

Our Town on the Plains: J. J. Pennell's Photographs of Junction City, Kansas, 1893-1922, by James R. Shortridge. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. 242 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

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The Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* fills an empty stage by describing the scenery and the relationships that form the social geography of a fictional town. Similarly, James R. Shortridge's *Our Town on the Plains* makes visible a community history that might otherwise be—like Wilder's stage—only a vague impression.

J. J. Pennell opened a studio in downtown Junction City, Kansas, during the heyday of local commercial photography. Using details culled from newspapers, city directories, and memoirs, Shortridge provides historical context for nearly 150 of Pennell's prints of businesses, buildings, neighboring Fort Riley, and Junction City townspeople. Shortridge is particularly attentive to Junction City's geography at the turn of the century, from main street businesses and banks to the bordellos and saloons built at the town's margins for soldiers seeking entertainment. In addition to depicting the impact of Fort Riley and the railroad on Junction City's economy and society, Pennell's photographs record the marriages, deaths, and baseball games that were part of the fabric of daily life. Shortridge concludes by revisiting Junction City's Main Street around 1920, revealing it to be indelibly altered by technological change, particularly the transition from a horse- and railroad-driven culture to the automobile age.

The photographs were taken for the inhabitants of Junction City and reflect the town's image of itself more than the photographer's artistic vision. By having photographs made of their possessions, citizens represented desires for middle-class status and stability. Junction City residents expressed pride in their accomplishments through status symbols ranging from homes and cars to a mammoth catfish. Yet Shortridge attempts to complicate this seemingly straightforward celebration of progress, and some of the most illuminating moments in the text are when he points out the visual order of the town and of the photographs themselves, thus exposing variations within the narrative of success. These readings interrupt what might become merely an elegiac depiction of a midwestern town to show ways local conditions produced varying degrees of prosperity for the inhabitants of Junction City and Fort Riley. For example, two images of a laundry show the male proprietors in the tidy outer room, while in the inner room,

women and African Americans work, sleeves rolled up, with hot irons and a belt-powered mangle.

Shortridge's close readings of photographs—particularly of the interiors of businesses and homes—indicate that, like the railroad and military post, visual representation itself was part of life in Junction City. More such close readings would be welcome in a history that is at its best when the photographs are used as evidence rather than as illustration. Shortridge includes one arresting picture of a man (possibly an immigrant) at his popcorn stand as an illustration of a less prominent business. Yet the photograph itself tells a story about photography's role in affirming prosperity: the stand is right below Pennell's successful studio, and the vendor poses next to a board displaying samples of Pennell's tasteful portraits of middle-class ladies and gentlemen.

Readers interested in the built environment, photography, and local history will find much to praise in this book. Junction City emerges as prototypically midwestern in its civic values, community aspirations, and desire to define itself as a site of culture and commerce comparable to other cities, yet unique in the way the railroads and Fort Riley affected its development and contributed, in particular, to diversity within its social and economic life. The book testifies to the importance of photography to local histories, for the images show the townspeople both as they were and as they wished to be.

Colliers across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Midwest, 1830–1924, by John H. M. Laslett. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. xiv, 314 pp. Maps, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Reviewer David Emmons is professor of history at the University of Montana. He is the author of *The Butte Irish* (1989).

J. H. M. Laslett is one of this country's most careful students of the lives of American working people. His books and articles have been of particular use for understanding class formation and the various, usually quite pragmatic, ways it has found expression. But there was always one vexing question that bothered Laslett, as it did all historians of working Americans. Was class formation in the United States unique or "exceptional"? Did American workers respond differently to the stages of industrialization than, say, British or German workers? Why, indeed, as Werner Sombert put it, was there no socialism in America? Or, and more basically, did Sombert's assumption accurately reflect the culture and ideology of American labor?

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