

by Jim Hoy and Catherine Hoy

PORTRAITS OF THE PLAINS



The Photographs of F. M. Steele



In 1981 Barbara Oringderff recognized the work of Francis Marion Steele as “one of the world’s largest and finest collections of original photographs of early-day cowboys.”¹ Oringderff was simply echoing an opinion expressed nearly fifty years earlier by a reporter for the *Dodge City Globe*: “Mr. Steele is credited with having one of the finest collections of pictures of trail outfits and cattle activities in existence.” On September 12, 1935, a *Dodge City Journal* writer, reporting Steele’s visit to Dodge City some forty-four years after his first arrival in 1891, noted that “During his residence here he covered the Panhandle, making cattle range pictures and round-ups in southwest Kansas, northwest Oklahoma, northern Texas, northeast New Mexico and southeast Colorado.”²

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1. Barbara Oringderff, “Cowboys: The F. M. Steele Collection,” *Kansas Territorial* 1 (August/September 1981): 15–20.

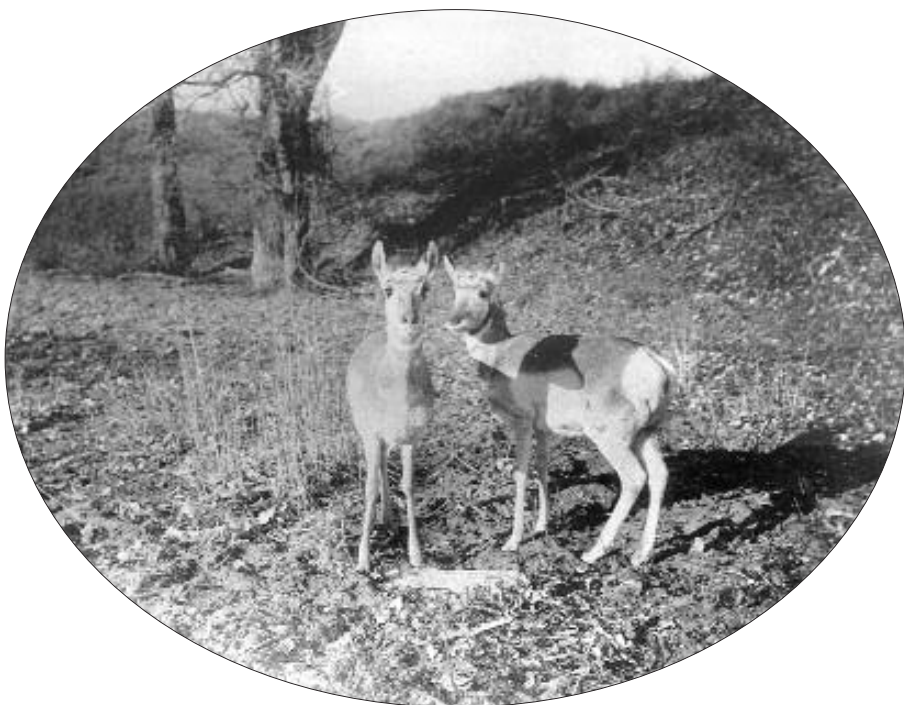
2. *Dodge City Globe*, August 25, 1933; *Dodge City Journal*, September 12, 1935.



Itinerant photographer Francis Marion Steele.



Composite of three photos depicting a horse race and a hot-air balloon at a fair in Ashland.



Antelope on the Beaver River, Woodward County, Oklahoma Territory, 1879.

Steele's work with ranching, covering the heart of the Southwest Plains cattle country, is better known than his name, for over the years many of his photographs have been used, without attribution, as illustrations for books and articles on cowboys and the West.³ In addition to his name, what generally has not been known about Steele is the broad scope of his work. Besides cowboys and ranching, Steele recorded such aspects of rural and small-town life as farming (from kafir corn to sugar beets and wheat), irrigation projects, railroad construction, community celebrations, civic booster trips, buildings (including farmsteads, town houses, and factories), portraits, floods, wild animals, and other nature scenes. In short, Steele's work provides a comprehensive view of life in the Southwest Plains from the 1890s through the first quarter of the twentieth century.

In 2003 we undertook the task of learning more about Steele's life and

3. See, for example, Ezra Bowen, ed., *The Old West: The Cowboys* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), 168–69.

his work, a project that is ongoing.⁴ When the search began, we were acquainted with only the Berryman Collection, fifty-eight photographs held by both the Krier Pioneer Museum in Clark County and the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka. Inquiries to various archives and museums in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Nebraska have turned up more than 150 additional Steele photographs. In the early stages of the project we learned from Dave Webb of the Kansas Heritage Center about twenty-four photographs that were owned by Kent Olson, who has since donated copies to the Kansas State Historical Society. The largest single trove was of sixty-two photographs from Haskell County, while both Finney County and Seward County held some forty pho-



Mr. and Mrs. Gant of Kiowa County.



Horses on the Johnson Ranch in northern Haskell County, 1912.

4. The present article serves as a progress report in the attempt to discover more Steele photographs and learn more of his personal history, work that has been greatly aided by a grant from the Kansas State Library through the Western Trails digitization initiative originated by the Colorado State Library. Partners in this grant included the photograph section of the Kansas State Historical Society, the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, and the Kansas Heritage Center in Dodge City, in cooperation with local historical societies in Clark, Finney, Grant, Haskell, and Seward Counties. We are especially grateful to Dave Webb of the Kansas Heritage Center for making available to us his extensive file on Steele.



F. E. "Gene" Murphy at his ranch house in Haskell County, ca. 1912.



Plowing scene, probably Haskell County.

tographs each. At this point 267 Steele photographs have been digitized by the Kansas State Historical Society.⁵

Oringderff noted in her article that "the life of F. M. Steele is an enigma." It is, however, less an enigma now than it was a quarter of a century ago. Francis Marion "Frank" Steele was born September 14, 1866, in Stanton, Illinois. When he was four he moved with his mother, Sarah, to Urbana, Missouri, a year after his father, Marion, disappeared or was killed while in St. Louis—the mystery of his disappearance never was solved. At thirteen young Frank began learning photography from G. T. Atkinson of Kansas City, Missouri. Just why he decided to come west is not known, but as early as 1890 he arrived in Dodge City, and a year later he had begun his peregrinations throughout the Southwest Plains in a wagon that served as a traveling studio and darkroom. Throughout the 1890s Steele plied this itinerant trade, sometimes bas-

5. The digitized images will be available for viewing in the near future through the Kansas State Historical Society website (www.kshs.org).

ing his operations from studios in Ashland and Meade.⁶

In May 1895 at age twenty-eight, Steele married twenty-four-year-old Pink Fletcher of rural Meade. A three-pound daughter, Edith, was prematurely born seven months later. Another girl, Zula Belle, was born in 1897. Frank and Pink divorced later that year. Three years later he married Sadie Harp of Burrton in Harvey County, about the same time that he joined the Masonic Lodge in Greensburg, where he had been employed by the Rock Island railroad as a special photographer. This union produced a son, Marion, born in 1904.⁷

In 1935 the Steeles returned to Kansas after some ten years in McCook, Nebraska. In September 1935 the sixty-nine-year-old photographer took a job with Dodge City to encourage the tourist trade. Steele planned to install on Boot Hill a display that would represent Dodge City during its cowtown days. Included in the display would be a



Session of the district court in Haskell County.



Heading wheat in Kiowa County, 1890s.

6. Oringderff, "Cowboys: The F. M. Steele Collection"; "Francis Marion Steele," *Meade County History* (N.p.: Meade County Historical Society, 1985), 202-4.

7. "Francis Marion Steele," 202-4.



Fourth of July celebration in Coldwater, 1903.



Harvesting kafir corn in Haskell County, 1890s.

completely outfitted chuck wagon, saddles, spurs, ropes, other droving paraphernalia, and some forty of his historic photographs. During the off-season he intended to present programs at area schools with his collection of artifacts and photographs. Before his plans could be put into effect, however, Steele and his wife died from asphyxiation in their rented Dodge City rooms on January 2, 1936. Steele had arisen to make coffee, then gone back to the bedroom to help Sadie, who was not in good health, prepare for the day. Apparently the coffee boiled over, extinguishing the flames of the stove, thus allowing gas fumes to permeate the apartment.⁸

While Steele is best known for his ranching and cowboy photography, the scope of his work ranges from portraits to construction projects. He was commissioned to document the building of irrigation ditches in western Kansas, railroad construction in Colorado, the operation of a sugar beet company in Garden City, and conservation projects

⁸ *Dodge City Journal*, September 12, 1935; *Dodge City Globe*, January 2, 1936.

in New Mexico. He also took many photographs of small-town life on the plains, of wheat farming and harvesting in western Kansas, Indians in Oklahoma and Nebraska, wildlife, individuals, and landscapes—even, reputedly, of motorcycle races, although none of these have yet surfaced.⁹

Unlike Texan Erwin E. Smith, Steele was not a cowboy determined to document his profession, and unlike Montanan L. A. Huffman in his Miles City studio, he did not work out of a single locale. Rather, Steele began his work as an itinerant photographer, traveling the plains in the years around the turn of the twentieth century with his portable studio and selling his work to the ranchers, cowboys, farmers, and small-town dwellers he photographed. One early-day cowboy, Charles McKinney of Englewood, Kansas, remembered Steele as a photographer who followed area roundup wagons in a buggy.¹⁰ Steele used glass plates that had to be prepared and finished on site. In addition to the plates and



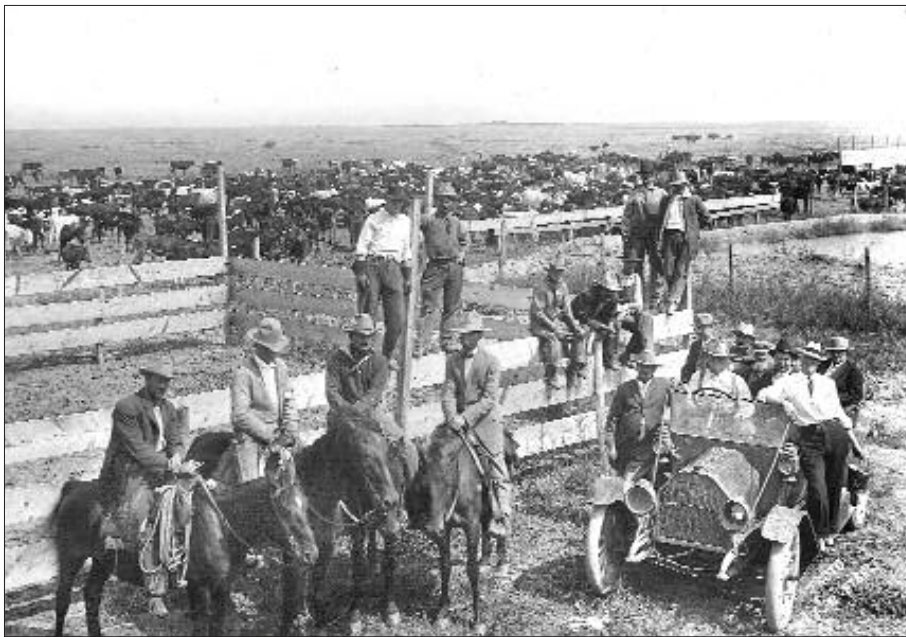
View of an orchard in Seward County.



Santa Fe railroad crew in Haskell County, ca. 1912.

9. *Coldwater Stock Journal*, December 11, 1902; *Dodge City Globe*, August 25, 1933

10. For information on Charles McKinney, see Oringderff, "Cowboys: The F. M. Steele Collection," 19.



Cattlemen, cowboys, and a herd of cattle in Haskell County.



A young girl and a flock of turkeys on an unidentified farm.

plate box, Steele also had a tent darkroom, a glass bath to hold the finishing solution, a tray, water tank, and several pint bottles of chemicals, all told some seventy pounds of equipment to lug around the prairies, not counting the camera itself.

Steele's incomplete life records suggest that in the first part of the twentieth century he moved almost as much from town to town doing studio work as he did while traveling by wagon in the 1890s. One aspect of his business was to advertise in a local paper that he would be in a certain area, available to take photographs (either indoors or on location) for a period ranging from a few days to a couple of weeks, then he would return to his studio to develop and finish the photographs. Nothing indicates that the frequent moves of his studio were associated with the need to stay a jump ahead of creditors. Perhaps he thought that new locations would provide a fresh clientele and a steady demand for his services. It is also possible that he maintained facilities in more than one town at one time.

Whatever the case, newspaper ads and other such sources show

that Steele set up shop or went on location at one time or another (sometimes more than once) in, among other places, Ashland, Bucklin, Coldwater, Dodge City, Englewood, Garden City, Greensburg, Hutchinson, Liberal, Meade, Montezuma, Mullinville, Plains, Protection, and Syracuse in Kansas and in Beaver and El Reno, Oklahoma. An 1894 newspaper article announcing that Steele was in Meade taking photographs of outdoor scenes and interior shots “by the flashlight process” stated that he was from Chicago, perhaps referring to a report that he had won a prize at the World’s Fair there.¹¹ He also had a studio in McCook, Nebraska, for some ten years, apparently the longest time he ever spent in one location.

Although a few years too late to document the big cattle drives up the Western Trail to Dodge City and Ogallala, Steele did photograph cowboys at work in roundups, roping and branding, and eating at the chuck wagon. He also photographed the drive of a reputed fif-

11. *Meade County Globe* (Meade), December 13, 1894; *Dodge City Globe*, January 2, 1936



Land buyers from Wichita call on James S. Patrick in Satanta.



Roping an outlaw steer near Ashland.



Cowboys from the 3 Block Ranch (New Mexico) going on night guard with cattle being trailed to Sterling, Kansas, 1898.



XIT chuck wagon near Buffalo Springs in Texas, 1879.

teen thousand cattle from the 3 Block Ranch in northeastern New Mexico to Sterling, Kansas. One of these photographs, perhaps his most famous, was an unusual nighttime scene of cowboys around a chuck wagon. Some are sitting up in their bedrolls, others are seated on the ground pulling off their boots, while still others are standing around. A mounted rider is faintly visible in the background.

As of now the legacy of F. M. Steele is incomplete at best. He was a “photographer of obvious sensitivity, who possessed a sense of history and self-esteem,” as described by the editors of *The Little Balkans Review* in 1983, who go on to say, in publishing six of his 1895 Oklahoma Panhandle ranching photographs, that his name “does not appear in any of the standard histories or reference books relating to photography and Western art.”¹² We have, as

12. “F. M. Steele, Western Scenic Artist,” *Little Balkans Review* 3 (Winter 1982–1983): 71.

of this time, located 267 extant Steele photographs, out of a body of work that undoubtedly must have numbered in the scores of thousands. In 1897, for example, the editor of the *Comanche County Clipper* noted that Steele had “finished about 4,000 pictures in Ashland and still had about 1,500 more to do.” So far as is known, none of his glass plates or other negatives have survived. We have extended, thus far, the subject matter of his work far beyond ranching and cowboys, although those scenes will undoubtedly continue to receive the most interest from the general public. But historians and sociologists, not to mention photography critics, will find much to study and much to admire in photographs that show a changing West, that document the advance of the plow and the railroad as well as the herds of cattle.¹³



Men at a pump house and irrigation ditch in Seward County.



Windmills pumping water into a large tank in Seward County.

13. This article is part of an ongoing project, and the authors would be pleased to learn from readers of other Steele photographs.