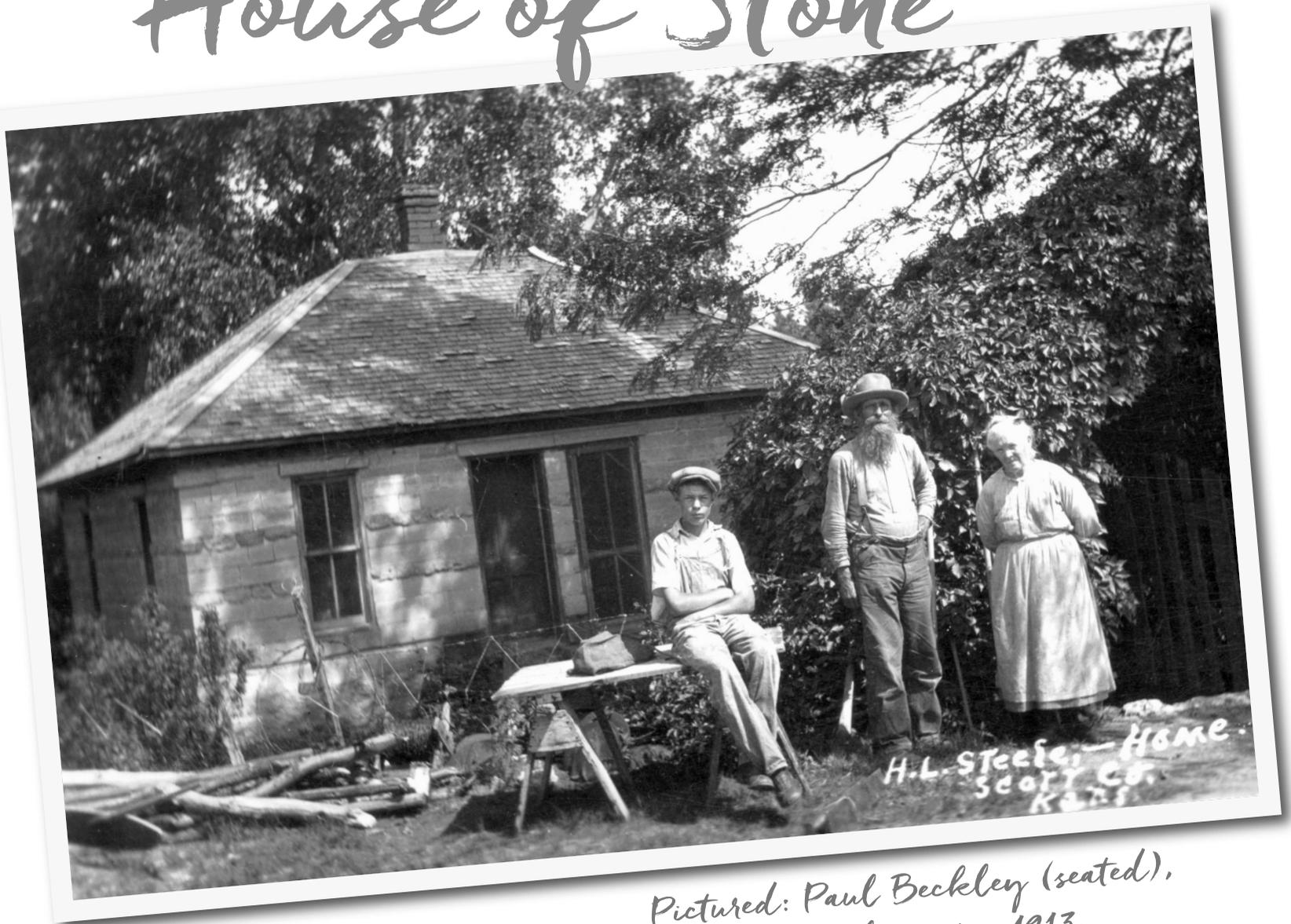


The Steeles' House of Stone



*Pictured: Paul Beckley (seated),
with the Steeles, circa 1913.*

In western Kansas, there is a surprising gash in the landscape of Scott County that is both geologically and historically significant. Located about 12 miles north of Scott City, the gash is a canyon formed by the erosive action of Ladder Creek across eons of time. Ladder Creek originates in eastern Colorado and flows into northern Scott County, where it turns northward and joins the Smoky Hill River in Logan

County. By Kansas standards, Ladder Creek Canyon is deep and rugged. The creek cuts down through the Ogallala Formation, creating steep-walled bluffs that line the canyon. The Niobrara Formation forms the canyon floor, which is relatively flat and bordered by yucca, grass and shrub-covered slopes leading upward to the feet of the bluffs. Near the creek, massive cottonwoods and other trees line the banks. Where

the Ogallala and Niobrara formations meet, persistent natural springs emanate from the ground near the canyon floor. These springs play a vital role in the story of the canyon and the lives of the Native Americans and Euro-American settlers who inhabited the canyon over the centuries.

This idyllic landscape is the setting for Lake Scott State Park and one of the most historically signifi-

cant regions in the state. If the canyon walls could talk, they could unleash a torrent of stories about life in the area beginning long before Kansas was a glimmer in the eyes of early politicians. This story, however, will focus on one pioneer couple, Herbert L. and Eliza J. (Landon) Steele, and the stone house they built in 1894 that still stands today.

The Steeles

The Steeles were among the first permanent settlers in Scott County after it was organized in 1886. Herbert was born in 1859 in East Bloomfield, New York, the first of 11 children. Some 25 years later, his family found their way to Dickinson County. It is unclear when Herbert moved to the Logan/Scott county area, but it may have been in the late 1880s or early 1890s. A brief 1890 newspaper article notes that Herbert was mending timepieces in the area, so he must have lived in the region. Conversely, an article announcing Herbert's death states that he came to Scott County in 1892. There are no records to indicate where Herbert lived between his arrival in the Logan/Scott county area and his marriage to Eliza.

Eliza Landon was born in 1858 in Jonesborough, Tenn. The Landons were living in Missouri in 1880, and land patent records indicate they were in Scott County by 1889. Eliza was a teacher before she married Herbert, having received her second-grade teaching certificate in 1890. They were married in Scott City in 1892. It is unknown where the Steeles lived between the time of their marriage and when they built their house. Though the couple had three children, none survived their parents.

A House of Stone

In October 1893, Eliza bought the land where their house stands for \$225. It is located on the west side of Ladder Creek upstream from

where Lake Scott now sits. At first, the couple lived on this property in a simple dugout built into the east-facing slope east of an unimproved county road. In circa 1894, they "renovated" their dugout and added a floor above it, building the two-level stone house we see today. The original road is now paved and familiar to park visitors as West Scott Lake Drive.

Built of limestone blocks, the house faces west so that the entrance to the main floor is one story and the east elevation is two stories. The house measures 30 feet long by 30 feet wide; the roof eaves are 25 feet above grade at the rear of the house. The house is topped by a wood-shingled roof. A central brick chimney evident in historic images no longer exists.

Inside, visitors are treated to a glimpse of the Steeles' lives in the early 1900s. The seven-room house has five upper-level rooms, including a parlor and a family

living area on the west side, each with a separate front door and two bedrooms on the east side with a walk-in, windowed pantry between them. Continuing to the lower level, the east room was used as a "summer" kitchen where Eliza would can and preserve a variety of fruits and vegetables. This room has a door to the outside through the east wall. The west basement room was Eliza's workroom and where the Steeles repaired tools and other equipment used around the ranch.

The Steeles raised cattle and crops, but gardening was their livelihood. They sold fruits and vegetables harvested from their orchard and garden Scott City – either from a horse and buggy or spring wagon and team, as they never owned a motorized vehicle. The garden was east of the house, and the orchard was to the south, (where the park maintenance facility is situated).

The stone springhouse north of their house not only supplied

Pictured: Rear of house showing walkout basement.





Pictured: A glimpse inside what the Steeles' home may have looked like many years ago.

their water but was used to store perishable food items. Across the road west of the house, they built a large barn for horses, milk cows, other livestock, hay, wagons and buggies. North of the barn was a stone chicken house, but the barn and chicken house were demolished long ago.

Eliza tended to a variety of chores, which included cooking, churning butter, washing, sewing, weaving and milking the cows. She also made cheese, hominy, sauerkraut, jellies and jams, spun wool from their sheep and wove fabric for clothing, rugs and quilts. To supplement their income, Eliza sold some of her creations while Herbert repaired clocks, sewing machines and other small machinery.

History Unearthed

A gentle mound of soil and rocks north of their house drew the Steeles' curiosity, and in 1898

Herbert invited University of Kansas paleontologists to excavate the mound. They found the remains of a seven-room pueblo that archeologists believe to be the location of El Cuartelejo, a Plains Apache village where Taos and Picuris Pueblo Indians lived after fleeing New Mexico in 1664 to escape Spanish rule. Later excavations throughout the canyon revealed evidence of other Native American habitation and led to the 1964 designation of a large portion of the canyon as the El Cuartelejo Archeological District National Historic Landmark. In 1922, the Steeles deeded two acres of the El Cuartelejo site to the Kansas Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), so it could be preserved and shared with the public. The land has since been deeded to the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism (KDWP). The restored foundation of the pueblo can be seen north of the Steele house, along with a monument erected by the DAR in 1925.

A Park is Born

The Steeles' willingness to share the beauty of their land with the general public led to the creation of Lake Scott State Park. Although Herbert was widely considered the county's most cantankerous and well-known character, the couple had long welcomed visitors to enjoy the scenery and El Cuartelejo. In 1925, prompted by the Steeles along with

Grover McBride and

other local dignitaries, members of the newly-formed Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission (KFFGC) toured the canyon and the Steele farm to see if the area could be developed into a lake and park. In 1927, the Commission began buying 1,280 acres for what became Scott County State Park. In 1928, the Steeles sold 640 acres to the KFFGC for \$18 per acre with the stipulation they be allowed to live in their house rent-free for the remainders of their lives. In August 1929, a contract was let to build the dam for the 100-acre Lake McBride (now called Lake Scott), and it was completed in May 1930. Herbert passed in September 1929 having never seen the park he was so instrumental in creating. Eliza died in July 1930, a month after the park officially opened.

Shortly after Herbert's death, Scott County residents embarked on a campaign to build a monument to honor the Steeles. Efforts to raise the needed \$4,000 began in January 1930, and the county's school children and many other residents contributed. On June 12, 1930, residents held a celebration of the new park and unveiled the Steele Monument, which still stands on the bluff overlooking the house.

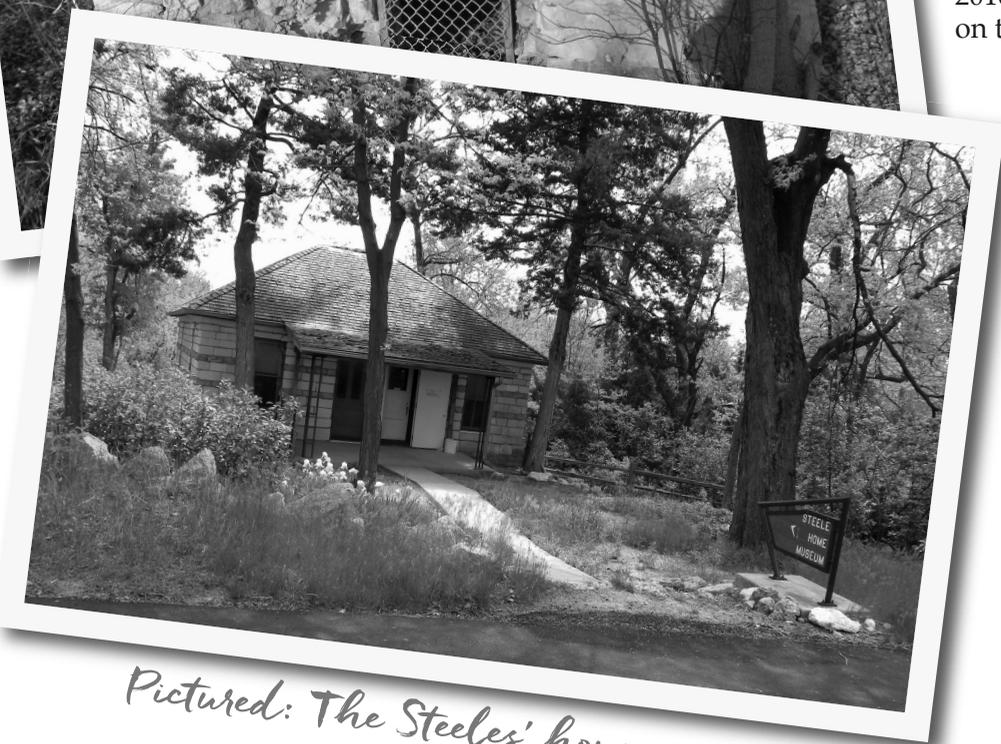
Eliza Steele - Home

The spring house the Steeles' used to cool their perishable goods, such as eggs and milk.



After Eliza passed, maintenance of the Steele House fell to state park staff and dedicated local volunteers. It was quickly put to use as a museum, a function it continues sporadically to this day. The Steele House remains much as it did when built in the 1890s, continuing as a testament to two of the most influential people in Scott County's early history.

In April 2016, the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review nominated the Steele House to the National Register of Historic Places and listed it in the Register of Historic Kansas Places. In June 2016, the National Park Service listed the house on the National Register of Historic Places. 



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Pictured: The Steeles' house as it sits today.


Kansas
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