

often been cited as the genesis of Iowa's system. In the speech Macbride called for a return to the "once familiar public common" by establishing a network of rural parks. Today, we take state as well as national park systems for granted, but they represent decades of struggle to acquire and maintain public access to areas of scenic beauty and scientific interest. *Everyone's Country Estate* and *Iowa's State Parks* remind us that some of nature's finest features are close to home, and they encourage us to explore the world immediately at hand.

Holding the Moment: Mid-America at Mid-Century, by Don Ultang. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991. xiv, 193 pp. 163 photographs, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY DRAKE HOKANSON, LAKELAND COLLEGE

To historians, collections of news photographs are seldom of great use. A dusty file of prints and negatives from a large daily, or even a small Iowa weekly, is most often an assemblage of images of unique happenings, singular situations, and unusual personages who passed through town but briefly, and but once. News photographers were sent to capture the barn fire, the giant pumpkin, the politician stumping from the rear platform of a railroad car. Their photographs may tell us little about how people actually lived, or what their town, homes, and work were like.

But there have always been news photographers at work who have taken a longer view. Some people have wielded cameras with an aim toward things more universal, things more common; subjects that endure. Don Ultang was such a photographer, and *Holding the Moment: Mid-America at Mid-Century* is a good book about enduring subjects, Iowa's enduring subjects. During his stints with the *Des Moines Register* and the *Tribune* between 1940 and 1958 (with a few years out for the war), Ultang produced a body of work that goes beyond the usual in news photography. As a news photographer he was no doubt called upon to take photographs of all the standard stuff—the routine sports and ribbon cuttings—but Ultang also kept before his camera those subjects that would somehow be of lasting interest to Iowans, to midwesterners. *Holding the Moment* shows us mule-powered haying scenes from a hot summer day about 1940; kids scooping the loop in 1953; a muddy farmer standing in his house doorway, shovel in hand, attempting to rid the living room of the silt left by a Floyd River flood; snowy downtown street scenes in Des Moines during the opening hours of the Second World War.

But perhaps the best treat is the selection of aerial photographs. Ultang learned to fly at the outbreak of the Second World War through the Civilian Pilot Training Program, then did his military tour overseas. After the war, he returned to the *Register* as both photographer and pilot. The company used its plane to get reporters and their pilot/photographer to breaking events; Ultang used the plane as a platform for making beautiful aerial photographs. Writes Ultang, "On a photo run over the target, the aircraft became a low-flying camera stand responding to the photographer's every thought. Holding the 4x5 Speed Graphic in the right hand and controlling the aircraft with the left hand was a single operation. The aircraft, the camera, the pilot, and the photographer became one" (57). Easier said than done. Ultang's "news aerals," as he called them, gave contemporary *Register* readers a new perspective on floods, plane crashes, and the winter landscape of Iowa, and they give today's readers of *Holding the Moment* a view of Iowa before metal-clad machine sheds and blue silos; a view of a landscape dotted with haystacks, checkered with small fields, and held together by a network of unimproved roads.

The large-format book is well organized into three sections. Each section begins with a personal essay by Ultang followed by a "gallery" of photographs. In the essays Ultang tells some of the stories that surround certain photographs, and provides the reader with some context of the times and the state of news photography. The sections are chronological, and both the essays and the photographs in each reflect the stylistic changes from "news photography" with large-format cameras in the prewar years to "photojournalism" and the 35-millimeter camera after. The selection of photographs is good and encompasses the breadth of Ultang's skills. But like so many books of this nature, the reproduction of them is only fair.

Ultang recognized throughout his career that certain assignments and the photographs that came from them had greater value than the everyday news shot. In a 1954 article he wrote, "A photograph that is great is one which will be worth looking at ten or twenty years from now—not just until the next edition. This means the news photographer must not only recognize news worthy subject matter. He must also work with those subtle factors which give lasting value to a photograph long after the original [timeliness] has vanished" (119). Because during his career he turned from time to time from the unique to the common, the photographs of Don Ultang, and his book, *Holding the Moment*, have that lasting value.

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.