recreate the reality that was set before the lens. Now my point here is an important one. Our object is simply a combination of animal, vegetable, and mineral organized by a lens. But that organization becomes important because the photograph itself - this animal, vegetable, mineral thing - is only a picture, the abstraction of reality, like a pencil sketch, like a painting. But with photography the abstraction is very, very good.

Think about the co-worker at the office who has a grandkid and grabs his wallet every time you walk by and assaults you with: "Look at my grandson." Well, it's not his grandson, it's a two dimensional abstraction of him. But both grandpa and the people whose throats he is shoving it down look at it and say "Yeah, that's him." We believe it to be true, but we don't do that with painting, and we don't do that with pencil sketches, or sculptures, all those other things that are likewise abstractions of reality.

And so, we can apply what we know about photographs to Francis Marion Steele. This gets us to the next level, which is epistemological. If this is in fact an abstraction of reality, then how do we know we are not fooling ourselves? That, too, is a good question. This is not, in fact, reality, so what are we to make of it, and what does this thing tell us?

Photography is a transaction, an important one. First and foremost, it demands the active participation of the photographer. You can sit in your studio in New York and paint the Rocky Mountains. But if you are going to photograph them, you have to go there. Photography is essentially a participation sport; you cannot do it without being there. But more than that, from the nature of the beast, photography is also one of our largest defrauders of the reality of existence.

The natural ontology is that time is fluid. What I said two minutes ago is gone and what I say thirty seconds from now will be fleeting. You can't rewind the time. Photography allows you to take this incredible cross section from fluid time and stop it. That's pretty important. The other thing that photography allows you to do that cheats reality is to make the immovable, movable. I can take a photograph of a Bohemian homestead in Nebraska and put it side-by-side with a house in the now-Czech Republic and I can compare them. Photographs become these unbelievable time machines that allow us to cheat time and cheat space.

So we have the photographer that has to be at a given place and time, who, by the act of photography, selects out something and takes a cross section of time and space and makes both freeze. That is important when we think about Steele. He was there and an active participant observer who, in fact, recorded.

The third thing is that you have to have the engagement of the people who are being photographed. And people do change when they are being photographed. People will do anything when a camera is out. I don't understand it; but it is clearly a phenomenon. So as the photograph becomes the intention of the photographer, a human subject likewise has an intention. You are saying something when you allow yourself to be photographed. And with the exception of the spy, voyeur, or paparazzi, the subject is a participant. Imagine that you are on the bowling team and you won the tournament. And you are going to get your photograph taken with the team and you all dress alike and everybody clusters together. You become someone different. Your posture becomes different.

We have all seen this; in such groups we all stand stiff and erect. When the photographer gets the camera out, the first thing the photographer says is, "Move together," and you have to grow rigid. We stiffen, we posture, we pose, and we become something that we are not. The subject speaks to the camera.

The last thing that is important in this transaction is that nobody makes a photograph without expecting somebody else to see it. And so photographers have to be at the right place at the right time. They cheat time, and the subject shows an intended posture at the right time.

Those who do this regularly refer to their "showing their best side." But everybody, photographer and subject, is thinking about who is going to see the photograph. The intended audience, the intended viewer, tells a lot of what we can know of the photographer. And here is one place that we get into trouble with photographs from Steele, because it is easy from year 2009 to project backwards onto those photographs our intentions and meanings.

What we need to think about then with Steele is, "Who is this guy that was at this place, at this time? Why was he making that photograph?" He had a universe of possibilities for any given picture. Why did he select that one? Well, because he had his intention and his subjects had their intentions. And both are thinking that somebody is going to see the final product. But the people in Steele's photographs probably never envisioned our meeting this evening of cultural voyeurs. We are looking back at them. They did not intend or anticipate us as the audience.

So when we look at F.M. Steele, we have to ask ourselves "what are things that make his photographs make sense, these pot shards of photographs out of a body of work that is much larger." The transaction is one issue, but then we must study what survived. And that is a problem in the world of history. What survives is what is durable - not what is important. You lose all the important stuff. You lose the taste, texture, the aroma, the fellowship of eating the bread, and end up with the bread pan. And so as I looked at Steele's work the question I ask myself is, "What was the transaction that actually caused these things to be created?" And then, "Why, out of the thousands and thousands and thousands of photographs he took, did these pictures became so precious that they actually endured?"

Jim and Cathy Hoy have done a wonderful job of locating Steele photographs and developing an exhibit that shows the various genres that Steele approached, many of which are predictable. We know he did a lot of portraits. Most of those don't survive because the people for whom they were important died a long time ago, and their importance went with them. We know that he did commission work, like the construction of a canal. Someone was paying him to do that, so we understand that transaction. And those pictures survive because the commissioners said,

"This is a big deal and this photograph shows that."

We also know that he did things that fit in popular genres of the time, such as the house portrait. The house portrait is something that is quite ancient. It is where you get the family up in front of the house and have your picture taken. It becomes evidence that the deity has blessed you. You have a healthy family and an estate and you capture that in a photograph, or, earlier, a painting. This was very popular in 19th century photography.

We have the photographs of bounty. The ones that I especially like are those where you put kids in a field with crops as tall as you can reach and make a postcard captioned "Our two best crops." It is us talking about our own temporal and economic continuity. At the time it was called Boosterism.

The genre that I do not understand is the cowboy photographs. And among the photographs that survive, if I were to judge from what is on the Kansas Memory website, proportionally they are what endure, and this is a reason for my interest in what Steele did. The trail days of the cattle industry are writ large in American history, but nobody photographed it. And so my question goes back to my transaction. The photographer had to be there at the right time to take the picture. These drovers were willing participants, but they were not the market. Who would buy these pictures?

I love the photographs of the cowboys who have worked all day and are wiping the sludge of labor off of their bodies in a pond and the photographer says, "Wait a minute, I'm going to get your picture." Maybe the cowboys are gullible, or perhaps the photographer has a bottle of whiskey with which to bribe them. Fine. But who is going to buy that photograph? The person who is least likely to buy it is the cowboy.

My point of course is that we lack the understanding of the transaction to really get to the meaning of the photograph. I understand the photographs of herds of 1,500 cattle that show the agricultural bounty, things that show the animals in which you take great pride. But explain to me the cowboys, the guys tucking themselves into their bedrolls at night. More biographical and historical, perhaps. But if those are the

bulk of the photographs that survive, somebody after Steele considered them significant. Pot shards.

It is easy to look at a photographer who simply had endurance, perhaps forbearance, and had the luck for his work to survive and conclude, wrongly, "This is the aesthetic genius that poured forth a body of work that we now consider, retrospectively, significant and beautiful." But that really doesn't work very well. Steele was actually a typical Plains photographer, and I will close with two observations.

One: he was an itinerant. Photographers were both sedentary and loved waiting in the studio for someone to come in, or they were bored and went out and created their own markets. I think Steele was not happy sitting in the studio waiting to take another photograph of Mrs. Jones' little child. It is easy to do but makes for really dull photography. So we have a cadre of itinerant photographers, and adventurous ones.

The other, second distinction is that Steele physically moved around. That is different than being itinerant. Itinerants, like Steele, load up their gear in wagons and head out into the countryside. And Steele did that. But he also relocated from town to town.

Jim Hoy has detailed the towns in which he operated. That has to do with economy. At that time it was easy to saturate your market, and if you look at the newspapers from the period you will see that about every three years a new photographer hits town. This person is lionized in notices that tell of bringing the most advanced techniques this side of Boston. The citizens of the community are told to get these magnificent new photos. And then later the next round of newspaper advertisements appears, detailing the photographer offering a bargain wherein you can get 12 prints for $1.25. And then in the next round a new photographer has moved into town and is taking over for the previous photographer and she or he has the best process this side of Boston. In other words, when you move into a town, how long does it take to glut the local market? Not very long. A good rule of thumb is three years. And so you move on.

I'll close by returning to our challenge; the process of intellectually constructing from remnants. It is archeology. Appropriate, because archeologists work with very little data from which they have to extract

large pieces of information, and we are doing that with Steele. I think tonight we should note that we are raising the questions, not answering them. We need to know more and see more pictures. We need to think about how we use those that exist.

But by asking the proper questions we are going to anticipate where the photographs are to be found and what conclusions we can draw from them. Are those cowboy photographs simply a man playing to the essential myth of the American Western dime novel? Who was it that wanted this mythology? Was there a historical intention?

And in the end, I think we set ourselves off on a journey that is far from intellectually perilous. I think that what we will find in Steele, over the course of our expanded investigation, is that he was a person who is important to our understanding of the larger saga of the Great American West. He took the photographs that we do not have from anyone else. He gave us that precious time machine, that thing that lets us go back and look at that America in the state of being born. And I think that the purpose we set for ourselves tonight is to begin to think about just how important that question is.