

Spans in Time: A History of Nebraska Bridges, edited by James E. Potter and L. Robert Puschendorf. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1999. v, 106 pp. Illustrations, inventory, index. \$21.95 cloth.

Reviewer James Beranek lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He is engaged in a study of railroad structures along Iowa's Rock Island line.

In our automobile-tailored world, it is difficult to conceive of a time when there were no bridges, when every river or stream was a barrier to be either forded or crossed on a bridge of one's own construction. Yet that is the situation that faced the waves of settlers who followed Nebraska's great Platte River Valley west in the 1840s and '50s and who were literally on their own when it came to crossing the many rivers they encountered en route. Beginning with this early period of migration and continuing through the 1940s, *Spans in Time* successfully combines the history of bridge technology, types, politics, and aesthetics with an appreciation of these often taken-for-granted structures.

The book is divided into two parts: the first, historical section, briskly recounts how, in an attempt to improve mobility within the state, responsibility for constructing and maintaining bridges was vested in the counties after Nebraska Territory was created in 1854. As both the state's population and the demand for better roads increased, this arrangement proved to be less than satisfactory. The counties were often underfunded and incompetent in bridge matters. As a result, for the next half-century, much of the history of Nebraska's bridges is that of the state's attempts (usually unsuccessful) to persuade counties to improve safety by adopting state plans and construction standards. Not until 1911 did state government first become directly involved in the financing and design of local bridge projects, and not until 1926 did it assume full control over all state and federally funded construction.

The book's second half is a useful guide to Nebraska's surviving bridges. The editors have selected 50 historic structures and given each a photograph and several paragraphs describing its location, type, construction date, and significance. Briefer one-paragraph summaries describe 35 additional bridges. This section is so successful that it motivated this confirmed depot hunter to search for similar back-roads survivors in Iowa.

Spans in Time is a very good book. Despite its two-bureaucracy parentage (it was published jointly by the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Nebraska Department of Roads), the prose is lively, the illustrations well chosen, and the layout pleasing. Two additions would have made it even better. First, a map, ideally including the locations of the 85 selected bridges and showing the rivers, counties, and towns discussed in the text, would have been helpful. A second and more

significant problem, at least for this engineering-challenged reviewer, is that the book seems to assume a minimum knowledge of bridge construction. Consequently, such arcane terms as stringers, trusses, pony trusses, chords, "bending moment stresses," H-beams, and I-beams are tossed at the reader without definition. For the layperson, either a glossary or drawings of the various bridge types with their parts identified would have saved time and frustration.

Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums, by Patricia West. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1999. xiii, 241 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Reviewer Peggy Boyle Whitworth is executive director of Brucemore, a National Trust Historic Site in Cedar Rapids.

Patricia West's book places house museums in a broad social context, presenting house museums not as collections of objects or as a litany of daily lives, but, rather, showing how these entities came to be. West uses four house museums—Mount Vernon, Monticello, Orchard House (home of Louisa May Alcott), and the Booker T. Washington National Monument—as case studies to review the cultural, political, and societal influences on their formation. Social diversity and gender are key elements in the interpretation of each museum. None of these organizations is neutral or politically aloof; each is affected by external issues prevalent at the particular place and time it was founded and developed. Perhaps a bit too detailed for the casual reader, the book focuses on key but seldom considered issues that still affect American house museums.

The case study approach makes the issue manageable. Four mini-case studies represent two "stars" of the house museum world and two lesser-known but equally interesting sites. Shrines to founding fathers, the home of a female author, and the reconstructed birthplace of an African American scientist allow the author to consider the sites in terms of race, class, and gender. Since each house museum came to be during a different period in our nation's history, West cites issues such as immigration patterns, governmental involvement, and the role of professionals in the house museum movement to explain the variety of influences as these entities developed. West's selection of case studies provides a nice variety over time. The interpretive focus tends to be on famous inhabitants, but even places primarily associated with such people have recently begun to emphasize a broader interpretation, incorporating the workers in these houses as well as their owners.

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