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Review of *Historic Photos of Nebraska* text and captions by Ted Stryker

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One of the salient features of Great Plains Quarterly is its inclusion of an extensive array of illustrations, maps, and photographs along with most articles. These images are meant to enhance their essays and enrich the reader's understanding of their contexts. Occasionally, pictures say so much that one wishes for more photographs and less text. That’s not a weakness of Historic Photos of Nebraska, which contains 192 photographs in its 216 pages.

This is Turner Publishing’s second book focused on the region's photographs; the first was Jeffrey Spencer’s Historic Photos of Omaha (2007). Using images selected from the Boys Town Hall of History, the Denver Public Library, the Library of Congress, the Nebraska State Historical Society, and photos from the collections of Frederick Bandholtz and Solomon D. Butcher, Ted Stryker presents a broad panorama of the visual history of Nebraska from the 1850s to the 1970s: Standing Bear and Buffalo Bill; Kosher butchers and Irish farmers; Willa Cather and Johnny Carson; sod houses and main streets; politicians and tornadoes.

The author states in his preface that “the photographs in this book are just a small window into [Nebraska’s] soul,” so it isn’t surprising that many of them are familiar, particularly the numerous selections from the work of Solomon Butcher, or the inclusion of the usual pictures of William Jennings Bryan, John J. Pershing, and Gerald Ford. But the collection’s greatest contributions are its many images showing ordinary people going about their business. There is the black man during the Great Depression drinking a bottle of beer alongside white customers in an Omaha saloon; clerks in a drugstore from 1904, including the store’s armed guard; a rabbi in an 1880s butcher shop standing next to mounds of ground beef, whole chickens, and Winchester boiled hams. These snapshots from daily life make history breathe.

There is no doubt the book is meant to be a paean to Nebraska history, as evident by the uniformly uncritical captions. The text accompanying the image of African American soldiers dancing at the USO during World War II mentions only that the war ended with the dropping of the atomic bomb, and not the obvious segregation faced by these warriors in the service and when they returned home. An early photograph of a Lakota family includes the note that they have “adopted the clothing and means of transport introduced by settlers” as if that was their choice and not something imposed upon them by the conquerors. Although the critical voice is not appropriate in all instances, we end up with a skewed perspective of Nebraska history when we fail to acknowledge the painful consequences of racial and ethnic encounters.

Except for one instance where the author failed to catch a proofreader’s note in the references ["<<<George Norris no image???>”], researchers will be pleased that Stryker included the image numbers from the various archives, making it easy to find digital images on the web. I expect this collection of photographs to be widely used whenever there’s a need to show and tell some of the important stories of Nebraska.

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