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## Review of *American Windmills: An Album of Historic Photographs*. By T. Lindsay Baker

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*American Windmills: An Album of Historic Photographs.* By T. Lindsay Baker. Introduction by John Carter. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xi + 156 pp. Photographs, index. \$34.95.

“I’m a lover and a fighter and a wild bull rider and a pretty fair kind of a windmill man,” goes the old Plains-country brag. Along with barbed wire, windmills helped bring an end to the open range, and the cowboy had to add fence riding and windmill maintenance to his roping and riding skills. *American Windmills*, T. Lindsay Baker’s latest volume on the topic of which he is the country’s (and most likely the world’s) leading authority, brought back a flood of memories as I turned its pages

When I was growing up on a small Flint Hills ranch in Kansas, one of the jobs I disliked most was windmill repair. As winter drew to a close, we would load a block and tackle, a pipe holder, a couple of lengths of chain, and the windmill kit into the pickup and drive to our summer pastures. Dad would open the vanes on the windmills (we had Samsons, Aermotors, and Dempsters), and if the flow wasn’t good we would pull the well. Most of our wells were from seventy-five- to a hundred-feet deep, which meant several long, heavy sections of pipe to haul up, unscrew, and set to one side until we finally got to the cylinder so we could replace the leathers. I can still see Dad holding the back of a pipe wrench firmly on one side of a joint and hitting the opposite side with a hammer to jar the rust loose. Then there were the emergency repairs in summertime when a jet rod would break, or one of the pipes had rusted out and had to be patched with inner tube and baling wire.

From the distance of half a century I look back at this hard work with some nostalgia (but

no sentimentality), and I regret that windmills are far fewer now than in the Flint Hills of my youth. Without doubt the windmill is a major icon of the Great Plains. Over his many years of study, Baker has amassed an extensive collection of windmill history, lore, and photographs, and the selection of images included in this volume captures both the mythic and the practical import of the windmill. Nearly every facet of windmillology—history, manufacture, marketing, installation, and use—is covered, and the photographs are well arranged and explained by Baker's commentary and captions. I found John Carter's insightful introduction especially useful in its extension of the concept of photographs as portraits—not only of people but of farms and ranches and houses and towns.

As a folklorist I was particularly taken by the chapter on homemade windmills, but equally engrossing were the chapters on ranching and farmsteads. Carter was awestruck by an 1880 photograph on the dust jacket (and on page 123 of the text, although—my only quibble with the book—the index misidentifies the correct page) showing two well-dressed women on a windmill platform many feet above the then small town of San Diego, California. What intrigued Carter was that the photographer, with the bulky and awkward equipment then available, had to have been standing on some sort of windblown structure several feet higher than the women.

My own favorite photo appears at first to be somewhat pedestrian, showing, as it does, two work-shoe-covered feet straddling the gear box of a Challenge windmill. What makes the image memorable, to my acrophobic mind, is that the cameraman (windmill installer B. H. Burdick) is standing at the tiptop of an eighty-foot tower as he points his camera straight down. Another of Burdick's photographs at the site shows three of his crew standing on the completed windmill, one of them precariously perched on the top of the gear-box cover, both hands held high in the air. Good windmill men are obviously impervious to heights, but I could get vertigo just looking at the picture.

The book is filled with remarkable photographs as well as fascinating information. The final chapter, for example, is about windmills in other countries, from Argentina to Australia to Tunisia and Madagascar. Railroad historians will appreciate the chapter on windmills and railroads. Let the book fall open almost anywhere and the variety of situations in which windmills can be found is striking. One winter-time picture from Nebraska, for instance, shows the wheel of a Dempster reaching a dozen feet above the peak of a barn, a snow drift piled up to the hayloft door. On the following page is a Woodmanse mill standing amid palm trees in California. Opposite is a photograph of a Texas preacher standing in a water-filled earthen tank, about to administer total-immersion baptism to a youth as the congregation lines the banks, a wooden windmill tower in the background.

Historians, sociologists, scholars of many different stripes, as well as general readers will find much to enjoy in this book. I recommend it highly.

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