

OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

Steinheimer week in Sacramento

LANKY AND STEEL-GRAY, the cat extends his forepaws towards me, bows low with his rump in the air, and stretches. I bend down to pet him. Though unexpected, his presence is a comfort—something I did not realize that I needed until this exact moment. Currently, I am a little lost. I have just abandoned my rental car curbside and am wandering the bungalow-lined streets of Shirley Burman Steinheimer's Sacramento neighborhood, squinting at house numbers while trying not to look conspicuous.

I am feeling more high-strung than usual too, because my purpose in Sacramento is extremely critical. After years of discussion and even a few setbacks (the pandemic being the foremost), we are ready to transfer the first batch of images from the Richard Steinheimer and Shirley Burman Steinheimer Collection to the Center's archives. It is Monday, June 6th, and a truck is scheduled to pick up the materials from Shirley's house at the end of the week. In the intervening days, Shirley, Elrond Lawrence, Ken Rehor, and I must identify which materials will be included in this batch and pack them for their journey from Sacramento to Madison. But before any of that can happen, I have to find Shirley's house.

The cat allows me to scratch him on the head for a few seconds and then grows restless. I am an intuitive person, and it feels right as I follow him along the sidewalk. After all, Shirley and I share a mutual appreciation for cats. Besides, he looks a little like Esse, one of the cats Shirley had when I first visited to survey the collection in 2019. Perhaps she's gotten a new one, and he will lead me to her place? As if hearing my thoughts, the cat flops over and shows me his belly—adorable, but decidedly unhelpful, like any cat. I sigh and call Ken for directions.

When I finally arrive, Shirley and Ken greet me in the living room before we go to the kitchen for some much-needed caffeine. Moving through the house, one can tell it serves as an artist's residence as well as a family home. A well-loved sofa and easy chairs are arranged in a circle toward the front of the living room, standing ready to host good conversation and friendly banter. Southwestern pottery, eclectic knick-knacks from Shirley and Steinheimer's travels, and books on many subjects are numerous throughout the house.

Although Steinheimer has been gone since 2011, his presence is still palpable here. His affable visage grins at us from framed photographs and album pages. A table laden with binders of his negatives, notes, and other documentation occupies a prominent spot

between the living and dining rooms. A gorgeous print of his 1964 photograph depicting Little Joes and cowboys in Montana hangs on the wall near the entryway to the kitchen.

Visiting the home and working space of the unparalleled Richard "Dick" Steinheimer, dean of American railroad photography, is intimidating. For six decades, he awed and inspired with his incredible shots in impossible places like the frozen tunnels of the Milwaukee Road electrics on St. Paul Pass, the snowy heights of Southern Pacific's Sierra crossing at Donner, the harsh and forbidding Mojave Desert, and countless other wild locations. I understand that many railfans would pretty much kill to be in my place, and I feel extremely fortunate, if not a little unworthy, to be here. Shirley's presence tempers these feelings though. Vivacious, refreshingly blunt, quick to crack wise or share a humorous yarn, and usually more on the ball than everybody else in the room, Shirley has always made me feel welcome here. Further, she is completely approachable, unpretentious even though she recognizes the prestige of Steinheimer's work as well as her own.

She is also constantly and almost agonizingly busy. I am thankful that she can make time for us. Any given day might find her flitting from answering publication requests to maintaining her home to checking in with friends and family. In recent decades, Shirley lovingly dedicated much of her time and energy to caring for Steinheimer and his legacy. When he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease in 2001, Shirley acted as his primary caretaker until his passing. When the DeGolyer Library needed help identifying their Steinheimer holdings, Shirley cataloged several thousand of his early-career negatives, eventually creating a database of detailed captions for each image.

But now she is taking time to pursue her own projects as well. During this visit, I am happy to see that she is putting the finishing touches on her forthcoming book, *Sisters of the Iron Road*, a passion project that has been forty years in the making. Comprised of historical images, Shirley's original work, and contributions from Steinheimer, the publication features the life and times of the women railroaders who have kept trains running in the United States over the past century. For those of us who still struggle with our roles in this male-dominated field, Shirley's book is an inspiration. In my headcanon of railroad photography's greats, she has almost taken on the role of patron saint of women railroaders and photogra-

ARTICLE

Adrienne Evans

PHOTOGRAPHS

Collection of the Center
or as noted



phers, a title she will likely dispute, but one I think she totally deserves.

The book is a great vehicle for Shirley's original work as well. She is an extremely accomplished photographer in her own right, and her partnership with Steinheimer was not only a romantic one but an artistic and business collaboration as well. While he tended to focus on locomotives, railroad operations, and workers, Shirley would devote equal time to capturing their surroundings—landscapes, built environments, animals, and people. When viewed side-by-side, their work complements each other's perfectly, an effect

Steinheimer greatly appreciated during their partnership. Much of Shirley's photographic work is eventually destined to join his in the Center's archives. But it is not the purpose of this visit; Shirley still needs to access her images for her projects and memoirs.

Shirley, Ken, and I spend much of that first day planning, assembling boxes, and setting up a staging area for packing. Elrond joins us in the afternoon. After catching him up on our progress thus far, we dig in. We decide to work primarily out of Steinheimer's office/darkroom, a free-standing, two-room structure in the grotto-like backyard. An orange tree that was

Adrienne scowling at Elrond while reviewing prints with Shirley at the kitchen table. Shot by Elrond Lawrence on Wednesday, June 8.



planted by Steinheimer grows to the left of the office door. I learn later that Shirley gifted him the tree, but that it only flourished once she took charge of its care.

The larger room served as Steinheimer's office and is lined with shelves of railroad books, maps, and periodicals. On the opposite side of the wall, a wooden desk holds an ancient-looking computer and several gadgety odds and ends from Steinheimer's days as a commercial photographer in Silicon Valley. A large work table, cut down to fit the space and embedded with a light box (Steinheimer's handiwork, accomplished without Shirley's permission, she tells us with amusement) bisects the room. To the right of the office is a smaller space that functioned as Steinheimer's darkroom, containing his enlarger as well as a sink and tubs for developing, fixing, and washing photographic prints. The darkroom also houses a few metal cabinets filled with oversize print boxes. Even larger boxes hold prints from the exhibition *Winter's Professionals*, while a giant, 4×6-foot reproduction of Steinheimer's famous winter photograph from Thistle, Utah, lurks against one wall.

But investigating the darkroom and its treasures will have to wait. Right now, our main interest is in the two large metal filing cabinets that stand to the left of the darkroom's entrance. Within them are seventy-four Logan boxes labeled alphabetically from A to CD. Each one contains several hundred 35mm color slides, some 30,000 all together—the bulk of Steinheimer's color photography.

We assemble around the light table. Shirley sits and reviews various boxes, looking for family photographs, non-railroad content, and images she would like to retain for the time being. Ken photographs the data sheets inside each lid for Shirley's records. Once he is finished, I swaddle each box in stretch wrap to ensure it does not pop open during the transfer. Then I pack the Logans away into shipping boxes.

Elrond alternates between assembling boxes, recording data sheets for Shirley, and snapping photographs of everything in sight (strictly for marketing and documentation purposes, of course). I glower at him when he points his camera in my direction. Archivists are used to hiding in the stacks, not being in front of cameras. Shirley teases Elrond about the first time they met, during a private car excursion on the *Coast Starlight* back in 2003. She was riding with Steinheimer and noticed Elrond, who was zipping around the place, photographing the excursion on behalf of *Railfan & Railroad* magazine...perhaps a bit



overzealously. “I thought, ‘Who is this little punk?’” Shirley laughs.

In one of the first boxes that Shirley reviews, she points out slides from her and Steinheimer’s first trip to the Mojave Desert and recounts their early courtship. They officially met in April of 1983, when Shirley was working as a photographer for the California State Railroad Museum and Steinheimer was attending a reception for his own work there. They could not get together that night (Shirley already had a date), but were able to meet up soon thereafter. They hit it off. After one fancy dinner date on Pier 39 (the first and last of those, Shirley chuckles) and a trip spent shooting operations on the Southern Pacific’s Donner Pass crossing of the Sierras, their relationship faced the ultimate test: a week of camping along the Santa Fe’s main line through the Mojave Desert—in mid-June.

Outdoorsy and no stranger to the Mojave, Shirley was totally game. They spent the week sleeping in Dick’s van and enduring extreme temperatures. They had one strong disagreement about picking up a hitchhiker the first morning after leaving their overnight lodging, a small crater near Amboy. Later, as they drove along old Route 66, Shirley had some doubts. “I was alone in the desert with a man I had only known for five weeks. He could have killed me!” she jokes.

They did not end up killing each other. Both emerged from their desert date unscathed with some wonderful photographs for their efforts and a greater understanding of one another. They married in Virginia City, Nevada, a year-and-a-half later. (For a more detailed account of their time together in the Mojave, I highly recommend Shirley’s great essay for *California Desert Art* entitled: “Shirley Burman and Richard Steinheimer: Desert Date on Mars.”)

Tuesday

On Tuesday, we prepare more of the slides in Steinheimer’s office for transport. Ken and Elrond understandably get caught up in the momentousness of the occasion from time to time. Steinheimer’s work in *Trains* completely blew them away as kids, and now they have a chance to examine the original slides of their most beloved images. Gasps and excited chatter erupt when Elrond pulls a jewel-like sunset slide of Bolo Hill in the Mojave (featured in Steinheimer’s 1977 landmark *Trains* photo essay, “Mojave Crossing”) from one of the Logan boxes. “You guys gotta digitize this box first,” he and Ken both tell me.

The atmosphere in the room is similarly celebratory when we uncover a color transparency of a dusty Santa Fe coal train descending Cajon Pass on the North track. This image graced the cover of *Trains* in 1974, accompanying Steinheimer’s “Cajon Pass Revisited” photo essay. When I pack up the transparency for transport, Elrond has me scrawl a clumsy Santa Fe logo on the shipping box. I also write, “Elrond says this one is special.” Everybody seems amused by the addition.

During our brief periods of down time (usually before or right after a meal—and yes, we do stop to eat), I assess the storage environment in Steinheimer’s office and darkroom. Archivists rarely have the chance to see the origins of archival collections in our care. Knowing the conditions under which collections have been stored helps us prioritize which preservation actions to pursue. I check floors and entryways for obvious signs of pests—particularly silverfish. I also look for leaks and active mold, which can grow on water-damaged photographic materials stored in extremely humid conditions. I find little cause for concern here. The office and darkroom seem fairly air- and water-tight. Further, most of Steinheimer’s

Above: Steinheimer shot this image during his and Shirley’s first desert trip. According to the slide mount caption, Shirley is shown here at Corva, a location on the Santa Fe’s “Peavine” line in Arizona on June 29, 1983.

Opposite, above: Shirley and Ken beneath Steinheimer’s orange tree with a large reproduction print of D&RGW 1403. Shot by Elrond Lawrence, on Friday, June 10, the day the truck arrived to pick up the collection materials.

Opposite, below: Shirley, Ken, and Elrond in Steinheimer’s office examining slides. Shot by Adrienne on the first work day, Monday, June 6.

Santa Fe coal train descending Cajon Pass on the North track; cover image for *Trains* in 1974 as part of Steinheimer's "Cajon Pass Revisited" article. Elrond and Ken absolutely freaked when we found this. Photograph by Richard Steinheimer



slides and prints are stored in boxes within metal cabinets. Each container provides an additional layer of protection from moisture, potential pests, and contaminants. I recognize that it does get hot and humid in the space (chromogenic color dye tends to fade and shift under such conditions). When she can, Shirley runs a window-unit air conditioner in the office to protect the material from the worst of Sacramento's summers. This eases my concerns a bit.

Elrond, Ken, and I finish packing the slides that afternoon, concluding the effort with thirteen unliftable (at least for Shirley and me) 16×16-inch boxes. Then we explore the materials in the darkroom and gather black-and-white prints to review with Shirley. Stacks of packed boxes now crowd the office area, so we take turns running print boxes up the back stairs of the house. Shirley examines them at her kitchen table, putting aside extraneous duplicates that she plans to keep for now. She occasionally points out missing and expunged caption information as she works.

One of the many devastating consequences of Alzheimer's Disease for Steinheimer was that, from time to time, he would white-out captions he had

previously recorded on the verso sides of his prints. Only those familiar with Steinheimer's wonderfully expressive writing style and penchant for narrative caption-making can truly appreciate what a potential loss this is. Fortunately for us, Shirley mastered much of this information when cataloging material for the DeGolyer. Many of the prints we encounter correspond to Steinheimer's pre-1974 negatives.

Retrieving print boxes for Shirley, we spend more time in Steinheimer's darkroom, which is a special place for Ken. He recalls a day he spent developing film and making prints with Dick here in 1998, shortly after they had met. I learn from Ken that although Steinheimer was instructive in the darkroom (Ken received a lot of good advice when printing with his childhood hero), he never corrected Ken's shooting settings or techniques in the field. "He was just such a humble guy," Ken mentions. "He never wanted to seem like a know-it-all."

Since then, Ken has essentially become part of the family, almost like a surrogate son to Shirley. For years, he has strongly advocated for the Steinheimer-Burman collection to come to the CRP&A's archives.

We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for making this achievement possible, and he helped make the week in Sacramento even more meaningful for me.

Wednesday

We continue reviewing prints on Wednesday. As box after box of “zingers” (associate archivist Heather Sonntag’s favorite term for visually-stunning images) seemingly fly across Shirley’s kitchen table, I recognize the lumber-hauling Shays of Steinheimer’s critically acclaimed *Backwoods Railroads of the West* and the intimate scenes from the cookshack at Norden that appear in *Growing Up with Trains*. It is one thing to see these images in Steinheimer’s books, but it is quite another to experience them in the full dynamic range of Kodak double-weight paper printed oversize at 11×14. The perfect balance of contrast! The detail! Steinheimer was truly a master printer.

Then Ken shows us a sure-fire way to identify original prints made in Steinheimer’s Sacramento darkroom: a small, cat-tail of a mark that usually appears in the upper left-hand corner. It is from a slight gap in Steinheimer’s paper easel. This information will prove invaluable when we process the collection, and knowing it makes me feel like a bit of an insider, too.

Elrond departs that afternoon for a long-overdue visit. Stan Kistler, a peer of Steinheimer’s and equally legendary for his masterful coverage of steam and early diesel railroading in southern California and across the West, lives a little over sixty miles away in Grass Valley. The CRP&A’s Collections and Acquisitions Committee approved the acquisition of Kistler’s stellar vintage color work last spring (we already had plans to archive his black-and-white Santa Fe material), and Elrond is off to pick up five boxes of priceless slides. Kistler’s color collection will join Steinheimer’s on the truck at week’s end. Before Elrond leaves, Shirley asks him to pass along her greetings; Kistler has been a friend of the family for many years. Shirley recalls that he visited frequently during Steinheimer’s long illness, often bringing lunch. It seems right that his and Steinheimer’s collections will make their way to the Center together—in a truck traveling over Donner Pass, no less.

Thursday

On Thursday, our last work day before the transfer, we review print boxes at a manic pace. A large pile, ready for packing, has accumulated in Steinheimer’s office. We group the prints into boxes mostly by

location and subject (with a few miscellaneous boxes). When stacked vertically, the box labels read like a compilation of Steinheimer’s greatest hits: Sacramento Northern, Glendale, Oro Dam, Kelso, Milwaukee Road Electrics, SP Shops-Oakland, China Basin, Searles, Norden. I feel a growing sense of satisfaction and ease as I pack them up. We might actually pull this off.

Also, in the frenzy of that final work day, I find a little time for wonder. I encounter an image that stops me dead in my tracks, my tasks forgotten for the moment. It is a November 1965 night shot of Pennsy electric 4869 in the yard at Enola, Pennsylvania. It is not Steinheimer’s usual fare, and I feel a little silly for counting it among my favorites. But there is something simultaneously haunting and extraterrestrial about the hulking mass of the GG1, dark save its head- and cab lamps, with its antenna-like pantograph backlit by a yard light. The whole scene reminds me of something out of the 1927 German Expressionist epic, *Metropolis*. It is vintage science fiction, my favorite genre.

As evening falls, the four of us enjoy a celebratory dinner of Mexican takeout before returning to Steinheimer’s office to tape up the final boxes. We have reviewed and packed fifty-nine print boxes in

Stacked print boxes with Steinheimer’s original labels. Shot by Elrond Lawrence on Wednesday, June 8.



Collection	Processing Status
Jim Shaughnessy	In progress, ~32% complete
John Gruber	In progress, ~27% complete
Ronald C. Hill	Images on-site complete
David Mainey	In progress, ~75% complete for images on-site
Henry Posner III	In progress, ~20% complete for images on-site
Richard Steinheimer / Shirley Burman	In progress, just beginning
John Illman	In progress, ~30% complete
Stan Kistler	Estimated start: 2023
Karl Zimmermann	Estimated start: 2023

Above: Processing status of the collections our archivists are currently and soon to be working on—always with more to come!

Above, right: Elrond with “Dick Jr.” in Steinheimer’s office on the last work day, Thursday, June 9. Photo by Ken Rehor

Opposite: This 1965 night shot of Pennsylvania Railroad GG1 4869 and E44 4434 resting in the yard at Enola, Pennsylvania, is one of Adrienne’s favorites from the collection. Photograph by Richard Steinheimer

the last two days. The giant Thistle, Utah print and the *Winter’s Professionals* boxes from the darkroom are coming along with this batch, too. As we work, we talk about Steinheimer, his images, and his legacy. I don’t know if I’m loopy from the long day or still dreamy from my encounter with the GG1, but I start to hear a weird sound coming from the depths of Shirley’s yard. What is that...a meow?

My unhelpful cat friend from Monday bursts into the office, purring and ready for pats. His timing is specular; we were just talking about Steinheimer! Elrond picks him up (not to worry, they’re both friendly) and dubs him “Dick Jr.” while Ken describes his coat as the perfect shade of Southern Pacific gray. Is he some kind of spirit guide? A message from beyond? Is Dick Jr. actually Steinheimer himself returned to his office in cat form? I remember Shirley mentioning that Steinheimer was not particularly fond of her cat when they first got together but eventually grew to love him (not that Steinheimer had much of a choice). I suppose his reincarnation as an easy-going, wandering cat could make a certain amount of sense.

I discover later that Dick Jr. belongs to some neighbors who let him out regularly to devastate the local ecosystem. My reincarnation theory is probably bunk. But whatever, I do not feel like giving into cynicism at the moment, because I am truly grateful—to the CRP&A’s staff and board, who have rooted for and supported this acquisition for a very long time; to Ken and Elrond, who have worked tirelessly throughout the week and never lost their sense of wonder; and, most of all, to Shirley, who has been an incredible host and demonstrates so much strength and trust as she hands off Steinheimer’s work to us. I know letting go is hard. So, for now, I will settle for interpreting



Dick Jr.’s timely reappearance as a positive omen. For Shirley, the Steinheimer-Burman Collection, and the CRP&A, there are so many good things yet to come.

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive Updates

While I have frequently been out of the office on Center business, progress on our collections work continues. Intern Abigail Guidry is processing John Gruber’s negatives from the early 1980s while volunteer John Kelly researches caption information. Abigail digitized more than 2,000 images in June, breaking her own processing record! Meanwhile, archives associate Natalie Krecek and intern Charlie Tonelli have continued their detailed work of re-sleeving, labeling, digitizing, and cataloging the Jim Shaughnessy Collection. Charlie finished his internship at the end of July; Natalie will wrap up his work on the Delaware & Hudson while diving into the “E” railroads. Erin Rose, reference and digital projects archivist, continues to provide timely assistance to our researchers and patrons. She has also started processing the recently arrived John Illman collection; look for more about it in a future issue.

At our archival storage space, contract archivist Gil Taylor is making great headway processing the Henry Posner III Collection. He has rehoused some 5,000 slides from the collection thus far, digitizing roughly twenty percent. Associate archivist Heather Sonntag just completed cataloging and rehousing Ron Hill’s black-and-white work. She has just finished an article about Hill’s Canadian Pacific photography for our long-running “Archives Treasures” series in *Classic Trains* magazine. Her next task will be surveying Steinheimer’s color slides in preparation for their cataloging and digitization. •

