

Land of the Fragile Giants: Landscapes, Environments, and Peoples of the Loess Hills

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1995 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

This work has been identified with a <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/>>Rights Statement In Copyright.

Recommended Citation

"Land of the Fragile Giants: Landscapes, Environments, and Peoples of the Loess Hills."
The Annals of Iowa 54 (1995), 288-290.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9948>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online

the Amana Colonies). Hidden from most Iowans and reserved to linguistic insiders are the humorous songs and idiomatic expressions that characterized Amana life during its first century in Iowa, a bonding experience that has faded since the Change and especially with the loss of German. Webber's Amana respondents recollect the good times the pre-Change community enjoyed accomplishing arduous tasks that demanded many hands, tasks that furnished an opportunity to sing, gossip, and tease with one's neighbors.

There never did exist a monolithic Amana in linguistic terms. Rather, the keen observer discovers microdialects of German, variations that allow a person to be pinpointed to one of the seven villages. Loss of identity and language individuality occurred at different stages depending on the village concerned. South Amana, with two railroad lines, enjoyed greater mobility earlier and produced residents who learned English faster and better, followed by Homestead on the highway, and then Main Amana, where both a railroad station and industry brought dependence on outsiders. The more isolated East, Middle, High, and West Amana, on the other hand, were slower to use English and retained specialized German dialects longer. The microdialects of these villages had origins in Hesse and other states in Germany, but demonstrate considerable coalescing of scattered German locales which linguistically regathered on Iowa soil.

Folkloric references by villagers of one Amana to those from another likewise give evidence of Webber's intimate grasp of the languages used in these communities. His quotes from speakers demonstrate intricacies that exude from countryside village styles in Germany even today. Unfortunately, few Iowa tourists to the Amanas will be able to penetrate the rich culture linguistically wrapped in these speakers. Luckily, this volume, with its rich, illustrative German accompanied by expert parenthetical translations in English, offers a dazzling substitute for a lifetime of language learning.

Land of the Fragile Giants: Landscapes, Environments, and Peoples of the Loess Hills, edited by Cornelia F. Mutel and Mary Swander, with additional material by Lynette L. Pohlman. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press for the Brunner Art Museum, Iowa State University, 1994. xxii, 118 pp. Illustrations, references. \$24.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY GAIL E. H. EVANS, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Over the past few years, the Loess Hills of western Iowa, often considered the state's most distinctive natural landscape, has received growing public attention. In 1989 Cornelia F. Mutel's *Fragile Giants: A Natural History of the Loess Hills* helped focus midwesterners' interest

on this unique topographical feature of interconnected steep-sided ridges and bluffs, composed of fine grains of wind-blown quartz silt, rising up from the Missouri River floodplain. Inspired both by the landscape itself and by Mutel's book, *Land of the Fragile Giants* is a collaborative project, initiated and coordinated by the Brunnier Art Museum at Iowa State University and the University of Iowa Press, which aims to further raise contemporary consciousness of the Loess Hills. The project features an art exhibition that is accompanied by educational programming, a poem and musical composition, and the book under review. Publication of *Land of the Fragile Giants* coincided with the September 1994 opening of the traveling exhibit at Moorhead Cultural Center in the Loess Hills.

Like the project as a whole, *Land of the Fragile Giants*, edited by Cornelia F. Mutel and Mary Swander, presents a multidimensional view of the Loess Hills as seen through the eyes of artists, scientists, and humanists, all of whom have experienced this place in different ways. The book opens with twenty-eight color plates that present the visual interpretations of several artists, including painters, photographers, sculptors, and printmakers. Four scientists (geologists and botanists) describe their research on and personal association with various aspects of the Loess Hills' natural history. An anthropologist, a historian, a nature conservationist, a poet, and a longtime resident farmer offer humanistic perspectives on this landscape's Native American and Euroamerican history and its present use and meaning. The book closes with essays by a prairie ecologist and a scientific historian who assess the value of the hills and share their vision of the area's future. *Land of the Fragile Giants* is organized into six sections with paired narrative essays inspired by the works of art and the hills themselves. Each section opens with a brief introduction to the two authors and a synopsis of the section's central theme.

Taken together, the book's visual images and descriptive essays successfully present a kaleidoscopic rendering of the Loess Hills as both a natural phenomenon and a cultural place defined by multiple human experiences and meanings. Perhaps the book's greatest strength lies in its portrayal of the present-day Loess Hills as a landscape that mirrors the convergence of nature and culture over time. Many of the artists' images of the hills include winding roads, utility poles, fences, farm buildings, and cultivated fields—the historic imprint of human life and activity on the land. According to writer Mary Swander in her essay, "Aerial View," the Loess Hills warrants consideration as both a physical landform and a cultural landmark; it is both a living place and a place where people live (9).

Some may be disappointed, therefore, that the book's last section presents two visions of the long-term conservation of the hills' prairie ecology as it existed prior to Euroamerican habitation. Perhaps such a prescription focuses too narrowly on only one aspect of the hills' uniqueness to the exclusion of human history. Since Euroamericans have been and continue to be part of the ongoing environmental history of these hills, it seems important to consider, from the multi-dimensional perspective offered in *Fragile Giants*, how both nature and culture can be accommodated in planning for the Loess Hills of tomorrow. If art and the humanities, including history, can contribute to our understanding of the Loess Hills and its past, can they not enhance our contemplation of this distinctive area's future?

Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place, by Kent C. Ryden. American Land and Life Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993. xvi, 326 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY WALTER RICHARD KNUPFER, IOWA HUMANITIES BOARD

For artists, "place" evokes more than the pattern of directions between map coordinates. Nebraska author Wright Morris expanded our sense of place and the meaning of "literature" in his 1948 montage of photographs whose internal composition as much as sequential arrangement contributed to a narrative ("pattern") of place greater than the photographs or accompanying text alone. Thus we have "photo essays" as literary genre—dramatic and historical compositions of word and picture.

Kent C. Ryden's *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* argues that land is story, and its representations in maps, signs, boundaries, folklore, oral history, and literature are points of excursion into the vastness of the human "sense" of place, a deep structure of meanings layered in the natural and human intersections that occur there over time. The "invisible landscape" is land in the imagination, the cognitive maps of those who daily negotiate it, a living dialogue between land, sense, and action. Place is the foundation for an architecture of myth, imagination, and behavior. It drives the local view of the world. Invisible to outsiders passing through, to insiders the cognitive landscape is richly constructed.

Ryden endeavors to be the translator. He surveys maps, surveyors, and the literature of place, defining a taxonomy of disciplinary relations to landscape. To his bibliographic essay he adds oral histories gathered from mining towns, revealing the many constructions of place over time. Some constructions characterize a regional attitude,

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.