Life through the Lens

The Photographs of Frank Sadorus

Judith Burson Lloyd, ISM Chicago Gallery
Curator of the Exhibition

At first glance, the work of Frank Sadorus (1880–1934) suggests that this amateur photographer led a charmed life in a rural Eden, quietly pursuing his hobby of photography in the bosom of a warm and loving family. A deeper look, however, reveals that there were cracks in this seeming Eden that would drastically alter Frank's life and bring early closure to the work of this talented photographer.

Beneath the surface of the quiet photographs Frank took lay a life with all the elements of a Shakespearean drama: love, passion, humor, betrayal, loss, and vindication. The twin loves of Frank Sadorus were farm and family. His greatest loss would come when the farm was sold out from under him, and his betrayal, when he was committed by his family to the Kankakee Mental Asylum, where he remained until his death. When he lost the farm and the family let him down, his passion for photography died. Vindication came with the validation of his work as an artist, some fifty years after his death, when a perceptive writer-photographer, Raymond Bial, discovered Frank's work, recognized its quality, and brought it to public attention. He then donated it to the Illinois State Museum, insuring that Frank's legacy would live. Ultimately, Frank Sadorus was a comic-tragic protagonist, for, as his photographs show, his life and work were permeated with humor as well as sadness.

He was a remarkably fine photographer for one living and working in the midst of the prairie with mainly books and magazines for inspiration. Frank had a clear, straightforward vision, with an appreciation of beauty, form, and light that far outdistanced the "average" amateur photographer. As the many family albums found in attics everywhere now attest, vintage amateur photographs abounded. What distinguishes Frank and his work is the clarity of his vision. He had a sentimental streak that he indulged in postcards and writing, but his photographs avoided that trap, even though his images are personal. These are his family members, and he loved them. That he can make us care for them and want to understand them almost a century later is uncommon.

Frank Sadorus, Punkin Orchestra, *date unkown. Original print dated March 2, 1912.*

Clearly, Frank's family enjoyed his photography. It provided them with entertainment in the off seasons and on Sundays, when the family didn't work. Undoubtedly, the *Punkin Orchestra* was a whole afternoon's entertainment, but even in less-orchestrated events, the family was willing to ham it up for the camera. The Sadorus men seemed to like to walk their land. They strolled with walking sticks, posing for Frank as the fancy took them, such as in a scene of four Sadorus men lounging on an improvised bench of a fallen tree. Two have assumed bookend positions to balance the middle figure lying prone along the trunk. On the ground, a fourth figure lies face down in grass, his nose buried in leaves, mimicking the figure over him.

In spite of this familial comradery, it is unlikely that Frank's family understood that photography was, to him, more than a hobby, that he considered himself an *artist.* For most artists, working without a support system of sympathetic or similar minds is difficult—which makes Frank's sensitive vision and his lifetime output even more remarkable.

Frank understood that light was the essence of photography, not just technically, but as an aesthetic tool. He was exceptionally good with light. Like all good photographers, he knew that light differs by the time of day and by the season. In *Autumn Sunshine*, one of many images of the homestead, delicate foliage envelops the house in a soft embrace. The season is felt in an airiness of the leaves that is less dense than that of summertime and in the wide variety of tones that capture the glow of autumnal golds, reds, and russets, even in this black-and-white photography.

The spring ice storm of April 18, 1910, offered Frank many opportunities for photography. In one of his most loved and loveliest images, Mary and Elmer stand in a snowy landscape with snowballs balanced on bare fingertips. This was a rare spring day—the flowering trees behind Elmer are encased in ice. The viewer can almost hear the photographer cajoling Elmer and Mary to remove their gloves to hold the snowballs on their bare fingertips. This, as in so many of his photographs, was a collaboration between photographer and models.

Evocative lighting plays an important part in many of Frank's interior portraits, as well. One of his most touching is the glowing image of his brother Warren, who holds his young son Lloyd, a baby of a year perhaps. His younger brother is portrayed as a man—a new parent—proudly displaying his young son, whose hair has just been combed and parted. The baby's arm rests companionably around his father's shoulder. Both baby and father are content. The natural light, coming in from the left, washes their faces in a dramatic half light that emphasizes the hand-cut eyelets of the baby's long dress and his father's stiff collar, tie, and Sunday shirt.

Some of Frank's strongest images were still lifes bathed in light. In *Catalpa Blossoms,* delicate white flowers resting upon a heart-shaped leaf become foils for the craggy tree bark to which they are pinned. Natural light rakes across an elegant composition of startlingly contrasting textures that fill the entire frame in a close-up. It is strikingly modern in concept, recalling the elegant flower shots of Robert Mapplethorpe. In *Christmas Still Life,* again Frank adeptly used artificial light. Navel oranges, grapes, walnuts, pecans, apples, packages of California dried figs, Persian dates, and Chums, a candy, are placed in a pyramid, topped by a peppermint stick and a paper bell. He has manipulated the lighting, spreading it across the front, allowing the goodies to be fully appreciated, while leaving half the paper bell dramatically in shadow.

Overall, one of Frank's most important images is a crowded still life of fifty-four objects that actually lacks the sensitive lighting and elegant composition associated with his best work. Nonetheless, it is

an intense image, layered with meaning. It is significant that on an original print, Frank gave this particular image three distinct names and signed it twice. The most obvious and inclusive title he gave it is *A Medley of Many Thinks*, the one inscribed on the back of the print with the date. As we look at this piece, we learn about Frank the man, what his interests were, and how he occupied himself when he wasn't farming.

This image tells us that Frank liked to read, and it shows his interests in "many thinks." The title also reveals his sense of humor. Among his pictured books were *The Masterpieces of Rembrandt, Artists to Remember, Museum of Antiquity, Webster's Condensed Dictionary, Self-Education Series* by John Adams, and *Hero Tales from American Life*. For fiction, he was partial to *Frank on the Prairie, Frank in the Woods,* and *The Winning of Barbara Worth*. His how-to books included *Taxidermy by Correspondence* (the Northwestern School of Taxidermy), which may explain why he also chose to include in this image one of his mounted specimens, an owl.

Frank Sadorus, Still Life: Catalpa Blossoms in Bloom.

The second title he gave this same image, *Vicissitudes of an Artist*, refers to his life as a photographer. This title is written on the front of the image, to the left. The majority of the objects in this image refer to photography. Many are the books and pamphlets from which he learned his craft and some of the tools he used to apply his art. One of his two cameras, a Black Beauty, is center stage. The photographic paraphernalia includes beakers, a thermometer, Kodak Card Mounts, Kodak Dry Mounting Tissue, photographic papers, Dry Plates, developers, a lens, and even a box of push pins, to name but some. Among his technical books were *Cramer's Manual, 20th Century Negative Making and Formulas, Development Simplified, Seeds from Which Good Pictures Grow, Faults in Negatives, By Flashlight*, among others, and, for aesthetics, *Camera Craft; The Camera; Photo-era, the American Journal of Photography; The Photographic Times; and Kodak on the Farm*.

Understanding the third title given the image begs consideration of the several likely photographic influences on Frank's work. While his introduction to photography probably came from his elder brother, Enos, also an amateur photographer, Frank was essentially self-taught through mail-order publications that were delivered by the Wabash Railroad. The many publications included in this still life remind us that although Frank was a solitary artist working in the middle of the Illinois prairie, he did not work in a vacuum.

Four photographic movements influenced the time in which Frank photographed, all of which probably had some influence on him: the early pictorialists, the "new" pictorialists, "straight photography," and the new snapshot aesthetic of Eastman Kodak. From the 1850s to the early 1900s, pictorialism was the reigning photographic style. It took a storytelling approach that made use of composite prints, costumed models, and painted backdrops. By the 1880s, British photographer Henry Peach Robinson decried the contrived "artiness" of the pictorialists and urged a more straightforward approach. A whole new generation of photographers began to think of photography as an art in its own right. These "new pictorialists" believed that photography should be judged on its own artistic and aesthetic merits; however, for many "art" photographers, "artistic merit" increased proportionally to the degree it resembled a drawing, a mezzotint, or a painting—ideally an Impressionist painting.

One man stood out as the standard bearer in the battle of recognition of photography as an art form: Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946). His importance is hard to overestimate. In his galleries—Little Gallery of the Photo-Secessionists (later know by its address, *291*) and An American Place—as well as in his influential periodical, *Camera Work*, he showed photographers such as Edward Steichen, Clarence H. White, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Gertrude Kasebier, as well as visual artists like John Marin, Joseph Stella, Max Weber, and his wife, Georgia O'Keefe. He was the first in the United States to exhibit Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso.

While Stieglitz championed pictorialist photography of the Impressionist ideal, his own work, except at the earliest stage, was different. It was cleaner, sharper, and more straightforward—and it led to the next important movement: "straight photography." Straight photography would dominate succeeding generations of art photographers, such as Paul Strand and Edward Weston, throughout the twentieth century. Photographs like the exquisite *Catalpa Blossoms* above show the influence of straight photography.

An equally strong influence on Frank Sadorus was that of "the Kodak Moment," brought to the world by George Eastman. Frank chose to include in the still life *Kodak on the Farm*, published by

This photograph, taken over two days—March 16 and 17, 1912—Frank Sadorus gave three different names: A Medley of Many Thinks, Vicissitudes of an Artist, *and* A Love Story.

Eastman Kodak Company in 1908. The text in this publication reminds photographers that "In every nook and corner of the farm there's a picture—not only a picture worth the taking because of its artistic merit, but a picture worth the taking because of the home association—a picture that will grow in value to you as the years go by." Frank took this advice to heart. Sometimes, he just wandered around, taking pictures of farm animals; his father in the garden; Mary, caught mid-errand, coming around the corner of a shed; or a friendly card game between neighbors. Frank was a magpie whose eye was caught by unexpected charms—a small group of mushrooms that became a spontaneous still life or a dead grasshopper or bee to be carried back to his room for experimentation with macro photography. He also experimented with timed exposures of the night sky and with double exposures. The double exposure was one of his specialities, and Mary and Warren were eager participants.

Frank used a large-format view camera in the still life, a choice that usually yields a more "formal," studied image because of the slowness of the large-format photography technique: the photographer must set up an 8" × 10" or 5" × 7" camera on a tripod, then peer at an upside-down image on the ground glass while standing under a black loth that shades the outside ambient light, then make still further adjustments to get the best shot. Frank, however, when he wanted to, was able to use the view camera as casually as if it were a Kodak Brownie snapshot camera.

Simply arranging the fifty-four objects in *A Medley of Many Thinks*, a.k.a. *Vicissitudes of an Artist*, so that they would all "read" would have taken Frank hours, if not days, to build. Why was this photograph so important to him? Why did he need to tell us about his life? The third title, and the most revealing of them all, is written directly under the photograph in ink as light as a whisper. It reads: *A Love Story*.

The timing of this image is significant, relative to Frank's life and work. The notation on the back of the image says that it was taken Saturday, March 16, 1912, and finished Sunday, March 17, 1912. His father had died the previous year. G.W. B. was the linchpin of the family. The day he died was, in Frank's own words, "a turning point in our lives." In 1917, when the estate was settled, the farm was sold. Elmer and Mary retired from farming and, with their mother Phoebe, built a new house. Frank moved alone into a two-room cottage and packed away his camera equipment. Within three months, Frank had been committed by his family to the institution where he died seventeen years later.

Frank didn't do much work after 1912, and this still life—with its trinity of names and meaning—was one of the last he took. The photograph, in a summing up, suggests anticipated loss. Perhaps when Frank entitled this image *Vicissitudes of an Artist*, he was not just speaking of many aspects of an artist's life, but the winds of fate against which one is powerless, as he must have felt with his family's desire to sell the homestead.

The photograph is a document, a tribute to his life on the farm. It seems likely that the debate over selling the farm may have already begun when Frank made this photograph, and possibly that a decision had been reached. In this remarkable still life, he brings together memorabilia worthy of record. In this visual love letter, he lays bare the fabric of his life in iconographic objects.

The commitment papers were signed by Frank's mother, his eldest brother, Elmer, and his youngest sibling, Mary, the three living on the farm after the death of G. W. B. There were stories of arguments and "fisti-cuffs" between Frank and Elmer. The acquiescence of Frank's mother and his sister Mary is unexplained. Enos and Warren are not mentioned. It is interesting to speculate on these relationships, but we will never know for sure what happened between them. Certainly, the inscription on the back of a small mounted image of the farmhouse makes Frank's feelings clear. It reads, "Home ... sweet ... damn."

While he was institutionalized, the family visited him off and on for family picnics on the asylum grounds. There is a snapshot of Frank taken on July 1, 1934, about six months before his death on the following Christmas Day. On the back of the picture, Frank wrote,"...I don't know if it looks like me, but it's me anyway."

Cinematographer Jeff Cunningham interviewed Warren Sadorus's daughter, who recalled that none of the family had attended Frank's funeral: She knew that Phoebe was unable to attend, and, although she could not recall why, neither her Uncle Enos nor her father did either. Elmer and Mary stayed home in their house across from the cemetery, where Frank was buried in the family plot.

The transition to industrialization, mechanization, and increased productivity on the farm opened up a variety of career options for many children of farm families, and for the first time, increasing numbers turned to the fields of medicine, law, science, government, and even entertainment. Unfortunately, transitions were not always smooth and sometimes resulted in unemployment, underemployment, or the loss of the farm.

What did the loss of the farm mean in a human sense? For some, it was an opportunity, while for others, a difficult but logical decision reached after careful consideration. For the unluckiest, it was a heartbreaking decision made by others against their will. What happened to those who could not or would not make a transition to a new career or retirement? Culture changes all the time, but sometimes it changes more rapidly than others. In times of accelerated change, those who find it harder to make transitions may find it most difficult to adapt.

Had his passions not been so intertwined, had he been a less-private person, with friends outside the family and ties to other places, he might have packed up his belongings and pursued a new life elsewhere, continuing his work as a photographer. But that wasn't Frank Sadorus—his heart was rooted in a 124-acre farm in central Illinois.

* * * *

The exhibition *A Family Farm Album: The Photographs of Frank Sadorus*, currently featured through August 19 at the ISM Lockport Gallery, forms a visual axis between the world of the twenty-first century and the experience of many Americans in the early 1900s. Through his photographs, Frank Sadorus captured a part of the collective American experience. Through his story, he captured our hearts. Thanks to Ray Bial and his generous gift to the Illinois State Museum, Frank's lifetime and his photographic legacy will continue. The exhibition will show at the ISM-Springfield from July, 16, 2006, through January 21, 2007.

The ISM Chicago Gallery would like to thank the Illinois Humanities Council for funding the educational programming accompanying the exhibition on its two-year journey though the Museum's sites. We also thank our participating scholars Dr. Jane Adams, Associate Professor of Anthropology and History at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale; Dr. Debra Reid, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Northeastern University; Raymond Bial, writer-photographer and "discoverer" of Frank Sadorus; and Jeff Cunningham, videographer, for sharing with us their knowledge and expertise.

Christmas Still Life, *December 1910.*