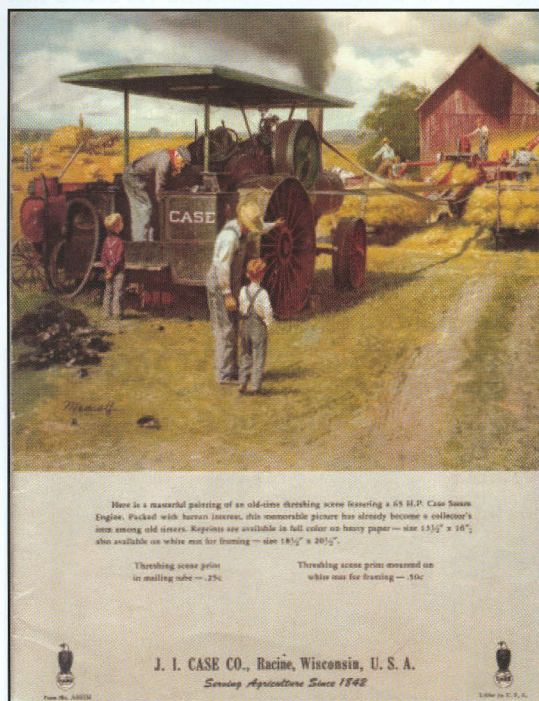


# WILLIAM MEDCALF'S ICONIC PAINTING OF A CASE STEAM ENGINE

By Robert T. Rhode

When I was growing up, I admired my father's print of a J. I. Case steam engine, threshing machine, and water wagon. Having seen an announcement in *The Iron-Men Album Magazine*, my father had written to the Case firm in Racine to request a booklet featuring reproductions of a few catalog pages, a center-fold of a bright red and green Case cut, and a cover depicting a painting by Medcalf. Noting the booklet's instructions for ordering a print of Medcalf's art, my father wrote away for the picture. Case sold many of the prints, and they have become iconic. The threshing scene has appeared on porcelain plates, tin signs intended to look old, and the dust jacket of David Erb and Eldon Brumbaugh's book entitled *Full Steam Ahead: J. I. Case Tractors & Equipment 1842-1955* (St. Joseph, MI: ASME, 1993). When my father passed away, I inherited his booklet and his framed artwork.

Who was Medcalf? He was one of the most famous painters of pin-up girls! To give an indication of how acclaimed Medcalf was, I will mention that his pin-up girl entitled *Pretty in*



The cover of the booklet presented William Medcalf's now-iconic painting of a threshing scene with Case equipment. The envelope containing my father's copy of the 24-page booklet was postmarked February 28, 1956.

## CASE STEAM ENGINE BOOK

In response to continued popular demand for information contained in catalogs long out of print, an 8½"x11", 24 page booklet (right) on Case Steam Engines has been printed. Containing many illustrations of early wood, straw and coal burners. This booklet will be valued by every collector and model builder. General specifications on later models from 30 to 110 H. P. and a color cut to show original paint colors. Postpaid 25 cents each.

### COLORED THRESHING PRINTS

Printed in full color on heavy paper, this realistic 13½"x16" reminder (below) will thrill every old-timer.

**Rolled in mailing tube - - - 25c each**  
**Flat, mounted on white mat - 50c each**



Please Send Cash With Order

**J. I. CASE Co.**

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RACINE, WIS.

Page 8 of the September-October 1955 issue of *The Iron-Men Album Magazine* carried this promotion, which my father, Joseph C. Rhode, noticed, and he ordered the advertised booklet from the J. I. Case Company.

*Pink* sold for \$21,510 at auction in Beverly Hills in 2011!

The artist's full name was William Edward Medcalf, and he was born in Minneapolis on January 18, 1920. According to various websites, he was employed in the United States Department of the Treasury's Bureau of Engraving and Printing in 1940 and 1941 and joined the Navy as gunner's mate in 1942. On the 18th of March in 1946, Brown & Bigelow, the famous producer of calendars and novelties in St. Paul, hired him. Norman Rockwell, one of Medcalf's idols, worked for Brown & Bigelow; Rockwell illustrated the Boy Scouts calendars. The pin-up artist Gil Elvgren, Medcalf's other idol, was another of Brown & Bigelow's champion artists. At the 1946 company Christmas party, Medcalf met both Rockwell and Elvgren, both of whom, it is said, complimented his work.

Medcalf's first assignment was for Kelly-Springfield Tires. Did he paint a nostalgic Kelly steam engine? No. Did he paint a truck sporting Kelly tires? No again. Medcalf painted an alluring young woman taking her dog for a walk near a sports car. His work followed an advertising practice of placing an eye-catching woman in the foreground and the marketed product in the background.

A few years after Medcalf established himself as a painter of attractive women, he illustrated Brown & Bigelow's highly respected baseball calendars. At first, Medcalf





My father ordered the print of the Medcalf painting that the Case booklet advertised, and he had it framed.



William Edward Medcalf was born in 1920 and passed away as recently as 2005. Here we see Medcalf at work on one of his celebrated paintings on the theme of baseball.

worked at the Brown & Bigelow headquarters, but he eventually painted at his home studio in St. Paul.

As an illustrator myself, I once applied for a position with Curtis Publishing in Indianapolis. It was many years ago. When I arrived for my interview, my host sized up my drawings—and me—in a glance. He concluded I was too wet behind the ears! He graciously showed me around the offices before sending me home. While we



*Pin-Up in Yellow Dress* is one of Medcalf's more modest (that is, less revealing) offerings.



This USDA photograph, reprinted in the book *The Good Old Days: An Invitation to Memory* (Cincinnati: F. & W., 1960), is one in a series of images from which Medcalf copied portions of his Case painting. The barn is the same, and the identical boy that is seated on the tongue of the coal wagon is standing in the foreground of the iconic threshing scene. The J. I. Case Company undoubtedly supplied Medcalf with photographs of Case machines, which he substituted for the equipment in this photo.

Photos courtesy of Robert T. Rhode.



strolled down the hallways decorated with framed Rockwell prints, my host told me that Rockwell worked from photographs. I remember being surprised to learn that fact. My host also told me to take more time on the ears of people that I drew, and, when drawing, I have been extremely conscious of ears ever since!

When you view Medcalf's pin-ups, my guess is you won't notice their ears. (Many of his alluring women are online, where you can also find several of his other works, such as scenes of Christmas, no matter how jarring the contrast may be.) Like Rockwell, Medcalf worked from photographs. In fact, I have found a United States Department of Agriculture photo that is one in a series from which Medcalf derived details for his iconic Case steam engine painting.

In my estimation, Medcalf's works can be classified in three categories: nostalgic views like those of Rockwell, colorful sketches, and pin-up girls (for which he is best known). He occasionally took commissions for formal portraits, and his illustrations frequently included spectacular landscapes emphasizing the grandeur of nature. Medcalf passed away on February 26, 2005.

When I used to show my 65 HP Case in Illinois, I heard rumors that Medcalf's orig-

inal painting of the threshers had been hanging in a bar or restaurant in the northern part of that state, but I was never able to track down the story.

I don't know about you, but, as far as my artistic sensibility is concerned, Medcalf's most seductive "pin-up" was

his Case steamer. I think the engine's winking at me!

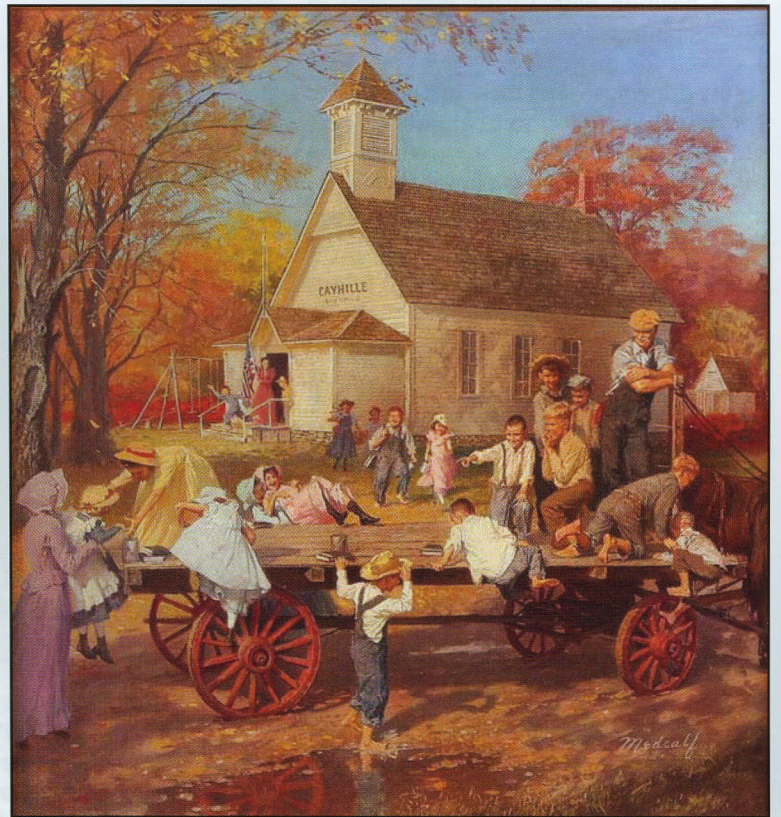
Contact steam historian Robert T. Rhode at 990 W. Lower Springboro Rd., Springboro, OH 45066; e-mail: case65@earthlink.net.



*Three Boys Playing Football* is representative of the numerous colorful sketches that Medcalf contributed over his long career as an illustrator.



Entitled *Holding His Nose*, this Medcalf illustration is very much like the work of Norman Rockwell, one of Medcalf's idols.



This painting, entitled *School's Out*, typifies Medcalf's nostalgic compositions and has much in common with his famous Case painting.