

## Reflecting a Prairie Town: a Year in Peterson

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generations, I gave dog ears to the pages where partial trees appear; the table of contents should at least list where these partial ones appear.

*All Our Yesterdays* is a good story well told. Its authors deserve much credit for using the house and family they came to know intimately as a window to life in nineteenth-century New England. There is no question that they made the most of the materials available to them. At the same time, the story is a curious one in this respect: rather than developing a plot for the story and unfolding it with appropriate evidence, they apparently felt compelled to use all the evidence at hand, even if straining was required to connect it to the story. Consequently, digressions are frequent, and the whole of the story is something less than the sum of its parts. A shorter, more tightly written story, more fully illustrated, would have made this very good book an even better one.

*Reflecting a Prairie Town: A Year in Peterson*, by Drake Hokanson. American Land and Life Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994. xiv, 259 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN E. MILLER, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Drake Hokanson, a writer, photographer, and assistant professor of writing at Lakeland College in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, spent a year in 1990–1991 back in his home town of Peterson, Iowa, taking pictures, interviewing people, researching, and meditating about the town and its people and the land around it. The result is this large-format book, a combination of history, geography, journalism, photography, archeology, geology, agricultural science, botany, and climatology, not to mention literature, for the author is a wonderful writer, capable of straightforward description and analysis as well as of lyrical evocations of the landscape and people's lives. His own term for the book's genre is "vernacular landscape study: a detailed, prolonged look at a common place in what I think of as an uncommon fashion" (3).

Hokanson is well acquainted with the town, for he was born and spent his first five years there during the early 1950s. He moved away with his family only to return for his junior and senior years of high school, and then returned to spend another year in his old home town after having worked and traveled all around the world, including Egypt, India, and Australia. The vantage point he brings to this study, therefore, is that of both the insider and the outsider. He is able to analyze the evolution of the environs around Peterson from prehistoric times to the present because he brings the curiosity of the questor after

truth as well as the analytical skills of a multidisciplinary researcher, meanwhile never forgetting that these are places of importance to him and people who are often friends and neighbors and even relatives.

The town itself has nothing particularly outstanding to recommend it as a subject for research, but that is precisely why it can purport to stand as a representative community. The author makes no real effort to demonstrate it, but rather simply assumes that Peterson is indeed representative. His first line reads, "This book is both about a particular place and, in a way, about all places" (1). For the reader willing to go along with him in this assumption, the rewards are many. We learn not only about what it is like now to live in a small midwestern agricultural town (1990 population: 390, down 80 from 1980) or on a farm nearby it; we also learn how a town like this came to be through the work of ancient glacial action, the continuing evolution of the plant and animal ecosystem, the activities of pre-historic Indian populations, the arrival in the 1850s of the first white settlers and their interactions with the Indians who were in the area at that time, the coming of the railroad in 1882, and the growth and decline of economic activities in the community during the past century or so.

The text moves easily back and forth between Hokanson's contemporary observations about people and places and the fruits of his research about how what is there now came to be. Individual chapters deal with the geology of the place, government surveys of the land, climate, the local diner and the grain elevator (where much of the activity in the town occurs), agricultural cycles, the founders of the town, the impact of the railroad (it was crucial), platting the town and town building, Indian conflicts, store buildings and homes, and historical memory.

This is a book to read and linger over, moving back and forth between the excellent photographs of people and scenes taken by the author and the accompanying text. We truly come to know what it is like to live in a place like this and some of the hopes and dreams and anxieties of people who choose to live here. In a fashion reminiscent of William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairieEarth* (about Chase County, Kansas), Hokanson shows just how integrally related to the earth and the natural environment human occupancy on the land is. There is enough history to allow the reader to grasp the essential forces that operated to create the town and that led to its gradual decline. Two things, however, will not be found here: a complex social and economic history of the town, explaining its development in detail over more than a century of history, and any deeply critical analysis of fault lines or negative aspects of the community. Much more than

simple nostalgia, this book nevertheless does not attempt to show how power relationships or divisions along ethnic, gender, and class lines might rupture community. That aside, it is a welcome addition to a growing shelf of books about small towns, rural landscape, and the workings of place in people's lives.

*Small Town America*, by David Plowden. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994. 159 pp. Photographs. \$49.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARY E. NOBLE, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES

For his nineteenth book, David Plowden has assembled 111 of his black-and-white photographs taken from 1962 through 1992 in small towns from Rhode Island and upstate New York west to Idaho and as far south as West Virginia, Kansas, and Oklahoma. David McCullough introduces the collection with a brief discussion of small towns as depicted in American literature and drama, and prepares the reader/viewer for Plowden's straightforward documentary approach—"never dressing the set, never rearranging" (6). In his own substantial essay, Plowden sets forth his intention to compile the story of a composite "'anytown' . . . the generic aspects that were once common to all, and those that are in danger of disappearing" (9). Indeed, the photographs have been carefully arranged to guide the viewer successively through the central business district stores, cafes, taverns, and lodge halls to the local governmental agencies (post offices, courthouses, schools, libraries), residential areas, churches, and, finally, to the town's edge where are found the businesses most obviously related to the farmland beyond—feed mills and grain elevators. Along the way, street scenes precede exterior and interior views of individual buildings. Occasionally the proprietors, employees, customers, or inhabitants appear, gazing matter-of-factly forward, amidst workplace or home surroundings. Plowden photographs individual persons and their homes or businesses only with permission, which may explain why most of the pictures are unpeopled and many show careful arrangement within the spaces shown. His willing portrait subjects are more often men than women, and all but one in this collection are white.

Twenty-four of these photographs, the most from a single state, were taken in Iowa in 1986–87, presumably as Plowden worked on his book of Iowa photographs, *A Sense of Place* (1988); seven appear in both books. Here, although the page size is nearly the same, the images are larger and slightly darker and warmer in tone. The two books complement each other in Plowden's text as well as in the pictures. There are variant views from the same locales, such as the

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