

The Times & Legacy of Frank Sadorus

Jane Adams, Associate Professor, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
D. Gorton, Documentary Photographer

For less than a decade at the turn of the twentieth century, Frank Sadorus photographed his family's Illinois farm. His often humorous, documentary, and artful photographs captured not only a slice of life on the Grand Prairie but also a glimpse into the cultural currents of modernism that fed Frank's imagination.

Frank Sadorus's family first settled the farm in the 1820s. Far from any other populated area, Frank's great-grandfather Henry (1783–1878) and great-grandmother Mary (d.c. 1846) and their several children opened land beside the headwaters of the Kaskaskia River in what would become called "Sadorus Grove."¹ In the 1830s, with Champaign County newly formed, Henry bought 320 acres of land from the federal government and platted the town of Sadorus. He also bought 120 acres to the south, and his adult son William bought a 40-acre parcel adjoining the home place.² Like other early settlers in the region, Henry chose a site on the edge of the prairie, farming in the cleared woodlands and grazing livestock on the prairie

grasses whose matted roots resisted the plows of the day. A huge boulder, a remnant of the glaciers that once covered the region, formed a landmark that is still honored in the town the Sadorus family founded. Family lore recounts that Henry and his sons hid behind the boulder as a band of Potawatomis passed by.³

The state road from Kaskaskia passed near his home and Henry, being enterprising, built the first frame house in the area that served as an inn and a residence. The inn was so profitable and required so much work that, according to his 1878 obituary in the Champaign County *Gazette*, his wife and three daughters replaced their homespun fabrics with purchased cloth.⁴ In 1835, the state legislature passed a massive improvement program, part of which included building a Great Western mail route which, it appears, would have paralleled the Kaskaskia State Road, at least where it passed by the Sadorus farm.⁵ The railroad would not be built until the mid-1850s, but Henry and his son William platted the village with expectations that the railroad would pass through it.⁶ They socialized with the other early pioneers in Big Grove and elsewhere in the area.

The region soon developed into one of the richest agricultural regions in the world. By the 1850s John Deere's "singing plow" cut through the tough prairie sod. The Civil War, in which two of William's sons, G. W. B. and Henry, fought, brought a temporary prosperity. Immediately following the Civil War, the Industrial University—University of Illinois—was established in nearby Urbana. The Great Western Railroad provided a ready link between Sadorus and the now-booming university community, as well as easy access to Chicago and the rest of the country.⁷ Frank's father, George William Bacon—G. W. B.—bought one of the last remaining pieces of government land in the area in 1870 and built the house Frank grew up in. It was an absolutely level piece of ground, about a mile east of the village and two miles from the old home place, along the railroad line.

The decades following the Civil War were turbulent ones for farmers. Henry Sr. was a Universalist and a "greenbacker." He was undoubtedly a Granger, and associated with the prominent Champaign County Busey family as well as other early settlers.⁸ In 1878, Henry Sr. died owning 1,000 acres of land that he had passed on to his sons.

Frank Sadorus's grandfather, William, who came to the area as a twelve-year-old, maintained the family legacy as a prosperous and enterprising farmer.⁹ Unlike the pioneer Henry, however, who had settled at least twenty miles from the nearest neighbor, William was surrounded by family and neighbors. He received a gold cane as the "oldest settler" in the county around 1921.



Frank Sadorus, Self-Portrait with Camera, 1910.

Frank, born in 1880, grew up on his parents G. W. B. and Phoebe's farm, surrounded by his four siblings and other relatives. They still made sugar in the sugar grove on the home place. Frank's great-uncle Allen returned from California in 1890 and lived on the farm. By the time Frank reached maturity at the beginning of the twentieth century, farming had returned to prosperity. Landed gentry, the Sadorus family lived comfortably, even luxuriantly, despite the hard work on their farm.

Most of Frank's photographs picture his family and the farm. In the pictures we see images that if taken out of context appear to be just "pretty pictures" or whimsy. But they are embedded in and refer to his family's legacy on the prairie: the maple grove planted by his forebears; the glacier stone with the family posed around and on it; "maple sugaring" in the late winter.

By 1908, at age 28, Frank had reached an assured competency that allowed him to express his vision. He was of the same generation as some of the the great modernists: photographers such as Alfred Steiglitz, artists and architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, and intellectuals such as Willa Cather, many of whom came from the prosperous farms and small towns of America's heartland. It was an era of globalization unrivaled until the last decades of the twentieth century. Electricity provided labor-saving equipment in the rapidly growing cities. Industry, fueled by new techniques of mass production and by the immigration of millions from eastern and southern Europe, brought both unprecedented prosperity, stimulating the first truly mass-consumer culture, as well as growing social inequities and dislocations.

Although Frank apparently lived a quite reclusive life on the farm, he was linked to these global currents. He photographed Greek section hands on the nearby railroad; his older brother Enos, also an amateur photographer, worked for the "Big Four" (Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis) railroad yard in Urbana.¹⁰ Frank photographed his mother, Phoebe, reading the elite women's magazine the *Delineator* and his father, G. W. B., reading the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

Time itself was proving to be elastic and malleable, a major interest of the modernists. Railroads dramatically collapsed travel time, telegraphs and telephones instantaneously moved information. Like many photographers of his day, Frank played with time, making witty double exposures that miraculously showed the same person in two places simultaneously.

His family were avid consumers, abreast of the fashions of the day. His still lifes can be read as an homage to consumption. They include assemblages of delectable foods brought from around the world for his family's pleasure. One still life contains coconuts, oranges, bananas, Persian dates, California figs, brazil and other nuts, as well as locally available popcorn, apples, gourds, and candy canes, capped by a paper bell. Another still life collects books; railroad schedules; a calendar advertising Coca Cola; materials for his photography, including instruction books; a University of Illinois banner; and many other objects.

Mounted birds he created in another of his enthusiasms, taxidermy, appear in several of his still lifes. Prominent among these are a raven, making one think of



Elmer and Mary Sadorus after a spring snowstorm. Frank noted that "the plum just back of Elmer is in full bloom." April 18, 1910.

Edgar Allen Poe, whose work was all the rage.

One of Frank's cameras could be purchased from Sears Roebuck.¹¹ Frank had at least three cameras that appear in his photographs, as well as a tripod, darkroom equipment, and a number of instruction books.

Frank worked hard at his technique, replicating perspectives and compositions he found in his manuals.¹² He composed rural landscapes around his farm, captured the speeding train, played with sun and shade. He made difficult and beautiful photos of spring flowers and harvest grains. He made portraits, sometimes sensitive and thoughtful, of his relatives, especially his younger sister, Mary.

But Frank's imagination was not charged only by the sensibility of modernist photographers. He was also rooted in a particular place, fourth generation on this prairie land. Over and over he created visual jokes.¹³ Some poked fun at his rural upbringing: A self-portrait with ears of corn strung around his waist, with a legend, "I was raised in the corn belt," and a washtub band—"The Punkin Orchestra"—in which his family plays a washtub, broom, toilet plunger, and logs put together as an ersatz piano, with real music racks holding folded newspapers (plate 23). In another, an unidentified man is

wrapped in a flag made of Illinois State Fair prize ribbons (plate 34 and here, shown at left). Others interpreted common sayings: His brother Warren's nose is held to a grindstone by the male members of his family (plate 24), Mary, her face showing through a tear in a newspaper, "breaks the news" to her mother (plate 16).

Many of Frank's photographs show the daily life of his family and his relatives. He documented the activities of the farm and of the remnants of the old grove that provided his ancestors their first habitation. Sugar making, corn and hay harvesting, hogs hanging after butchering, and timbering all appear in his photographs. His younger siblings Mary, who



never married, and Warren, who married late, also appear over and over—in winter ice storms and springtime jaunts.

He also recorded the family pilgrimages to the glacial boulder that became, symbolically, the navel of not only the farm, but of the town of Sadorus as well. In 1930 the Sadorus Garden Club moved the boulder from the old sugar camp to “where the hard road turns west just south of Sadorus.” Dedicated two years later, the stone was later moved to the town park, where it remains today.¹⁴

As long as G. W. B. was alive, the farm prospered. But when he died in 1911, it appears that Phoebe was unable to hold the family together. Frank’s photographic enthusiasm ended in 1912, and five years later, in 1917, the estate was sold. As it turns out, they sold at the most prosperous period of American agriculture. Phoebe built a house in town, where she lived with Mary and Elmer. Frank moved to a small house west of town, near the old home place. At this point his story becomes obscure, for that same year his family committed him to the mental hospital in Kankakee, Illinois. He died there December 25, 1934.¹⁵

For a few brief years between 1908 and 1912, Frank Sadorus’s energy, wit, and talent captured images of his home and family. Then, just as quickly, he and his work fell into oblivion. Nearly a half century after Frank’s death, his nephew Marion Sadorus showed photographer Ray Bial boxes of Frank’s glass plate negatives, prints, and postcards. Bial understood the unique value of the collection and, after editing a selection of the work published by the Champaign County Historical Archives and the Urbana Free Library, he arranged for the 350 glass plate negatives and other materials to be donated to the Illinois State Museum. In 2003, the Museum mounted a major exhibition of Frank Sadorus’s work. Frank captured a moment in time—a time when family farmers in the Illinois prairie looked optimistically to the future as full citizens of a prosperous American nation.

Jane Adams, PhD, is Associate Professor of Anthropology and of History at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. D. Gorton is a documentary photographer and independent scholar.



G. W. B. and Elmer Sadorus harvesting wheat. July 8, 1909.

Notes

1. “Grandfather had six children, three boys and three girls—William, Allen M. and Henry T. were the boys. The oldest girl married a man by the name of John Jordan. They came to California in 1849. One married Samuel Suvers, near Monticello, Ill. The third daughter was the wife of John P. Tenbrook, ex-county judge.” 1924 letter from H. W. Sadorus, published in the *Decatur Review*, Feb. 24, 1924. <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/lineages/lineages36.html>
2. Illinois State Archives, Public Domain Land Tract Sales Database, search on the name Sadorus. <http://www.sos.state.il.us/GenealogyMWeb/landsrch.htm/>
3. Accounts of this appear in an unattributed item c. 1932, posted on the Champaign County ILGenWeb page <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/lineages/lineages36.html>. A friendly Potawatomi chief named Shemanger was reputed to have helped Henry Sadorus at his barn raising, according to a note in the history of Philo, Illinois <http://216.125.250.83/philo/history.htm>. A brief account of the barn raising appears in the Champaign County time line, and William Sadorus, as recounted in his biography in a county history, recalled visits by men from the Kickapoo, Delaware, and Potawatomi tribes. <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/biographies/bio0149.html>
4. Henry Sadorus’s 1878 obituary was republished in *A Standard History of Champaign County, Illinois*, J. R. Stewart, Supervising Editor, The Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago and New York, 1918. It appears on the Champaign County ILGenWeb page <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/biographies/bio0147.html>. A picture of the old inn is posted on the Web site <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/photoalbum/houses.html>.
5. On the internal improvements scheme, see, among other sources, a history of Macon County published by Illinois Trails, http://iltrails.org/macon/maconcentennial_p77.htm. On the first railroad, the Northern Cross, that later became the Wabash Railroad, see Illinois State Museum, http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/transportation/trains/northern_cross.html. A brief 1959 history of the Wabash Railroad can be found at <http://home.comcast.net/~wabashrr/wabhist.html>. An 1854 map can be found at the Library of Congress, showing a road between Springfield, Decatur, and Urbana that appears to go through Sadorus: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4100.rr002020>.
6. History of Sadorus: <http://www.sadorus.com/history.htm>.
7. H. George Friedman Jr., “Chapter 1, Prologue: The Foundations of Urbana and Champaign 1822–1861.” In *Twin Cities Traction: The Street Railways of Urbana and Champaign, Illinois*. (2001). See <http://www.faculty.cs.uiuc.edu/~friedman/champaign-urbana/Chapter01.htm>.
8. On the history of the Grange in Champaign County, see Roy V. Scott, “Grangerism in Champaign County, Illinois, 1873–1877.” In *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, vol. 43, 1961, pp. 139–63., and *The Agrarian Movement in Illinois, 1880–1896*. Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, vol. 52. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962). On his friendship with Busey and others, see <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/biographies/bio0147.html>.
9. For a brief biography, apparently transcribed from an 1891 county history, see biographical information attributed to Judge Cunningham, from *A Standard History of Champaign County, Illinois*, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/lineages/lineages36.html>.
10. Raymond Bial and Frederick A. Schlipf, eds., *Upon a Quiet Landscape: The Photographs of Frank Sadorus*. Champaign County Historical Archives, The Urbana Free Library, Urbana, Illinois, 1983 n.p. (p. 3 of Introduction).
11. The 4 × 5 Delmar Camera, selling for \$3.68 (p. 137 of the *1902 Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue*, New York: Bounty Books, 1969) can be seen in at least two of his still lifes, with two or three mounted birds, a Christmas card he created, and an array of camera instruction books and equipment and other objects.
12. His books included *The Modern Way to Picture Making*, which included a section by the great modernist photographer, Alfred Steiglitz, a leader of the Pictorialist Movement in photography and a key organizer of the 1913 Armory Show.
13. The photos cited in this paragraph are in Bial and Schlipf, *Upon a Quiet Landscape*, plates as noted.
14. The account of the first move appears, unattributed on Champaign County ILGenWeb Project, “Sadorus Family Tidbits,” <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilchampa/lineages/lineages36.html>.
15. Biographical information is in Bial and Schlipf, *Upon a Quiet Landscape*, Introduction, n.p.