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April 1986

Foreshortened Lives: Review Essay

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Illinois Writers Review, Spring 1986, Vol. 5 (1), pp. 10-12.

Foreshortened Lives

By Robert Bray

We focus here on two important Illinois photographers, their work separated by about seven miles and seventy years. A review of *Upon a Quiet Landscape: the Photographs of Frank Sadorus*, edited by Raymond Bial and Frederick A. Schlipf (Urbana: Champaign County Historical Archives Publication 6, 1983); and *Ivesdale: A Photographic Essay* by Raymond Bial (Urbana: Champaign County Historical Archives Publication 5, 1982).

He lived a foreshortened life. For a period of less than three years, from the end of 1909 to the beginning of 1912, Frank Sadorus of Sadorus, Illinois, was intensely interested in photography, perhaps hoping through the medium to arrest the changes he felt were inexorably coming to his land and community. Hauling his view camera from the farm to the town to the grove and back again (all named Sadorus, German for "Sartoris" or tailor, the first Faulknerian pre-echo in this sad, strange story), he created, rather than recorded, a sustained photographic elegy for a family and a culture going out of business. And, as sometimes happens with the camera, the real subject turned out to be himself, on the other side.

He was nearly thirty when· he began taking pictures in earnest. Before that he had been merely an anonymous third son who helped out on the farm. In 1911, after the death of his father, an imposing sort of patriarch named George William Bacon Sadorus (G.W. B. for short), Frank seemed to lose interest in the camera. By 1912 he was done with photography. In 1917 the farm was sold and the Sadorus family dispersed to town, to other towns. Frank moved into a two room house along the Wabash track west of Sadorus. But something was wrong. Maybe the family thought there'd been too many shots of his sister Mary. What they said publicly was that Frank had been out in the sun too long. No one knows why, but for whatever reasons, the Sadoruses, like the Burdrens with Darl, had their brother, their son, and their late family chronicler committed. So Frank Sadorus, "Artistic Pictorialist," as he laughingly referred to himself, went north on the train to spend the last seventeen years of his life in the mental hospital at Kankakee, where he could be the anonymous third son once again. He was the first of the five Sadorus siblings to die, in 1934.

That burst of picture-taking coincided with the heyday of the mail-order photographer, not a few of them down on the farm like Sadorus. Frank liked carefully-posed shots of familiar subjects: family members situated in family places, still lifes, and, of course, landscapes. He developed and printed his own dry-plate negatives in an improvised darkroom. And we can imagine him presenting his work, with a mixture of pride and diffidence, to the family he so loved to memorialize. Thus far Sadorus is indistinguishable from the thousands of Americans at the turn of the century who fiddled around with photography, just another hobbyist who liked to mix chemicals in the dark and watch the mailbox for the latest number of *Camera Craft*.

Had this been all he was, I suspect Ray Bial and Fred Schlipf would not have put together *Upon a Quiet Landscape*, and the photographs of Frank Sadorus would have remained strictly archival materials. But Bial, himself an expert photographer, calls Frank Sadorus an artist, and a romantic artist at that: "On the spare, Midwestern prairie he distilled lovely qualities from a

monotonous landscape." From among 350 surviving negatives, Bial and Schlipf chose 65 for the book seeking to reprint the best pictures but also to represent "all of Frank's enthusiasms - his parents and brothers and sister, work on the farm, the change of seasons, family excursions, carefully composed still lifes, and good-natured fooling around." While most of the posed jokes are merely corny (see Plate 1, "I was raised in the corn belt"), the stuff of humorous postcards, the photographs on the other subjects are uniformly interesting and occasionally compelling. The still lifes, for example, look back at the viewer with almost hallucinatory power, and the images of Mary Sadorus, both in portraits and as a figure in the prairie landscape (see the haunting "Sunlight and Shadow," Plate 19), suggest a probing mutual understanding between sister and brother.

A catalpa blossom on a catalpa leaf on a catalpa trunk (Plate 32) looks for all the world like Georgia O'Keefe by way of Ansel Adams - archetypal and super-real at the same time. Similarly, the pyramid of corn ears at an angle and the scrupulous arrangement of grain sheaves and corn (Plates 43 and 44) anticipate what the "f-64" circle would achieve a generation later - an ultimate squint of the camera that rendered both landscape and "dead nature" with stunning tonality and texture, yet the imitative painterly qualities so often sought by turn-of-the-century photographers.

Plate 2, by contrast, is a very different sort of still life: a crazy-quilt of photographic paraphernalia and life memorabilia which recalls the sort of *trompe l'oeil* groups of objects painted by William Harnett and his followers in the 19th century. But in this case the photographic frame is cluttered from top to bottom, side to side, with an apparently chaotic miscellany of magazines, books (including several of the popular juvenile "Ranger Frank" novels), stuffed hawk, camera, clock and calendar, etc. , etc. Yet the picture is in fact a meticulous arrangement that (I sense) embodies the truth about Frank Sadorus, if only we can read it. The pendulum clock is stopped at five past twelve, the coca-cola calendar says March, 1912. The stuffed bird, the Illini pennant, and the copy of *Frank on the Prairie* bespeak Sadorus' whimsy. It's a remarkable last testament, perhaps the only autobiography he left us. Nearly every object in the picture is viewed frontally, flattening the space and making it shallow. A single box in the left front sits edge-on to us, its length foreshortened and nearly sticking out of the frame: "Seed's Dry Plates." Given his sense of humor, I expect Sadorus appreciated the irony: the rube "raised in the corn belt" is also the sensitive young man who made photographic art using plates from a company named "Seed's."

This "autobiographical" still life implies what Frank Sadorus was in the years of his passion, what he would never be again. With the death of his father came the end of the rura1 idyll he loved: the sugar grove was cut down, the farm sold, the family broken up. The past he had tried to freeze on film proved finally both an Eden and psychic destroyer. Or so we can speculate. To fashion his quiet landscapes had entailed photographing the shadows, which in turn had meant standing out in the sun for too long. After all, the aperture was f-64.

From Sadorus to Ivesdale is a few miles and a couple of jogs west on the blacktop. That's the map distance. The distance in vision, however, is considerably more. Ray Bial calls *Ivesdale* "a photographic essay," but he doesn't mean by this "photojournalism." As in *Upon a Quiet Landscape*, the subjects are posed, though Bial does this less formally than did Frank Sadorus, and with more attention to people than to the townscape (for some reason Bial chooses to ignore the landscape surrounding this little island in the corn, and nearly all of the photographs have a narrow field of view). The Citizens of Ivesdale are seen in context - Postmaster Paul Giblin: arms akimbo by the flag pole in front of his post office, with the Ivesdale water tower peeking

over the roof like a rising moon (Plate 1) - so that we generally know what they are, if not who, and the accompanying captions can be limited to simply names and occupations.

There's "Tim Collins, retired farmer," for instance (Plate 2). He stands, overalled, in front of a white wooden wall, arms defiantly crossed, cap on head (no seed corn or farm implement logo!), his dark workshirt buttoned at the collar: he's the archetype sourpuss, with a quarter-moon frown that's been fixed in place for years. He doesn't seem to have any eyes, but the rest of the face and his left hand are a topographic map of work and wear. The context is severely reduced here: the white vertical tongue-and-groove boards, a white thermometer compliments of "Clancy Bros." (it goes from 40 below to 120 above - or probably used to, since the fluid is no longer visible), and half a white window with gunny cloth for a screen. Mr. Collins stands in the left third of the picture, his dark greys and blacks contrasting fundamentally with the white background, which reflects sufficient light to give him an aura around the head and shoulders. No doubt this is a trick of the medium rather than Bial's intention, but the effect is nonetheless striking. Because the subject's context is so severely limited - we can' t tell whether the fragment of a building is part of the farm or the town - it is difficult to know who “Tim Collins, retired farmer” is or what he's doing now he's retired. I think this adds power to the photograph, and demonstrates Bial's work at its best, avoiding "storytelling" while still managing to evoke a sense of character (he isn't uniformly successful at this, as some of the other "vocational" portraits show, particularly those of the Co-op workers, Plates 31-38).

The Ivesdale Co-op is evidently the town's biggest employer and its second largest structure after the St. Joseph Catholic church. Bial has done a splendid composition of the Co-op complex, using almost the whole frame to capture the buildings' elemental solid geometry. The result (Plate 30) is a photograph with iconographical force: the buildings are seen as a group of cylinders, cubes, rectangles, and triangles, their volumes over1ayed and piled on one another as they gleamingly ascend into the sunlight of a high sky, with just enough play of shadow to give depth to the composition. In this picture at least, the Co-op dominates the landscape as it dominates local agribusiness. I'm even tempted to talk in terms of transcendence, but then this is all too easy to do with other people's grain elevators.

Transcendence in Ivesdale is rightly reserved to the other big building in town, the parish church of St. Joseph's, which is the spiritual and social center of this predominantly Irish Catholic community. Though the parochial school was closed in 1958 (the young folk go to school over in Bement nowadays), St. Joseph's is still the town's most important institution, sponsoring such atavisms as the "Annual Costume Contest and Wiener Roast" and maintaining an active Knights of Columbus chapter (their hall is one of four drinking establishments I counted on Chapin Street). Bial's “St. Joseph" portraits capture Ivesdale at its most convivial: happy communicants coming out of mass, children bedecked for the "Annual Costume Contest," and a marvelous shot of two altar boys (Plate 19) which looks like a piece of nostalgia out of Spanky and our Gang or the Little Rascals.

But what of St. Joseph's as a building, as a piece of architecture? Rather surprisingly, Bial has chosen not to portray it. We see the entire church edifice only once, from a distance in a view of the entire town of Ivesdale that serves as the book's frontispiece. Even from afar, however, St. Joseph's is impressive. Romanesque in structure, brick in substance with what appears to be an unusually low “prairie style" roof and twin towers of unequal height topped off by turrets rather than steeples. The church and a huge oak take up fully hall of this late-autumn picture, while over to the left- not dominant, not even as tall as St. Joseph's lesser tower – and mostly hidden by trees and houses is the Co-op, all but banished by the relative authority of the church.

This may be partly a trick of perspective, since the Co-op seems to be on the far side of town and deeper in the frame. But, according to Bial, it's also right proportion. Work is a necessary condition for community, but not sufficient. In the frontispiece and throughout the book, Bial suggests that St. Joseph's is "bigger" than the Co-op. Part of the "thesis" of *Ivesdale* is that the place is very much alive, and the book succeeds in convincing us of this. Yet the strength of Bial's approach is also a weakness. He has essentially accepted the town's self-image, without irony from the camera or the subjects. To take a hamlet-sized small town's word for itself, as near as we are to the end of the 20th century, is to invite skepticism among the audience who will look at these pictures and wonder. Are we getting truth about Ivesdale – human or artistic? In the very finest of the *Ivesdale* photographs we do. Compositions like "Tim Collins, retired farmer," are powerful because they create character rather than accept it as found. They are portraits, that is, of foreshortened lives.

Perhaps Ray Bial faced more problems in *Ivesdale* than he, or any other photographer, could reasonably be expected to solve. By rejecting candid photojournalism as unrealistically dramatic for this "small, low-key town; he invited the folk to reveal to him what they wanted to, and only that. Nor could he legitimately demand any more from them: he was an outsider, lacking the intimacy with "family" that Frank Sadorus readily exploited. Such criticisms aside, however, I should end by saying that Bial's collective portrait of Ivesdale forms a genuine "quiet landscape" of its own. Not the inwardly romanticized vision of the Sadorus homeplace, to be sure, but still a recognizable kindred work of the photographic imagination.