

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 20th 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 (#2 of 2)

Brothers-in Law and Brothers in Spirit: Part Two



Carl Sandburg & Edward Steichen (ca. 1959)

Dear Readers,

Like Carl Sandburg, Edward Steichen seemed to do everything. He excelled at taking photographs and excelled at displaying them, organizing forty-four exhibitions during his more than fifteen years as director of the Department of Photography for the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. His best-known exhibition was *The Family of Man*, which celebrated the universal human experience. It featured 503 photographs by 273 artists from 68 countries. Ten million people worldwide visited the exhibit, and the companion book sold over four million copies. In 2003, the *Family of Man* photographic

collection was added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. It is on permanent display at Clervaux Castle in Luxembourg, Steichen's home country.

The Family of Man was the most challenging exhibition Steichen assembled. He gathered about ten thousand prints from photographers around the globe and winnowed the collection to around five hundred. Next, he developed major themes from the photographs and determined how they would be sequenced in displays. To help, MoMA rented the second story of a building and took out the walls to make one exceptionally large room where the visuals could be worked out. Steichen reported that he and the museum crew worked around the clock; but in the evening, it was not the hoped-for quiet location. "On the ground floor, there was a striptease joint with a raunchy orchestra grinding out the same tunes night after night until three o'clock in the morning."

To support the war effort in the 1940s, Steichen created the *Road to Victory* and *Power in the Pacific* exhibits. These were displayed in the MoMA and traveled to England and to Honolulu, Australia, and other Pacific ports. Sandburg wrote the captions for the photographs and remarked "if a real image of war could be photographed and presented to the world, it might make a contribution toward ending the specter of war."

Steichen also served in uniform in WWI and WWII. He held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Army/Airforce in WWI and reported directly to General Pershing. He pioneered the use of aerial photography to locate enemy positions on the battlefield, sometimes riding in the biplanes himself. Hundreds of soldiers who reported directly to Steichen were stationed on the ground to develop the films and place them on strategic geographical grids. For his exemplary accomplishments in WWI, he was awarded the French Legion of Honor, among other honors.

Steichen was sixty years old when the United States entered WWII. He first tried to enlist in the Air Force, but no one took him seriously at his advanced age; however, the Navy eventually let him enlist. He reached the rank of Captain by the end of the war, overseeing all Naval combat photography in the Pacific with two thousand sailors reporting to him.

It had been Navy policy to severely restrict what could be photographed on a naval vessel, but Admiral Chester Nimitz authorized Steichen and his men to go anywhere they

wished to go, board any ship to take pictures, and fly military priority on any plane. Steichen was tasked to tell the real story of naval life to the folks back home. To fulfill his mission, Steichen sometimes exposed himself to direct danger, taking films of planes landing (and sometimes crashing) on the deck of an aircraft carrier. For his service during the war, The Navy awarded him the Distinguished Service Medal.

Steichen directed the film, *The Fighting Lady*, after the war. It told the story of a Japanese attack on the aircraft carrier Lexington, which carried his film crew. Audiences marveled at the unprecedented virtual reality of planes landing and taking off, guns firing in the air, and Japanese bombers erupting into flames, exploding before their eyes, and falling into the sea. For this work, Steichen won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and the Art Directors Club Award.

And yet, there is still more. Steichen became an expert geneticist, breeding delphiniums, roses, poppies, and other flowers. He first worked from his garden in France before WWI and after the war on his Connecticut farm, where he cultivated six acres of flowers. He grew tens of thousands of flowers, collected their seeds, and created new varieties—even naming one after his brother-in-law Carl Sandburg. In the mid-1930s, Steichen served as president of the American Delphinium Society, foreshadowing Sandburg's wife Paula's presidency of the American Goat Association a decade later. MoMA presented its first and only dedicated flower show as modern art in 1936, *Edward Steichen's Delphiniums*.

In his poem, “Out of the Rainbow end, for Edward Steichen,” Sandburg writes:

*A delphinium flings a shadow
with a rooted stalk—
a personal shadow.

Each silhouette documents
designs and dooms woven
between shape and shadowshape.*

As one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century, Steichen received accolades throughout his career, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom for significant contributions to the arts, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Center of Photography, and the U.S. Camera magazine Achievement Award for outstanding contribution to photography.

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...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.

Edward Steichen leaves behind a legacy that continues to inspire photographers and artists today.

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.