

Harker's Barns: Visions of An American Icon

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formation: Sioux City went from "Sewer City," a deteriorating "cow town" losing jobs and population, to a growing, economically vibrant city that served as the heart of "Siouxland." The episodes illustrate urban renewal, highlighting a battle between politicians and developers over suburban expansion versus downtown and riverfront regeneration; the happy result was that the city got both.

Moreover, an unfortunate calamity, the crash of United Flight 232 on July 19, 1989, galvanized the community and served as the defining moment in an equally important attitudinal transformation. "The harrowing tragedy and its extraordinary aftermath not only changed the way the nation thought of Sioux City, it changed the way Sioux City thought of itself" (17). Thus, while the shifting economy (from stockyards and big meatpackers to gambling, computers, and boxed beef) and the changing population (a large influx of Southeast Asians and "Latinos") continue to alter the area, the recent story of Sioux City was one of "Two Decades of Renewal." (291).

Harker's Barns: Visions of an American Icon, photographs by Michael P. Harker, text by Jim Heynen. A Bur Oak Book. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. xiv, 89 pp. Photographs, technical notes. \$24.95 paper.

The American Barn, by David Plowden. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003. 160 pp. Photographs, technical notes. \$50.00 cloth.

Reviewer James R. Shortridge is professor of geography at the University of Kansas. In addition to writing an article about Kansas barns, he has authored four books about the Middle West, including *Our Town on the Plains: J. J. Pennell's Photographs of Junction City, Kansas, 1893-1922* (2000).

Agrarian life, the touchstone for Iowa and midwestern culture, has been in rapid decline since the 1940s. We all know this. But as long as the familiar rural landscape of barn, silo, and house remained intact, urban citizens were able to draw from it a continuing symbolic attachment to the land. This tenuous anchor itself is now about to disappear, with Iowa alone losing a thousand big barns every year (Harker, xi). The two books under review here are photographic tributes to these vanishing structures.

Michael Harker's and David Plowden's projects are similar in many ways. Both men employ black-and-white formats as the best way to capture the quality of light on old wood; both minimize their texts in order to maximize illustration; and, curiously, both exclude human actors from their exposures. Both also have found publishers willing to provide the quality of paper and printing needed for fine reproduction.

The books differ primarily in scale. Plowden took his camera across much of North America and was able to include 121 plates, each averaging a generous 10" x 8" in size. Harker's book is more modest. Limiting his range to Iowa, he offers 75 plates, most of them about 8" x 7".

These books will disappoint readers who want to understand nuances of barn construction. Neither author provides figure captions beyond place and date, nor attempts to be comprehensive geographically or historically. In words that apply to both volumes, Plowden says that his "is more of a poem than an essay" (158).

I find much to praise in *The American Barn*. David Plowden, who has been photographing rural America for 40 years, cares deeply about his subject. He grew up forking loose hay into the family barn in Vermont and has taken the time to consult with experts across the country about "what is important to look for and where to go" in his quest (158). Plowden's sensitivity is perhaps best revealed through a decision to devote 25 photographs to interiors. Through shots of milking stanchions, hay carriers, roof trusses, and tool storage racks, viewers are encouraged to see barns as the important workplaces they were.

Although Plowden's title suggests a wide-ranging sample of structures, his focus is actually fairly restricted. With the exception of single photographs from Maryland and Montana, he ignores the entire southern and western portions of the nation. Iowa contributes three shots, while Illinois, Michigan, and other states of the Old Northwest plus Vermont provide nearly 80 percent of the total. This regional bias means an absence of log crib barns and an overemphasis on dairy-belt specialties such as round barns and silos.

Michael Harker, an ophthalmic photographer for the University of Iowa, was moved to document area barns by their fragility. His plates display a landscape more derelict than Plowden's, and do so in a less varied style; most shots are taken at middle range and only one from a building's interior. Eleven prose vignettes by Jim Heynen, an Iowa-born professor at St. Olaf College, supplement the photographs. Heynen's introductory statement is an excellent statement of barn symbolism, but most of his others strike me as overly sentimental. They made me yearn instead for genuine barn stories, the kind that owners almost assuredly told both Harker and Plowden as they requested permission to set their cameras. Carelessness in several captions also mars *Harker's Barns*, including the mislabeling of two barns as corn cribs (plates 15, 61), a grain elevator as a silo (13), and hay as grain (61). Such lapses provide still another reminder of our loss of agrarian knowledge.

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