

This book covers a lot of time and territory in 161 pages of text. Each chapter is written in almost almanac style. Some topics receive pages, others just paragraphs of explanation. Readers may consider each chapter as an abstract or research design for expanded efforts. Doctoral students should take note. There is work to be done on these topics within the three paradigms.

Nash's final effort should be read by all history majors. The book is easy enough to read to introduce regional economic history to undergraduates. It is a must read for students of the American West because Nash expands his earlier interpretations into economic and policy history. The volume contains endnotes and an informative bibliographic essay. It lacks more maps and data tables.

*Our State Fair: Iowa's Blue Ribbon Story*, by Mary Kay Shanley. Des Moines: Iowa State Fair Blue Ribbon Foundation; Ames: Sigler Publishing, 2000. 272 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

*The Missouri State Fair: Images of a Midwestern Tradition*, by Richard Gaskell. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000. 114 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer Chris Rasmussen is assistant professor of history Fairleigh Dickinson University. He is completing a book manuscript on the Iowa State Fair.

Fairgrounds teem with such an overabundance of exhibits and activities that each visitor inevitably focuses on some aspects of the fair and skims over or overlooks others. These recent books on the state fairs of Missouri and Iowa both attest to the abiding popularity of fairs, but offer very different visions of these annual exhibitions. Richard Gaskell's fair is a timeless rural tradition captured in stolid black-and-white photographs, while Mary Kay Shanley's mingles tradition, innovation, and festivity in a riot of color. Gaskell's fair retains its popularity by hewing to its original purpose and resisting the vast changes that have remade American culture over the past century, while Shanley's fair endures by stirring new events into its time-tested recipe of agricultural exhibits, good clean fun, and sociability.

Photographer Richard Gaskell's black-and-white images of the Missouri State Fair evoke a rural America seemingly bypassed by interstates and the Internet, but by no means gone. The fair, he writes in the introduction to this collection of photographs taken in the 1980s and 1990s, evokes potent feelings of nostalgia, reviving fond childhood recollections and even binding us to past generations of fairgoers. The fair remains one of the few places where "the reality of virtue," rather

than virtual reality, still prevails. As Gaskell observes, Americans now inhabit a society in which we are simultaneously "dazzled to the point of weariness by incessant change" and yet "addicted to the predictable and the uniform" (11). While American life has been homogenized by corporations and mass culture, fairs celebrate the idiosyncrasies of their state or county. For Gaskell, the fair is literally a spiritual event, an annual ritual that marks humanity's profound, inescapable dependence on the soil and the elements (11).

Gaskell's photographs nicely document the Missouri State Fair that he chooses to remember, a century-old tradition scarcely altered by the passage of time. His photographs of fairgoers and livestock document his particular vision of the fair, revealing a swath of rural Missouri that endures despite the advent of restaurant chains and shopping malls. He displays an especially keen eye for capturing those elements of the fair, such as the anxiety and exultation of competitors in the fair's livestock judging, that have changed relatively little over the past century. Images of crotchety farmers, beaming 4-H exhibitors, recalcitrant livestock, and jaded carnies have been icons of fairs everywhere for decades. Gaskell's fair binds generations together: grandfathers pass the finer points of showing livestock down to their grandchildren or proudly accompany them on the merry-go-round. (Gaskell's favorite photographic subjects are craggy septuagenarians and fresh-faced children; old farmers, who still wear bib overalls and straw hats, predominate in this book.) Gaskell demonstrates a particular gift for portraiture, and his depictions of rural Missourians, even those who are far from photogenic or stylish, are nearly always respectful, not patronizing or voyeuristic.

Because Gaskell trains his attention on the fair's traditional elements, other important aspects of the annual exhibition are conspicuously absent in this book. Those who have never visited the Missouri State Fairgrounds will catch scarcely a glimpse of its appearance, layout, or architecture in this book. Carnival rides are only barely depicted, and grandstand shows are absent altogether. There are no displays of cooking, canning, or handicrafts. Gaskell typically photographs his subjects in moments of repose, taking a respite from the fair's crowds and activities, rather than in motion, and his black-and-white photography obviously does not reproduce the kaleidoscopic colors on the fairgrounds. Most notably, although Gaskell is keenly aware that modernity has taken a considerable toll on rural America, he chooses not to focus his lens on the tensions between tradition and innovation, rural and urban, on the fairgrounds, preferring to believe that the fair remains an oasis of stability amid the shifting sands of

contemporary American culture. Gaskell's appealing photographs thus document his particular vision of the fair as a ritual consecrated to the hope that rural America will persevere for another century. I share his hope, if not necessarily his optimism.

*Our State Fair*, a lavishly illustrated history of the Iowa State Fair, offers a more wide-ranging view of fairs' diverse activities. This colorful, beautifully laid-out book almost bursts with photographs, posters, postcards, newspaper clippings, artifacts, and myriad other images of the fair since its inception in 1854. Mary Kay Shanley's text recounts a fair that has changed greatly over nearly 150 years, yet retains much of its original purpose. Today's gargantuan fair, which offers extensive entertainments ranging from midway rides to country-and-western concerts, dwarfs the modest agricultural exhibitions of the fair's early years, yet the annual fair has consistently afforded Iowans an opportunity to mingle and celebrate their state's prodigious bounty.

Shanley's book is organized thematically, comprising chapters on the fair's origins, entertainments, competitions, agricultural exhibits, grounds, and sociability. Within these chapters she offers a series of crisp, eminently enjoyable essays on particular aspects of the fair, such as horse racing, baby judging, and midway rides. Shanley's breezy prose is well suited to her topic, and she makes apt use of anecdotes, quotations, and the recollections of longtime fairgoers to enliven and personalize her accounts of Iowans' experience of attending the fair. Additional block quotations, boxes of text, timelines, and other material fill the book's pages, creating a diverting mixture of words as well as images.

*Our State Fair* does not seek to offer a scholarly discussion of the fair—this is a book to be perused rather than studied. (The book was commissioned by the Iowa State Fair Blue Ribbon Foundation, and is intended to celebrate the fair's history. Proceeds from its sale will be used to restore and preserve the state fair's buildings, many of which are nearly a century old.) Still, even casual readers, as well as historians, will be disappointed to discover that most of the illustrations are not analyzed or even identified. These visual sources are always delightful to look at, but they do not speak for themselves. Intriguing images of the fair's advertisements, meticulously arrayed exhibits of crops, and entertainments ranging from horse racing to rock concerts all invite commentary and attest to extraordinary changes in the fair over the past 150 years. Similarly, the book's many photographic montages are eye-catching, but often juxtapose unattributed images from different decades, leaving the reader curious as to the origin and date of many of the images. Like the fair itself, though, this book is not

designed to be informative, but is primarily intended to be diverting. Both the extraordinary variety of visual sources and the evocative text will pique historians' curiosity and jog the memory of anyone who has ever attended the Iowa State Fair.

*Skeletons of the Prairie: Abandoned Rural Codington County, South Dakota*, text by Ried Holien, photographs by S. Paul Tuszynski. Watertown, SD: Codington County Historical Society, 2000. 160 pp. Illustrations, maps. \$40.00 cloth.

Reviewer Fred W. Peterson retired last year as professor of art history at the University of Minnesota-Morris. He is the author of *Building Community, Keeping the Faith: German Catholic Vernacular Architecture in a Rural Minnesota Parish* (1998).

*Skeletons of the Prairie* is primarily a photographic documentation of abandoned structures in rural Codington County, South Dakota, accompanied by brief notes about the history of the county, homesteading, and houses and outbuildings on area farms. Poems, quotations, and relevant commentary also accompany the photographs as aids to interpret the images.

Both text and photographs address a general audience in an almost "folksy" manner. Reading the text and studying the photographs of the book is like riding the back roads of the area with a local farmer who tells stories about the way things were and the families who once lived and worked on the now abandoned farms. One does not, however, learn about the technological and economic forces in American history that have caused the failure of these family farms. Neither is there any attempt to analyze and explain the farmhouses and outbuildings as significant architectural monuments.

It seems ironic that a book documenting the devastation of rural America originates from the county where artist Terry Redlin has built a museum to commemorate his own commercialized paintings. Reproductions of those paintings found in galleries to grocery stores sentimentalize the life and environment of the family farm, presenting a vacuous vision of a Disneyland life in the rural Midwest. It is unfortunate that *Skeletons of the Prairie* did not directly address that kind of falsification of history with a factual and substantial account of how the flesh was ripped from the noble vernacular structures of the American farms.

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