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Raymond Bial

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"I was raised in the Corn Belt," Frank Sadorus claimed quite aptly on one of his self-portraits, and, all humor aside, the statement fairly well summarizes Sadorus and his work.

Lugging a view camera around the family farm in East Central Illinois, he made portraits of his family, landscapes from a nearby maple grove, and lovely still lifes. In postcards to his brother, Enos, who lived about twenty miles away in Urbana, he wrote humorously and tenderly of his attachment to the home in which he was born and raised: "How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood."

He did travel at least once to the State Fair in Springfield and, on another occasion, went to Urbana, most likely to visit Enos. He also made one longer trip to visit relatives in Ohio—in each case, making one or two offhanded negatives of the State Capitol Building, Main Street in Urbana, and his father standing on the shores of Lake Erie. Yet, as shown in this sampling of photographs made from his original dry-plate negatives, he was essentially involved with photographing those people, places, and objects around his home that meant the most to him.

Frank Sadorus was born on the family farm a half mile east of the town of Sadorus, Illinois, on January 5, 1880, the fourth of seven children (five of whom survived to adulthood) of Phoebe and G. W. B. Sadorus. His great grandfather, from whom the town derived its name, was the first permanent settler in Champaign County, Illinois, and his father had been a captain with the 125th Illinois Volunteers during the Civil War. When he returned home from the war, G. W. B. Sadorus settled down to farm his 104 acres just east of town and, in due course, built the house that appears with such frequency and warmth in his son's photographs.

As he grew up Frank Sadorus worked on the farm with his brothers, Enos, Elmer, and Warren, while his sister, Mary, helped their mother in the house. The family worked hard, generally six days a week, although there was time for picnics in the maple grove (always in Sunday best) and for antics such as Warren's warning to "Post no bills" on the soles of his shoes.

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*Raymond Bial has published two books of photographs, In All My Years; Portraits of Older Blacks in Champaign-Urbana, and Ivesdale; a Photographic Essay based upon traveling exhibits of his work. He has most recently edited a book of historical photographs, Upon a Quiet Landscape; the Photographs of Frank Sadorus. His photographs have appeared in a number of publications and, in addition to the traveling exhibits, he has had one-man shows at St. Anselm's College in Manchester, New Hampshire, and at Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois.*

In this quiet, relatively isolated setting Sadorus became interested in photography, although the source of his interest, as well as his education in photography, is still unclear. In all likelihood he was self-taught as a photographer and simply happened upon photographic equipment and materials.

Most of his negatives came from the Seed Dry Plate Company in St. Louis, and in a postcard to Enos he sings the praises of Velox, a favorite printing paper. Enos, who worked at the Big Four railroad yards in Urbana after he married and moved off the farm, was also an amateur photographer, and the two brothers no doubt discussed their common interest. Moreover, despite the relative isolation of the farm, Sadorus did reside near a railroad line which brought him newspapers, magazines, and books on photography as well as camera equipment and supplies.

He experimented with a variety of styles and never seemed to overcome an ingrained uncertainty about himself and his work. On postcards and photographs he variously referred to himself as "Frank Sadorus, Photographic Artist," "Sadorus, Lifeographer," "The Beauty Artiste," "Sadorus, Artistic Pictorialist," and "Frank Sadorus, Artist."

There is a quality of humor in these titles as well as what he himself called the "Sadorus Sunshine System." However, in photographing what mattered to him personally, he does imbue his work with integrity. There are clear, yet hesitant glimpses of his potential as a fine artist, such as the portrait of Mary and Elmer Sadorus with snowballs held in their fingertips.

He left only 350 negatives. Yet, in primarily four years—from 1908 to 1912—in time he could spare from working on the farm, he completed a body of highly original work. Through humorous portraits of his family as well as still lifes of familiar objects, including common field corn, his work offers a highly personal look at a young artist and his home on a small farm on the Illinois prairie.

In photographing the maple grove and family farm, as it turned out, Sadorus was documenting not only the last years of a way of life in the rural Midwest but also his own life in that place. The automobile and mechanized farming were on the verge of radically altering the region, and the nation would soon engage itself in a futile world war. Yet Sadorus seemed primarily concerned with the loss of a personal landscape. On one photograph he wrote, "Goodbye, old timber, you are doomed." Indeed the indigenous maple grove was being cut down so that the land could be converted to larger, more profitable farms that emphasized cash crops. But Sadorus was also recording his last years on that land.

The first critical change in his life came on June 17, 1911, when his father died. On a photograph of his brothers, his sister, and himself made at the time of the funeral, Sadorus wrote prophetically, "A turning

point in five lives." And, especially for himself, things were never the same again. By early 1912 he had given up photography and, never having settled upon another career, simply continued to live on the farm with his mother, Elmer, and Mary.

Eventually, in 1917, the estate was settled and the family farm to which he had been so attached was sold. The same day he bought a small house at the western edge of Sadorus that his father had originally purchased as a first home for Warren when he was married. With her proceeds from the estate, Sadorus' mother built a house in town, and Mary and Elmer, who retired from farming, moved in with her.

Displaced from the farm, entirely on his own, Sadorus lived only a few months in the small, two-room house. Then, on March 22, 1917, under very questionable circumstances, he was committed to a mental hospital in Kankakee, Illinois, about 100 miles north of Sadorus. Various reasons have been advanced as explanations for the commitment. One rumor suggests that he got sunstroke while working in the fields years before and had never quite recovered; another that he drank and smoked excessively.

Disregarding speculation on the actual reasons for Sadorus' commitment, the result appears to be extreme. Against his will he was abruptly and irrevocably separated from the home he valued above all else. The house that he had occupied so briefly was shut up and remained empty, ironically in his name and always informally referred to as "Uncle Frank's house," while he was in the hospital for the next seventeen years—until his death on Christmas Day, 1934.

Apparently resigned to his fate he never returned home again, not even for a visit. Only once during those years did he make an effort to leave the hospital. One day, about five years after his arrival, he simply walked off the grounds and tried to return home by following the railroad tracks that he knew led back to Sadorus. The family was promptly notified of his absence. However, after walking a few miles, he apparently realized the futility of the trip, for he turned around and went back to the hospital.

During this period Sadorus did make some drawings. However, they have since been lost and in contrast with the rich record of photographs that he left of his life on the farm virtually nothing remains from the years in the hospital. As far as is known he never picked up a camera again, and the only surviving evidence from those seventeen years is a single snapshot taken in the last year of his life. On the back of the photograph he wrote, "Taken July 1, 1934. I don't know if it looks like me, but it's me anyway."

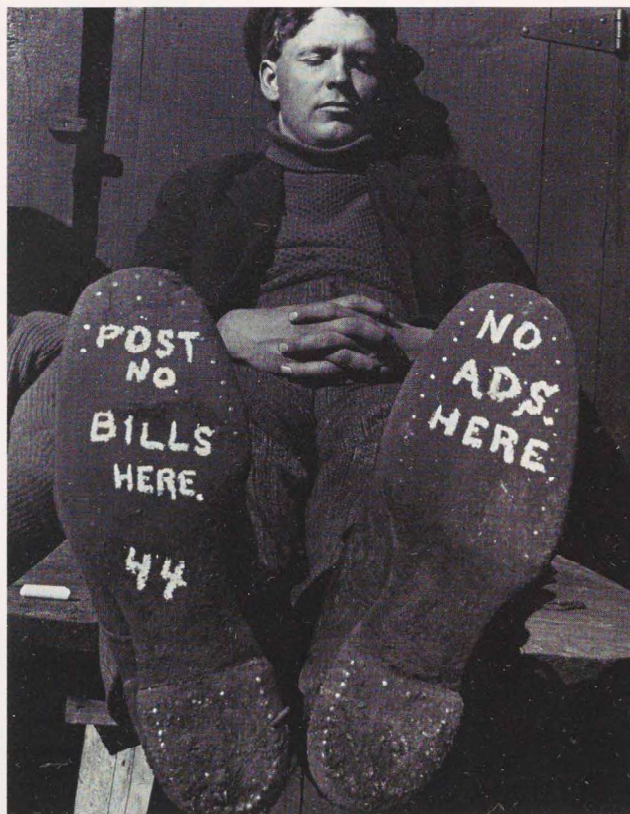


Figure 1 Warren Sadorus.



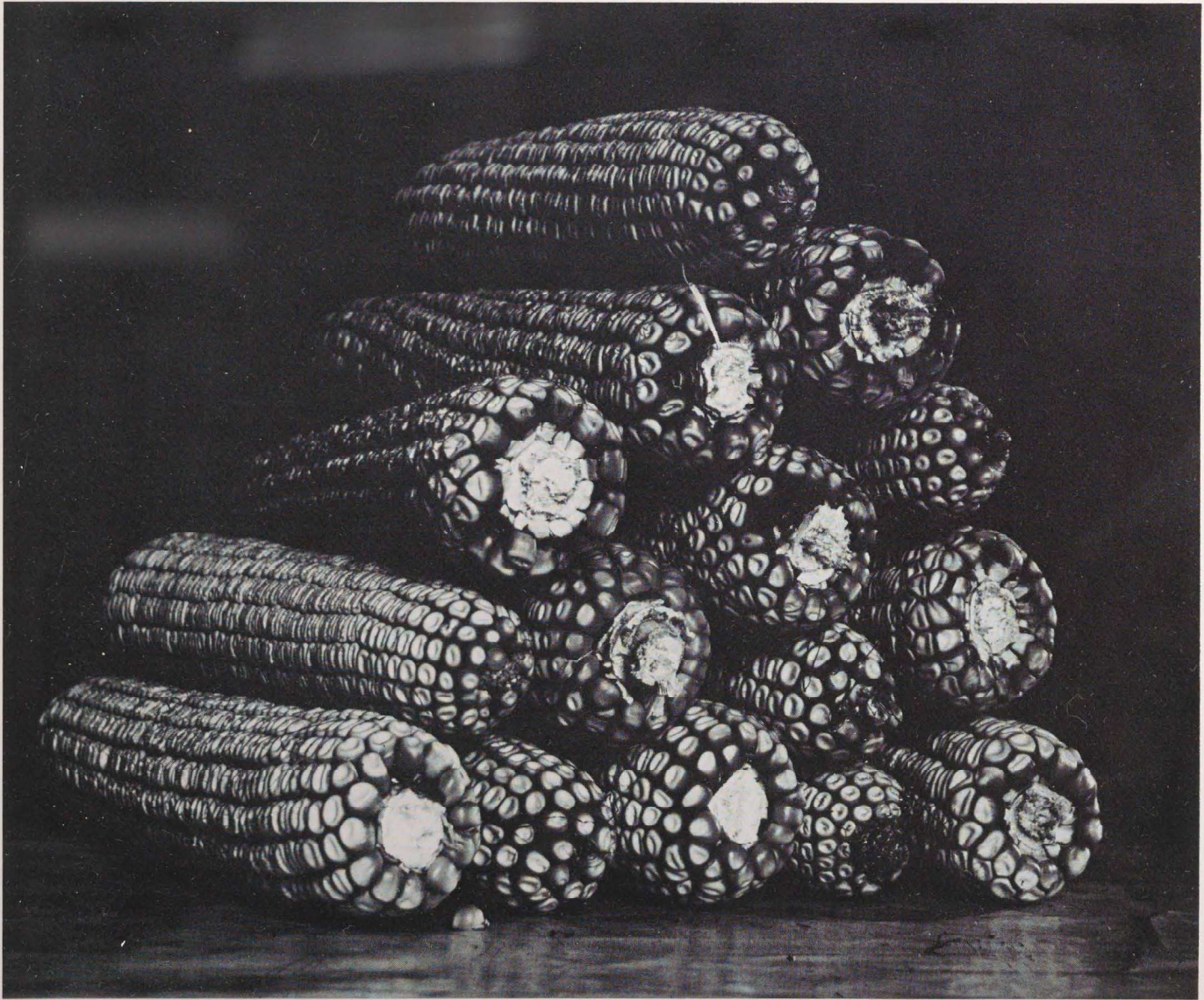
**Figure 2** Double exposure of Warren Sadorus.



**Figure 3** Unidentified man with a flag apparently made by stitching Illinois State Fair prize ribbons together.



Figure 4 Still life of magazines, books, and photographic equipment.



**Figure 5** On a print of this photograph Frank Sadorus wrote, "Corn raised on the Sadorus farm by FAS and Bill. Shortie trimmed 'em." "FAS" is Frank Allen Sadorus, and "Bill" is Elmer, whose full name was William Elmer Sadorus. Frank was also called "Shortie."





Figure 6 Warren Sadorus.



**Figure 7** Frank Sadorus. Self-portrait. November 6, 1910.



**Figure 8** Sadorus called this photograph of Mary and Phoebe Sadorus "Breaking the News to Mother."



**Figure 9** Frank Sadorus labeled this photograph "The Punkin Orchestra." The date of the photograph is unknown, but the print was made on March 2, 1912. This photograph includes family members Warren, G.W.B., Mary, and Elmer.