

A FAMILY FARM ALBUM: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF FRANK SADORUS

On the surface, amateur photographer Frank Sadorus (1880-1934) led a quiet, unassuming life. Never married, he lived in the bosom of a close-knit family on a farm in the Illinois prairie, quietly pursuing his hobby of photographs when farm work allowed. A deeper look reveals that he was artist of vision whose life had all the elements of a Shakespearean drama of tragic/comic proportions: love, passion, humor, betrayal, loss, and vindication.



Frank had two loves: his family and the farm they shared. His passion was photography. Loss came in the sale of his beloved farm, and betrayal, when he was committed by his family to the Kankakee Mental Asylum where he remained until his death. He was a tragic/comic protagonist for, as his photographs show, Frank loved a joke and never minded playing the clown. His life was imbued with a gentle, self-deprecating humor. He was a thoroughly likable man.

Vindication came some fifty years after his death, when a perceptive writer/photographer, Raymond Bial, discovered his work, recognized its quality, brought it to public attention, and donated it to the Illinois State Museum for the enjoyment of future generations.

Frank never sought vindication—he accepted his fate with an odd equanimity and grace. Could Frank but know that his work had lived on to be exhibited and admired, most likely, he would say something delightfully cornball—such as, “Ain’t they peaches though?” as he did to Enos in a postcard about some recent work. In his *heart*, he would be content, for he knew he was an artist. The gaps in the last chapters of life raise many unanswered questions. Whatever happened in those years, it’s clear that something vital broke. As Shakespeare said, “...and thereby hangs a tale.” The happy ending is that his photographs were not lost and that his legacy lives on in his photographs.

THANK YOUUS AND CREDITS

This exhibition has been several years in the making, and, as curator, it has been my pleasure to guide it to completion. The Illinois State Museum would like to thank the Illinois Humanities Council for a generous grant for educational funding which will accompany the exhibition throughout the Museum’s sites for the next two years. We are grateful for the contributions and insights of our participating scholars: Dr. Jane Adams, Associate Professor of Anthropology and History at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale, Dr. Debra Reid, Assistant Professor in history at Northeastern University, videographer Jeff Cunningham, and writer/photographer Raymond Bial, who, in addition to his essay, dug into his personal archives to lend us photographs he printed from Frank’s negatives.

There are many other people to thank: Bruce McMillan, Director of the Illinois State Museum, and Kent James Smith, Director of Art, for their support and encouragement of this project; the Department of Transportation for printing the photographic murals, Illinois State Museum Registrar Carole Peterson and museum photographer Gary Andrashko who worked with me on the printing of images; Amy Jackson and Estie Karpman for help with grant writing and labels, and the multi-talented staffs of all the museum's sites without whose help this show would not be up and running. Finally, I especially thank Irene Boyer, Registrar of Decorative Arts, who graciously researched and wrote the labels for farm implements, and Doug Stapleton, Assistant Curator of Fine Arts, who not only expertly designed an elegant exhibition but greatly added to the show's breath and depth with curatorial suggestions and enhancements.

Judith Burson Lloyd
Assistant Curator of Fine Arts, *A Family Farm Album*
Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery

DEAR TO MY HEART
THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF FRANK SADORUS

Over twenty years ago, I was presented with a rare honor and a humbling responsibility—to review a collection of glass plates by Marion Sadorus, the nephew of Frank Sadorus. Having always loved all forms of photography, especially historical images, I readily agreed to look over his uncle's photographs. Marion's face brightened and he promptly dug out the boxes of dusty prints and dry plate negatives from a backroom.

As I glanced through the assortment of photographs, I was immediately struck by the quality of the work of this turn-of-the-century photographer. In hand-made prints and dry plate negatives, his youthful spirit brightly shone through—across the generations. One can simply peer into the photographs and come to understand Frank intimately. His work varied from the high-jinx and cornball humor of a young man growing up on a relatively isolated family farm to breathtakingly sensitive images of a fine artist. He clearly staged many photographs as a diversion from the rigors of daily chores, roping family members into his contrived situations of simple fun. There is a refreshingly open, candid tone to these photographs that reveals much about the Sadorus clan and even more about Frank himself. In fact, although he made a few self-portraits, both haunting and humorous, Frank tells us as much or more about himself when he is behind the camera.

In a sense, the life of Frank Sadorus was fated to end in tragedy. He was inevitably destroyed by the very same forces that ravaged the land he so devotedly loved. I recall that on one of his photographs, he wrote, "Dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood." Although the language is flowery, this was not simply nostalgia, but grief for the brutish destruction of all the lovely places of his youth. On the back of another photograph, he wrote, "Goodbye, old timber, you are doomed."

Although Frank Sadorus could not ultimately save the family farm or himself, his work survived quite miraculously. During the many years that he was torn away from home and long after his death on Christmas Day, 1934, his photographs lay forgotten—until rescued by Marion who entrusted the prints and dry plates to me. I committed the next two years of my life to printing all of Frank’s work and making his work known through a series of exhibits and the publication of the book: *Upon a Quiet Landscape: The Photographs of Frank Sadorus*. This work was simply my gift from one artist to another. Thereafter, I arranged for the dry plates and prints to be donated to the Illinois State Museum to insure that Frank’s work would never again risk being lost to future generations.



It was perhaps yet another curious twist of fate that Frank and I were brought together. From the beginning, I felt a powerful kinship with Frank Sadorus, since much of my work dealt with rural themes, especially the sense of loss. Like Frank, I had been taken away from our small farm, never to return. It was a place of joyful youth that I had once hoped to always make my home. Yet in a sense, the farm can never be taken away from Frank, and he can never be removed from the land, as long as his work is always with us.

I have been deeply grateful to have had the privilege of getting to know Frank Sadorus through his photographs. Still a young man when I first began to work with his photographs, I then thought of Frank as older than me. Now, two decades later, I tend to view Frank as a younger man. And it seems appropriate that he should always remain so to us—dear to our hearts, forever hopeful—a tender young man, with a hint of whimsy in his eye.

Raymond Bial
Writer & Photographer