

The Other Worlds of Joe Steinmetz

Jay Ruby

For more than fifty years Joseph Steinmetz made his living shooting candid wedding albums, portraits, and commissions from clients such as *Life*, *Look*, *Country Life*, *Colliers*, *Holiday*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He is a native of Philadelphia, a graduate of Princeton, and the inventor of the candid wedding album. Since 1940 he has resided in Sarasota, Florida, where he continued his work as a photographer, taking publicity pictures for various Florida chambers of commerce, Ringling Brothers circus, and other clients.

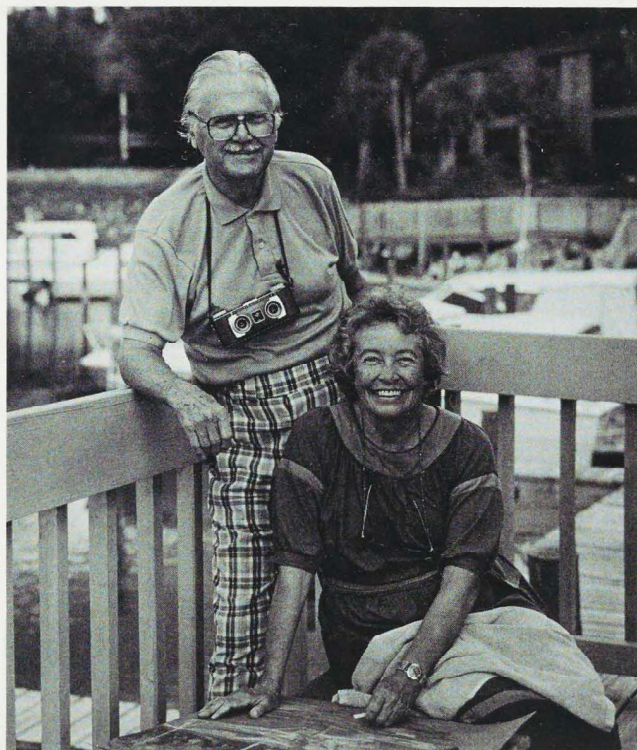
Studio and other commercial photographers are often ignored, at times even ridiculed, by those wishing to create a particular orthodoxy within photography. Photographers who take pictures for a commission instead of satisfaction of their "inner urges" as creative artists are not worthy of serious consideration, displays in art galleries, or a mention in "official" histories of photography unless, like Richard Avedon or Irving Penn, they happen to reside within privileged New York circles. Consequently, Steinmetz's photographs were known only to his clients.

Fortunately, there is a growing recognition that a variety of histories of photography can coexist. Approaching photography as art alone is as limiting as confining the appreciation and study of writing to poetry. Photography is a medium of communication capable of being used in a number of ways that are not only interesting to contemplate but rewarding to study.

Barbara Norfleet is a pioneer in bringing the studio photographer to our attention. She created an archive at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard. From the collection Norfleet produced an exhibition and book, *The Champion Pig* (1979), featuring some of Steinmetz's images and a second show and catalog, *Killing Time* (1982), devoted exclusively to Steinmetz. Norfleet's work initiated discussion among scholars and critics about the importance of studio photographers in the history of photography and their images as data for understanding society.

This article continues the dialogue, through Steinmetz's photographs. Although some remarks may be critical of Norfleet's ideas, they are possible only because of the stimulation created by her work and Steinmetz's photographs. Three issues will be addressed here: (1) Steinmetz's assumed innocence; (2) the importance of intention and context in the understanding of photographs; and (3) the value of these images as data.

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Joe Steinmetz, with Stereo Realist on his chest, and his wife, Louise Palmer Steinmetz, an artist who works with oils, acrylics, and pastels. She is also a good photographer and helps Joe with arrangements of people and props for his photographs. (Taken October 7, 1983, on Joe's 78th birthday, at their home in Pelican Cove, Sarasota, Florida.)

Innocence

Norfleet was drawn to Steinmetz's work because "He combines the innocence of a child with a sophisticated eye. Like a good portrait painter he takes what he sees with no idea what he is capturing" (Norfleet 1982:5). This assumed quality attracted many critics. Gene Thornton of the *New York Times* entitled his review of *Killing Time* "Unwitting Pioneer of the Candid Style" (August 22, 1982). Edward J. Sozanski, art critic of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, wrote on August 1, 1983: "Although he didn't aspire to high art, he was gifted with an artist's intuition and irrepressibly impish sense of humor." And Rebecca Sinkler, also of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, stated (September 11, 1983): "Joe Steinmetz didn't think that he was making art back in the 30's and 40's when he was shooting Philadelphia preppies at play. . . . Norfleet has accused him of 'artistic perfection' and 'understanding the ideology of the society' he was recording. 'That sounds mighty fancy,' Steinmetz says . . . 'I was shooting as fast as I could—and having fun.'"

Norfleet's quote and the critics' response to *Killing Time* raise two questions: (1) Is Steinmetz a "naive" artist—an innocent who made art without knowing it? and (2) Was Steinmetz recording social customs and history and did he realize it?

1. "Naive"?

I believe that Steinmetz's "innocence" is simply the reflection of a general lack of concern among most commercial photographers for the canons of fine arts photography, where one's motivation is thought to be the satisfaction of self and not the client and where a devotion to a particular style is thought to be a sign of integrity. Steinmetz is a sophisticated and professional commercial photographer, technically competent, craft conscious, and able to deliver the type of image his clients expect. To do so, he has employed whatever style has suited the situation. It is a pragmatic world, in which getting the job done well must dominate other considerations.

His portraits (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4) display a clear mastery of the conventions of Western portraiture. Other images in this essay indicate a stylistic range not previously seen in either of Norfleet's books. Many are indistinguishable from photographs taken by documentary artists (Figures 5, 6, and 7), such as Cartier-Bresson (Figures 8, 9, 10, and 11), or some FSA photographers (Figures 12 and 13). The similarities do not suggest that Steinmetz is directly derivative of any of these people. To stay in the business of taking photographs for a living, one adapts whatever look or style is deemed appropriate at the time. An argument could be made that being well known or obscure in the history of photography has to do with many factors unrelated to the quality of one's work.

2. "Social Recorder"?

Modern art photography has been influenced by two "non-art" styles: the snapshot, or candid, and the so-called vernacular, or commercial, image. Norfleet suggests that Steinmetz, or at least photographers like him, may be an important source for the art photographer. "The modernity of Steinmetz's vision makes us admire this vernacular photograph (e.g., *Burger Queen*, Sarasota, Florida, 1959); it is possible that the origins of much contemporary art photography can be traced to such sources, usually ignored in photographic history. Clearly, studio photographers know that good form makes a subject more accessible" (Norfleet 1979:75).

Gene Thornton of the *New York Times* says:

The style of Steinmetz's photographs is a style made famous by the party photographs of Lee Friedlander . . . and Garry Winogrand. . . . The roving photographer armed with a hand-held camera and a flash looks for pictures at a party, a political rally or an art show and, when he sees one, shoots from the hip. . . . As John Szarkowski of the Museum of Modern Art pointed out . . . such accidental effects are peculiarly characteristic of the photographic medium . . . all three photographers (that is, Steinmetz, Friedlander, and Winogrand) are working in the same style, and the fact that Steinmetz, a heretofore obscure studio photographer mastered it several decades before the stars of the Museum of Modern Art made it famous, is a fact worth pondering. [August 22, 1983]

Steinmetz's candid wedding shots and Florida tourism shots displayed in the *Killing Time* exhibit and catalog (1982) are not the "accidents" John Szarkowski and others wish them to be. They are shots taken by someone whose job depends upon understanding the events to be recorded well enough to predict those elements that clients wished to have photographed. The wedding photographer who presents the happy couple with "accidents" does not stay in business very long. They want their candid shots to look exactly like the candid shots they have seen in everyone else's wedding album. The "informality" of wedding candid shots is as formulaic as the formal studio portrait; it simply operates under a different set of conventions. Steinmetz may have pioneered the style, but very quickly other photographers copied it and participants in weddings learned how to perform their "candid" and "caught-off-guard" poses just as they learned to perform their formal studio portrait stances.

There is an important difference between the work of professional photographers like Steinmetz and art photographers like Friedlander and Winogrand. Steinmetz is commissioned to record a coherent description of an event for a very specific purpose. The need for content has to dictate the "look" of the pictures. Steinmetz's personal vision or desire for self-expression or stylistic consistency is not relevant. Friedlander and others like him regard the content of their images as deliberately banal and important only if it allows them to explore the formal qualities of the picture. They are interested in the syntactics of the images, not in conveying information about content. They are not interested in using style to reveal content; instead they use content to explore style. It is only by ignoring the purpose and intent of Steinmetz's pictures that we can attach his work to this tradition.

Intentionality and Context

The conundrum about whether an image contains its own meaning or whether one must know the maker's intention, the original context, and the intended audience will probably be debated as long as there are images. It seems reasonable if you wish to comprehend an image to begin with an understanding of the maker's intention, the context in which the picture was displayed, and the original audience. The issue is made more complex when editors and other "gatekeepers" use pictures for secondary purposes in new contexts for audiences never imagined by the photographer. The meaning of a photograph is never fixed but is determined by a combination of factors. This article is an example of the latter point of view. I am using Steinmetz's photographs to discuss issues and ideas that were simply not relevant at the time of the production of the images nor were they of any consequence to the people who commissioned or initially saw them. If we propose to use Steinmetz's photographs for data about social customs, it is critical to understand the differences between the maker's intended meaning and our transformations and recreations.

Norfleet's attitude toward these issues is at best unclear:

Photographs are better at raising questions than at answering them; they can reveal what you do not understand, and also what you take for granted. It is possible to analyze a photograph as a work of art or for its information on material culture because all the information you need is in the photograph, but to interpret the picture's meaning requires information outside the photograph. Like the historian, who edits raw material, the photographer chooses his subject, frames it to include and exclude, and at the moment he sees fit, clicks his shutter. The result of this interaction between a person with a camera and a subject at a particular time and place is then seen by the viewer, who also edits the photograph as he filters it—unconsciously—through his frame of reference. Most of us, of course, do not think about what we are bringing to a photograph when we look at it, but rather respond to it as a simple copy of nature. I have chosen four photographs that demonstrate, each in its own way, how difficult it is to unriddle what we see . . . [Norfleet 1979:5]

It is perplexing that she calls photographs without this information a puzzle and yet supplies the information for only four images in *Champion Pig* (1979).

Four of Steinmetz's photographs reproduced here serve as excellent illustrations of the problem. Figure 14 appears in *Killing Time* labeled simply, "Figure 13 Pennsylvania, 1937." It would appear to be some sort of formal dining occasion among the Philadelphia elite. Given other images in this section of the book, it is not unreasonable to assume that you are looking at a dinner held after the dress rehearsal for a society

wedding. It could be examined as a record of social custom in America. It is an advertisement for the Campbell Soup Company posed by Steinmetz's friends. These data help us to demystify the picture and make the task of gaining a critical understanding of photography more likely.

Figure 15 is a panel from an essay, "Life Goes to a Head Dress Ball"—a somewhat bizarre annual event for the wealthy of Philadelphia. *Life* magazine delighted in regularly presenting its readers with an essay called "Life Goes to a . . .," which invariably poked fun in a lighthearted manner at human foibles. To reproduce one image from the essay (as was done in *Killing Time*, Figure 23) and neglect to explain the original context is misleading.

Figures 16 and 17 are reproduced as further support for our position. Contemplate them with and without the captions. The exercise is in fact rewarding for all of Steinmetz's photographs found here.

Steinmetz as a Social Historian

Steinmetz's pictures present us with a vast amount of information that seems to have the potential of yielding analyzable data about human behavior. Some writers apparently believe that Steinmetz actually made the photographs for these purposes. "He has taken 140,000 or so photographs during his life, most of them studies of how people spend the money they earned or were born with" (Cookie Mueller, *Art Forum*, December 1983). To restate the obvious, Steinmetz is not a historian or social scientist, and his pictures were not taken in order to make a research record. If these images are analyzable data, it is because some analyst is able to ask a researchable question that can transform the pictures into data and then into evidence.

Norfleet states:

A local studio photographer like Steinmetz must respond to the culture and character of his clients if he is going to please them. To succeed he must know the ideology and iconography of the society he is visually preserving. His record of time and place may be a more honest one than that of the art of documentary photographers who has [sic] no need to reflect the self-definitions and thoughts of the people he photographs. [Norfleet 1982:4]

While I am less certain than Norfleet about how one determines the honesty of a photograph or a style, the sentiment expressed in her quote clearly states the potential. She has paved the way by creating an archive, two exhibitions, and a catalog. It is an excellent beginning. Now starts the scholarly task of unraveling the information contained in these documents.

A photograph is a record of a complex set of assumptions, culturally normative behaviors, and expectations. What kind of data do they contain? How do we reveal it?—questions not so easy to answer as they might appear. We can only hope that the photographs and accompanying materials collected at Harvard will be a continuing resource for those scholars interested in the problems involved in studying photographs as social documents.

Norfleet commented that "Joe Steinmetz thinks everything has beauty and all people are nice. I never heard him say anything bad about anyone, including tourists, during the long and many days I spent with him in his studio" (1982). My much briefer contact with Joe Steinmetz has been just as pleasant. His photographs offer us a chance to contemplate ourselves—a serious undertaking. In the process we should not lose sight of the fact that Steinmetz had fun making these pictures. We should try to do the same while reflecting upon them.



Figure 1 The P. Blair Lee family, Chestnut Hill, Pa., 1942. Taken for a Christmas card . . . There is nothing unusual about this picture; a rather routine family group.

References

- Norfleet, Barbara
1979 *Champion Pig*. Boston: David Godine.
1982 *Killing Time*. Boston: David Godine.

Note: The italicized quotations in each legend are Steinmetz's comments.

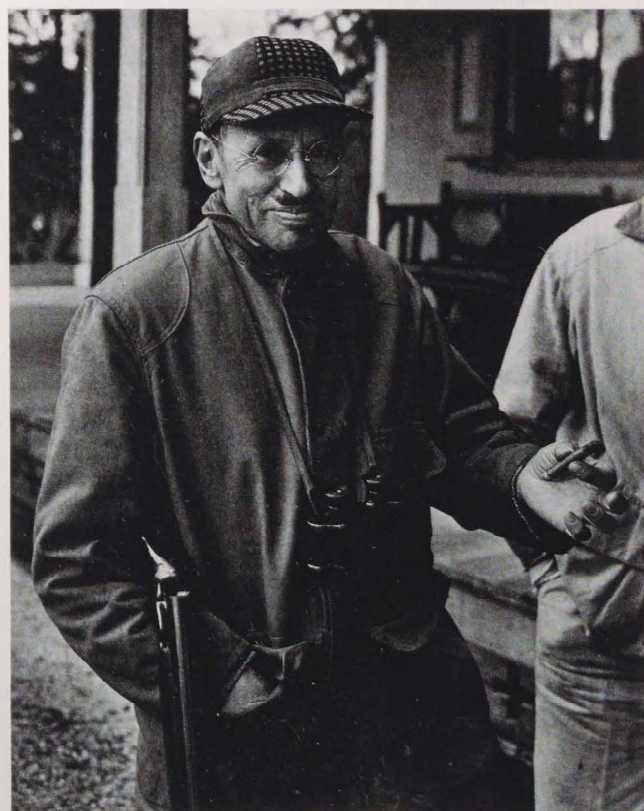


Figure 2 Joseph Lippincott, The Joseph Wharton Estate, Batso, N.J., 1940. An assignment for *Country Life* magazine. The writer for this article in *Country Life* was Sophie Yarnall (Mrs. Reginald Jacobs, prominent Philadelphia socialite who wrote of fine houses and estates and society people).

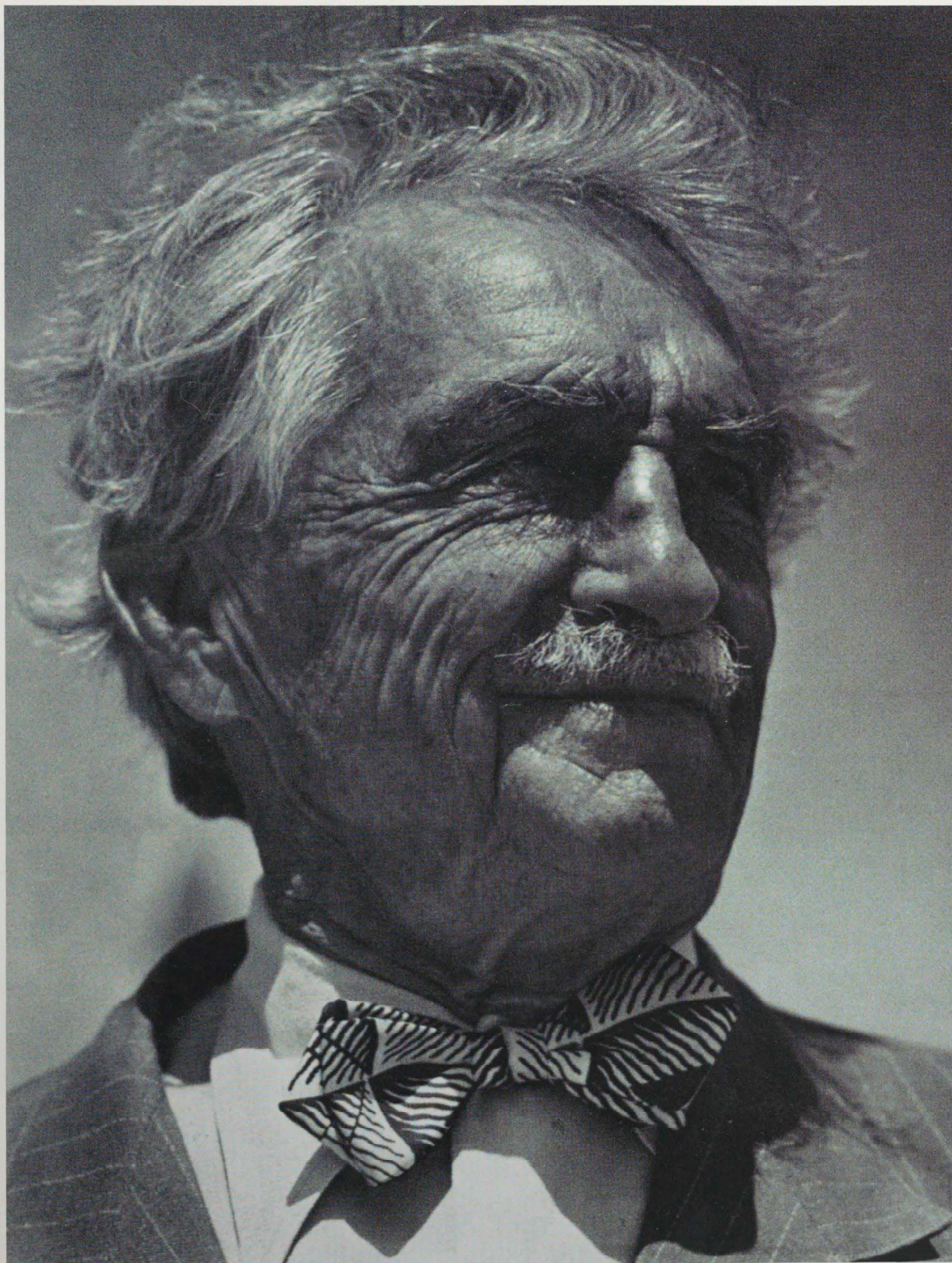


Figure 3 Bernard McFadden at the Orange Blossom Hotel, Sarasota, Florida, 1968. He had flown into Sarasota with his new and much younger wife. I had already photographed his Olympic-sized pool at his Deauville McFadden Hotel on Miami Beach and just wanted a shot of his rugged face for my files and displays.

Figure 4 Ben Stahl, illustrator and founder of The Famous Artist's Course, 1966. Here he is seen working on some paintings of Ben Hur races as promotional artwork for C. B. De Mille's movie epic *Ben Hur*. . . . I consider this shot of Stahl with his paints one of my best portraits.

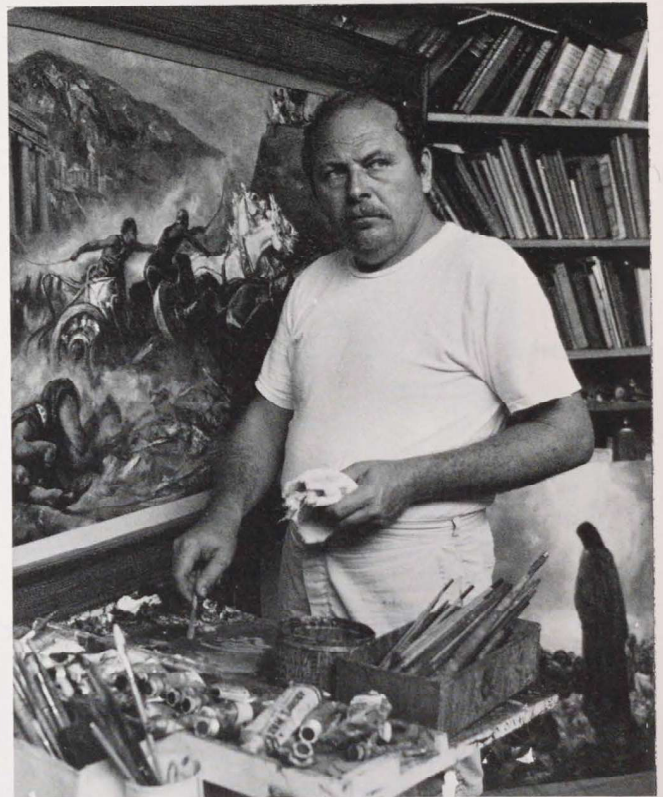


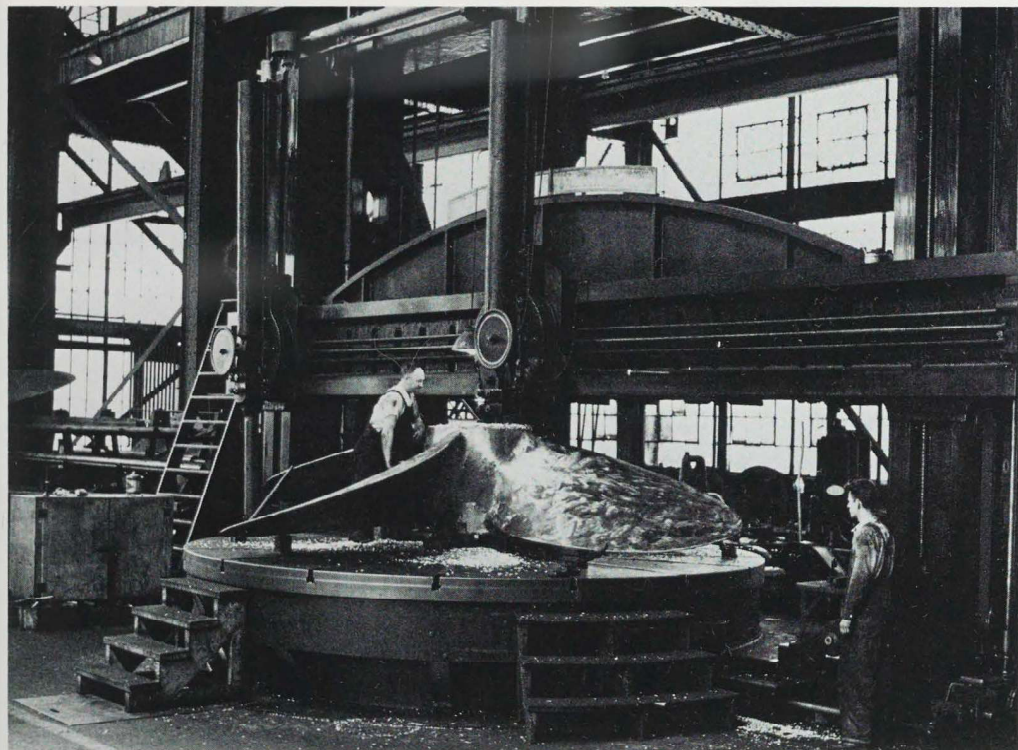
Figure 5 In the Highlands of Guatemala, 1939. I was traveling on vacation with my wife and another couple through the highlands when we passed some Indians coming home from market. I consider this one of my favorite shots and had it enlarged to a 4 foot by 5 foot mural on my livingroom wall above the fireplace

Figure 6 Commercial Fisherman, Crescent Beach, Florida, 1949. Photo taken for Saturday Evening Post article by John Maloney entitled *Late Date With a Mackerel*.

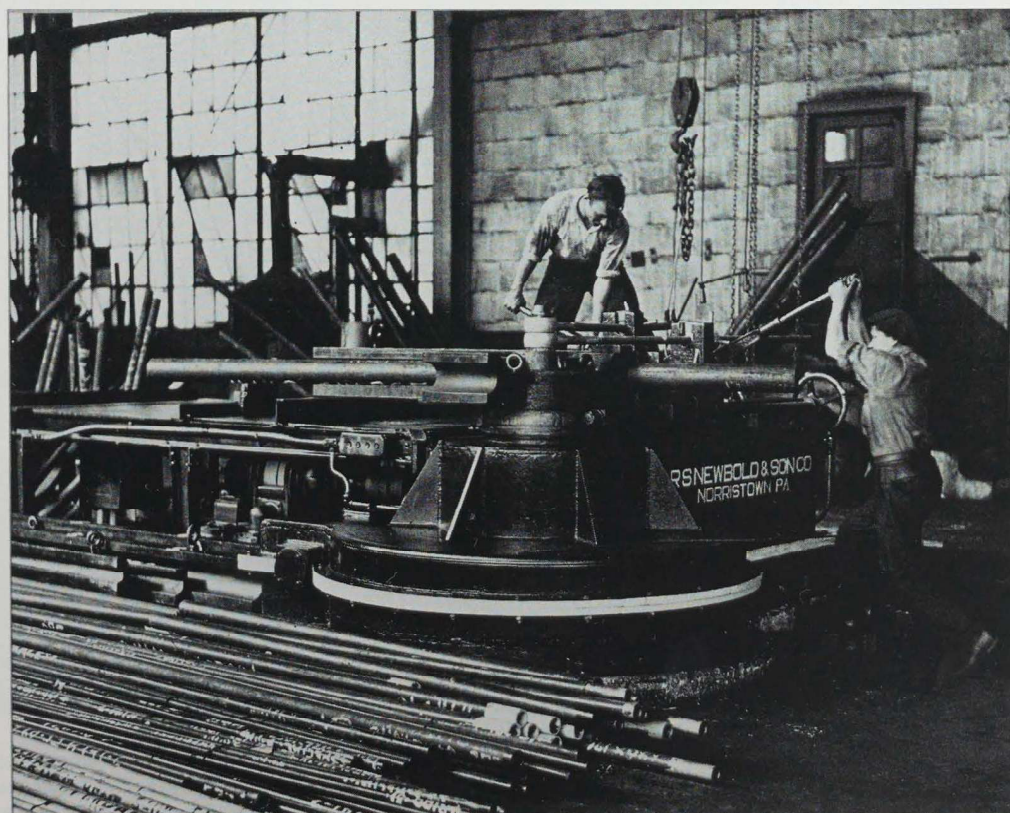




Figure 7 Seminole Woman and Child, Along the Tamiami Trail, 1949. *I had recently photographed a cattle roundup by the Seminoles and wanted to increase my negative files on them. I saw this scene as I motored across the Everglades. I stopped and took it. I've used it in some photo shows and probably had it published in some local papers.*



Figures 8 and 9 At the Federal Shipbuilding Yards, Kearney, N.J., 1935. These are two photos in a series on how a ship is built taken for Lynn Korndorf, president of Federal Shipbuilding. Leather-bound albums of this shipbuilding sequence were made and given to the captain of the ship, to the lady who broke the champagne bottle over the ship's prow at the launching, to President Korndorf, and to the Navy.



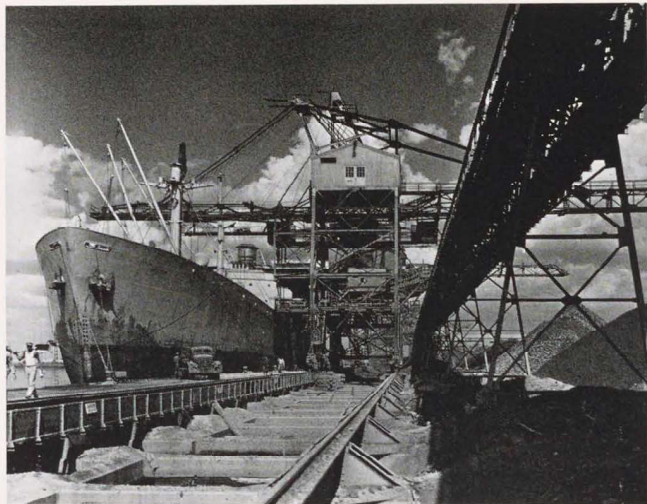


Figure 10 Bauxite being loaded at Mobile, Alabama, 1950. This was one photo of a series for an article on Mobile in *Holiday* magazine.

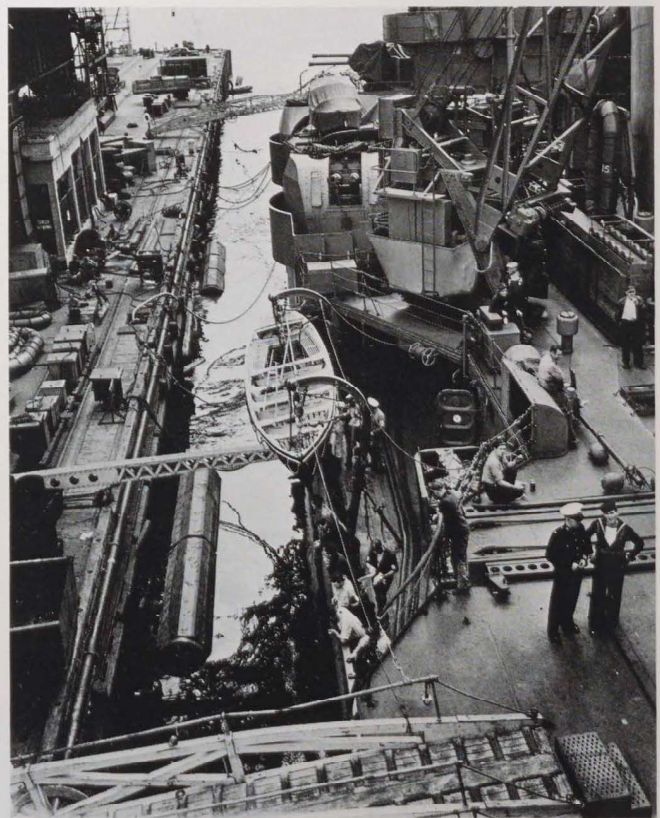


Figure 11 H.M.S. Manchester, British cruiser being repaired in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, 1941. Taken for *Life* magazine. All photos had to be submitted to the British censor before *Life* could use them.



Figure 12 "A Patch in Time Saves Nine But Will They Last?" 1938. This was one of a series of photos for an advertisement in a textile magazine for the Textile Machine Works, Reading, Pa. The theme of all the ads was: If you have old inadequate or broken-down equipment in your textile plant you will not be in the profits.



Figure 13 Circus Roustabout, in the bunks on the Circus Train going to Madison Square Garden, 1941. Taken for Life but not used. On the Circus Train as it rode from Sarasota, Florida, to the opening at Madison Square Garden . . . A circus official begged me not to release this photo for publication thinking the crowded drab conditions would give bad publicity for the show. I held it out at that time.

Figure 14 Campbell Soup Advertisement, 1937. This was made for a Campbell Soup advertisement, per layout prepared by art director (perhaps the F. Wallis Armstrong agency). Models were younger friends of mine.





Figure 15 Excerpt from “Life Goes to a Head Dress Ball,” 1940. A spread in *Life* magazine on Philadelphia’s annual Head Dress Ball, organized by Mrs. Edward J. MacMillan, who ran most of Philadelphia’s parties. I wore a broad-brimmed black Amish hat while shooting the party.



Figure 16 Three Employees of the Davies Artificial Limb Co., Philadelphia, 1938. *For Life magazine I spent the whole day photographing the process of manufacturing aluminum legs and arms. . . . All the workers in the Davies plant are without one or more of their original limbs. . . . One worker asked me "Would you like a truly dramatic photo?" I said yes, what do you have in mind? "We'll take you outdoors and three of us will jump over a hedge!" And so they did. . . . This shot shows the three handicapped men in a footrace in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.*



Figure 17 Interior of warehouse at John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, 1968. *I was the official photographer shooting exhibits, paintings, special events for twenty years for their files, brochures, and publicity. Lady on right was with Publicity Department of museum and posed in photo to give scale to the many objects.*