

**A Note from the Author - John Quinley**  
***Letters from a Sandburg Docent***  
**August 2025**

Hi Friends,

World Photography Day is held each year on August 19th to celebrate the art, craft, science, and history of photography. The letter this month highlights the remarkable influence of Sandburg's brother-in-law Edward Steichen on photography in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like Sandburg, Steichen believed that art could make the world a better place. In her book, *Steichen's Legacy*, Joanna Steichen shares that her husband:

...called the job of the camera that of explaining humanity to himself. He never stopped believing that seeing led to understanding and understanding could transform suspicion, hatred and violence into tolerance, peace, and love.

And because Steichen excelled in so many other fields as well, it took two letters this month to tell his story.

Thanks for your interest in Carl Sandburg,

John

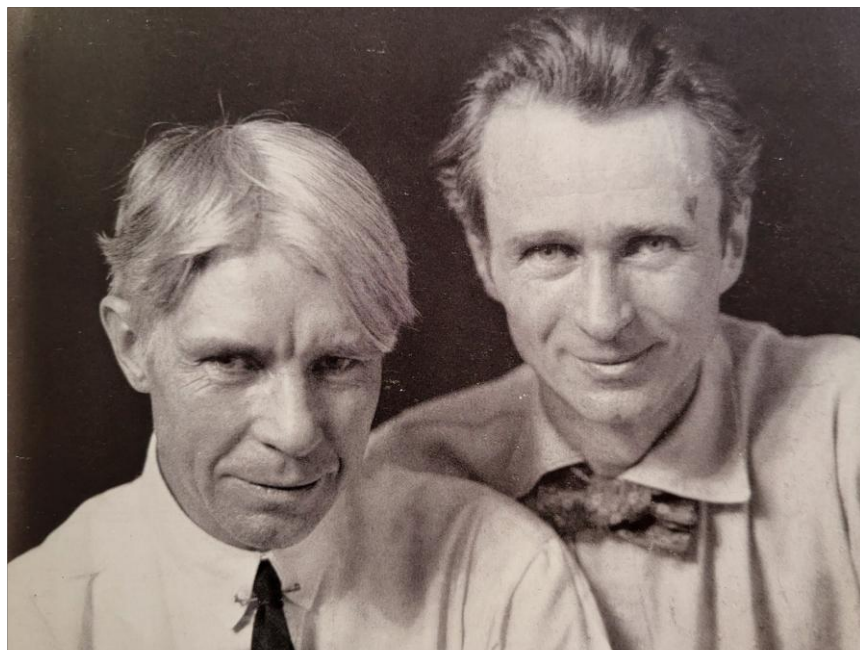
P.S. The performance of my play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg* at the Jewish Community Center in Asheville is now scheduled for Sunday, October 26 at 3:00 pm. The response was so overwhelming that I moved it to a larger space at the JCC.

## *Letters from a Sandburg Docent*

**August 2025 (#1 of 2)**

# **Brothers-in Law and Brothers in Spirit:**

## **Part One**



***Carl Sandburg & Edward Steichen*** (ca.1920)

Dear Readers,

Spending time together only once during their six months of courtship, Carl Sandburg and Lilian Steichen kept their relationship fresh by writing dozens of letters to each other. For their second meeting, Lillian wrote Carl to invite him to the family farm in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. She told Carl that her brother Edward would be there from Europe. It was his birthday. He was a year younger than Carl.

Steichen was famous, having photographed many of Europe's distinguished painters, sculptors, writers, and musicians. His photograph of Rodin with his iconoclastic sculpture "The Thinker" brought him to the top of the artistic photographic world in Europe and America. He traveled from the birthday celebration to photograph Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft for the staggering fee of \$1,000, about \$16,500 in 2025 dollars.

Sandburg and Steichen bonded as members of their extended families and as fellow artists. Steichen gave wholehearted approval to Carl's and Lillian's impending marriage. The Sandburgs helped Steichen through his first troubled marriage and the tragic death of his beloved second wife; and Sandburg introduced Steichen to the young publicist who would become his third wife. The Steichens visited the Sandburgs in their Illinois, Michigan, and North Carolina homes, and the Sandburgs visited the Steichens in their New York City apartment and farm in Connecticut.

Both Sandburg and Steichen believed that art should affect social change and be accessible to all social classes. They worked together on many projects: Steichen helping with the selection of photos for Sandburg's books (including the Lincoln series) and Sandburg writing captions for Steichen's photographic exhibitions and books. Steichen designed the cover for Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*. In turn, Sandburg dedicated *Smoke and Steel* to Steichen:

...painter of nocturnes and faces, camera engraver of flints and moments,  
listener to blue evening winds and new yellow roses, dreamer and finder, rider  
of great mornings in gardens, valleys, battles.

Satirically, Steichen asked Sandburg to say how many copies of the book he would have to buy to show his gratitude.

In 1929, Sandburg wrote a biography of Steichen's career, saying "it was the first biography of a photographer by a poet." In 1966 a year before Sandburg's death, Steichen published a photographic biography of Sandburg, and remarked "it was the first

photographic biography of a poet by a photographer.” Several of Steichen’s photographs adorn the walls of the Sandburg home in Flat Rock, North Carolina.

Steichen’s experiments in photography started in his youth. During a time when newspapers and magazines used etched drawings as imprints for advertisements, Steichen demonstrated how photography could be more effective in promoting products. His first project was a photograph of a pig for the meat processing industry. When he was twenty-one, he was thrilled that three of his photographs were selected for the prestigious Third Philadelphia Saloon exhibition. One reviewer wrote, “I will assert that the maker of these three pictures is destined to rank among the greatest pictorial photographers of the world if he continues to use the camera.”

Steichen joined the debate over the question of whether photography should only portray an exact mirror of reality or if it could be an art form that presents reality in different, creative ways. To promote photography as fine art, he founded Photo-Secession with his friend and mentor the world-renowned photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Musing about photographic perception, Steichen wrote:

Perception is a mental process that merely registers just as the lens registers.  
The good photographer not only sees—he looks and in the process of looking,  
insight is developed at the point where the object looks back at the  
photographer—and together they make the photo.

Steichen also played an important role in introducing modern art. In annual trips, he brought the work of modern European and American artists to both sides of the Atlantic. He championed the work of Europeans Paul Cezanne, Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and others.

Through his work as Chief of Photography for Conde Nast Media company, which published the magazines *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, Steichen took portraits of celebrities from government, industry, and the artistic worlds, including J. P. Morgan, Alfred Stieglitz, Clark Gable, George Gershwin, Winston Churchill, Walt Disney, Gloria Swanson, Loretta Young,

Marylyn Monroe, and Marlene Dietrich. He created the first color photograph for the cover of *Vogue* magazine—a model clad in a vivid red bathing suit holding a beach ball up to a sparkling blue sky. He also pioneered the use of high-quality fashion photography—often with an undercurrent of romantic desire—to advertise such products as evening gowns, Kodak film, Jergens lotion, and Lux soap.

In the 1930s, Steichen earned a combined salary of nearly a million dollars (in 2025 dollars) from the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson and the publisher Conde Nast. He was the highest paid and most famous photographer in the world.

Thanks for reading,

**John Quinley** is the author of *Discovering Carl Sandburg* and is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at [jwquinley@gmail.com](mailto:jwquinley@gmail.com).