

Sam Steel

Would have been NMSU's first graduate.

A new immigrant to the United States, **Samuel Steel (b. 1876, Coleraine, Ireland-d. 1893, Las Cruces, NM)** would have been the first graduate of New Mexico State University, then called New Mexico College of Agriculture & Mechanic Arts. A keen scholar with an excellent preparatory education after arriving in Las Cruces, Sam entered college at age 13 and would have received a bachelor's degree at age 17, had he not been killed just a few months before graduation. His family put great value on education, and several of his brothers and sisters also attended NMSU, obtained advanced degrees, and participated in the agricultural and intellectual life of the New Mexico territory in the early 20th century.



Hiram Hadley, first college president, speaking at Sam's funeral

"Personally, I loved him with a paternal affection... I have had under my care many brilliant youths, a large number of whom now fill exalted positions in their chosen callings, but taken all in all, I have never known the superior, if the equal, of Samuel Steel."

Sam was a well-known presence on campus and likely participated in all aspects of campus life, including musical and dramatic performances and literary societies. He was the only senior among 37 students who attended the college in 1892-1893. McFie Hall, where classes were held, was named after district judge John McFie, Sam's great uncle by marriage.

The death of this promising scholar was tragic for his family, the new college, and the Mesilla Valley community. This "amiable, industrious, and inoffensive" young man (as he was described in the murder trial) ought to have had a fine life ahead of him. But, on the fateful evening of 1893, Sam was delivering milk for his father's dairy, driving a horse-drawn wagon along a familiar route. A woman in a nearby house heard a gunshot and the sound of a "wagon running."

Who Shot Sam Steel?

Circumstantial evidence implicated John Roper, a cowboy working for a nearby outfit who had been seen earlier that day drinking and gambling in a saloon in Las Cruces.

Roper was convicted of the crime by a court in Doña Ana and sentenced to be hanged,

but this judgement was later reversed by a higher court. Public outrage on behalf of Sam had been so great, it was argued, that Roper was denied an impartial jury.

Steel Legacy in the Mesilla Valley

After Sam's death, the Steels remained deeply involved with the life of southern New Mexico, operating a dairy and vineyard. Sam's sister, Maude, wrote her NMSU thesis on water law in the Mesilla Valley, then worked for the New Mexico Historical Society. The Steel family's agricultural legacy in the Mesilla Valley continues today in the Rio Grande Vineyard and Winery, run by Phillip "Gordon" Steel, Sam's nephew. Gordon's siblings, Carol (Steel) Shepherd and Dr. Samuel L. Steel, also live locally.

Tributes to Sam Steel

Sam was interested in entomology, and after his death, professors at New Mexico A&M (as NMSU was called at the time) named a species of mealy bug for him, *Bergrothia townsendi steelii* (now called *Spilococcus steeli*).

In 1998, NMSU granted Sam an honorary bachelor's degree.

Sam Steel Way, the frontage road east of I-10, is named after Sam, as is the student-run café in Gerald Thomas Hall.

Since 1993, NMSU College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) honors Sam's memory each year by inducting the freshman class into the Sam Steel Society. A home-away-from-home for the duration of their college experience, the community supports and encourages students as they strive to obtain what Sam Steel was so unjustly denied: graduation and a college degree.

During NMSU's annual Homecoming initiation, ACES Freshmen have the Sam Steel Society symbol painted on their shirts, symbolizing their pledge to fulfill dreams Sam Steel was denied.



Sam Steel Society symbol



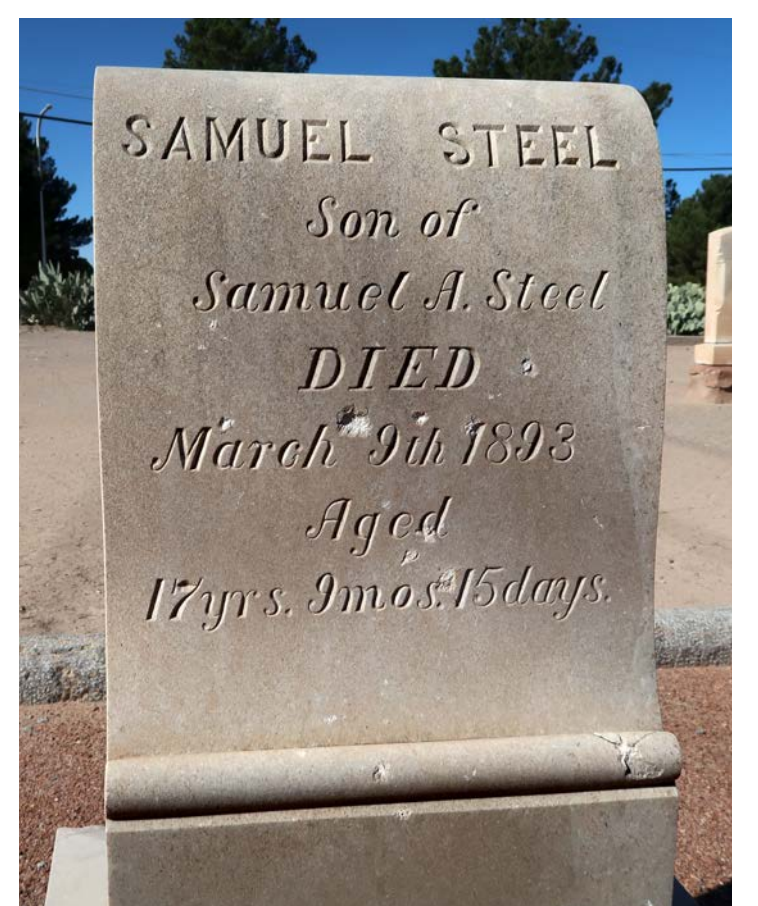
Sam at approximately age 10 (center) and two of his siblings, Richard & Maude.



Sam Steel (approximate age 14).



Sam's parents (top), Eleanor Taylor Fryer & Samuel Steel Sr.; Steel's Corner store in Bushmills, Ireland (bottom).



Sam's gravesite at the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Las Cruces, NM.