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Book Review: Barns of Kansas: A Pictorial History

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Barns of Kansas: A Pictorial History. By Robert L. Marsh. Virginia Beach: Donning Company Publishers, 2002. ix + 166 pp. Photographs, map, glossary, bibliography, index. \$86.55 leather, \$44.02 cloth.

This catalog of old barns from Kansas appears at a propitious moment when considerable popular attention is being directed toward historic farm buildings in the "Sunflower State." The National Park Service along with the Kansas State Historical Society is currently in the middle of a five-year assessment of the state's historic resources, a survey that includes many historic farms. The "Barn Again" program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation has recently bestowed its highest commendation on barn restoration projects in Doniphan, Osage, and Pottawatomie Counties. This concern with agricultural legacies is reinforced as well by the University of Kansas's

Spencer Museum of Art which has been traveling an exhibition entitled "Remembering the Family Farm: 150 Years of American Prints" since 2001.

Robert L. Marsh's *Barns of Kansas* is, as its subtitle explains, less a book than an album. An affectionate labor of appreciation, it catalogs his discoveries made across a vast array of Kansas farms and ranches from the slopes of the Ozarks in the east out to the High Plains at its western border. An architect by profession, Marsh has an eye for barns that are large and monumental, although he is careful to include a few of the more representative and modestly proportioned structures as well. He is quick to indicate that his chief purpose was to photograph barns rather than to recover their histories or to interpret their historical and cultural significance.

On such matters, Marsh defers to the cultural geographers and architectural historians who have specialized in the study of agricultural buildings. His aim was to satisfy his curiosity about the more spectacular and intriguing old barns he encountered over several years of prowling along dusty country roads. He gives considerable attention, for example, to round barns even though only twenty-one are still standing and there were never more than fifty in the entire state. Many of his photographs are of massive stone or frame barns of cathedral-like proportions. While certainly worthy of documentation—and even our respect as marvelous works—such buildings deflect attention from the representative norm and thus imbue the story of agriculture on the Plains with too rosy a glow. Marsh's decided focus on exceptional examples indicates that there is still a need for a rigorous survey of barns in Kansas, and he would be among the first to say so.

Barns of Kansas is a beautifully produced volume filled with wonderful color photographs, all of them made on bright sunny days so that each barn's salient features are rendered with great clarity. Marsh produced this volume because he is finally an advocate for the preservation of old barns. It is likely that

his book will encourage others to join him in that worthy mission.

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