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1987

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# TIME AND VISION IN WRIGHT MORRIS'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEBRASKA

JOANNE JACOBSON

Wright Morris is better known as a writer than as a photographer, but his photographs of Nebraska deserve more attention than they have received. Morris's work in the 1930s never achieved the fame of the Farm Security Administration photographs. And he himself cut short his photographic work of the 1940s when he and his publishers became frustrated with the expense and the aesthetic strain of his early books' photo-text format. But Morris's images of a premodern Nebraska, taken from the 1930s to the early 1950s, form an impressive body of work that is especially acute for its rendering of a world caught between change and changelessness. Morris's photographs deserve serious attention because in identifying this tension they mark a significant stage in

twentieth-century America's imaginative response to the changes set in motion by industrialization and urbanization.<sup>1</sup>

Over the first half of the century, many American writers and artists turned to the preindustrial, preurban Midwest and, in particular, to the question of *time* there, in order to dramatize the problems of coping with cultural change. From the 1890s through the 1920s, these writers and artists developed opposing visions of time in the Midwest. Some, like Frank Lloyd Wright, Willa Cather and, to a lesser extent, Ernest Hemingway, celebrated the Midwest as a stable repository of timeless rural values. Others, like Hamlin Garland, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis, exposed time's toll on a Midwest paralyzed by the shift of national power toward urban industrial centers. In the 1930s, the crises of the Great Depression and the Dustbowl called into question precisely the kinds of promise and order that these visions of "the Midwest" had traditionally provided. Regionalist painters like Grant Wood and photographers of the Farm Security Administration responded by hinting at the tension between these two competing visions of time in the Midwest. But it is in Wright Morris's

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FIG. 1. Barber Shop Utensils and Cabinet, Cahow's Barber Shop, 1942. Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.

photographs from the 1940s that this tension is openly acknowledged for the first time and finally begins to evolve into a creative interchange. More than any of his predecessors, Morris confronted the contradiction between a Midwest that offered protection from time and a Midwest that suffered time's losses, between a Midwest of timelessness and a Midwest of time. In his photographs of Nebraska, Morris was attracted to both of these visions of the Midwest, but he also understood the need to transcend their cultural dualism and to make a claim to "the Midwest," instead, as an arena of creative engagement.

In 1942 and again in 1947 Wright Morris, on Guggenheim Fellowships, left the East Coast, returning with his camera to Norfolk,

Nebraska, where his parents had grown up, to the family farm where his father had sent him periodically in summers as a child. Like the work of Wright, Cather, and Hemingway, Morris's photographs of these journeys back to "the home place" seek in the Midwest a refuge from change. It is the particular province of the camera to evoke a sense of timelessness, for it stops time as it exposes an image on film. But Morris not only halts time's motion in these photographs, he actually confronts and challenges its power.

Morris's photographs of Nebraska attempt, first, to offer protection against time's encroachment. Many of them collect and preserve groups of quotidian objects from a disappearing past. In "Barber Shop Utensils and Cabinet, Cahow's Barber Shop" (fig. 1) of



FIG. 2. J. C. Cram family sod house, Loup County, Nebraska, 1886. *Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.*



FIG. 3. Eggs in Pot, Home Place, 1947. *Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.*

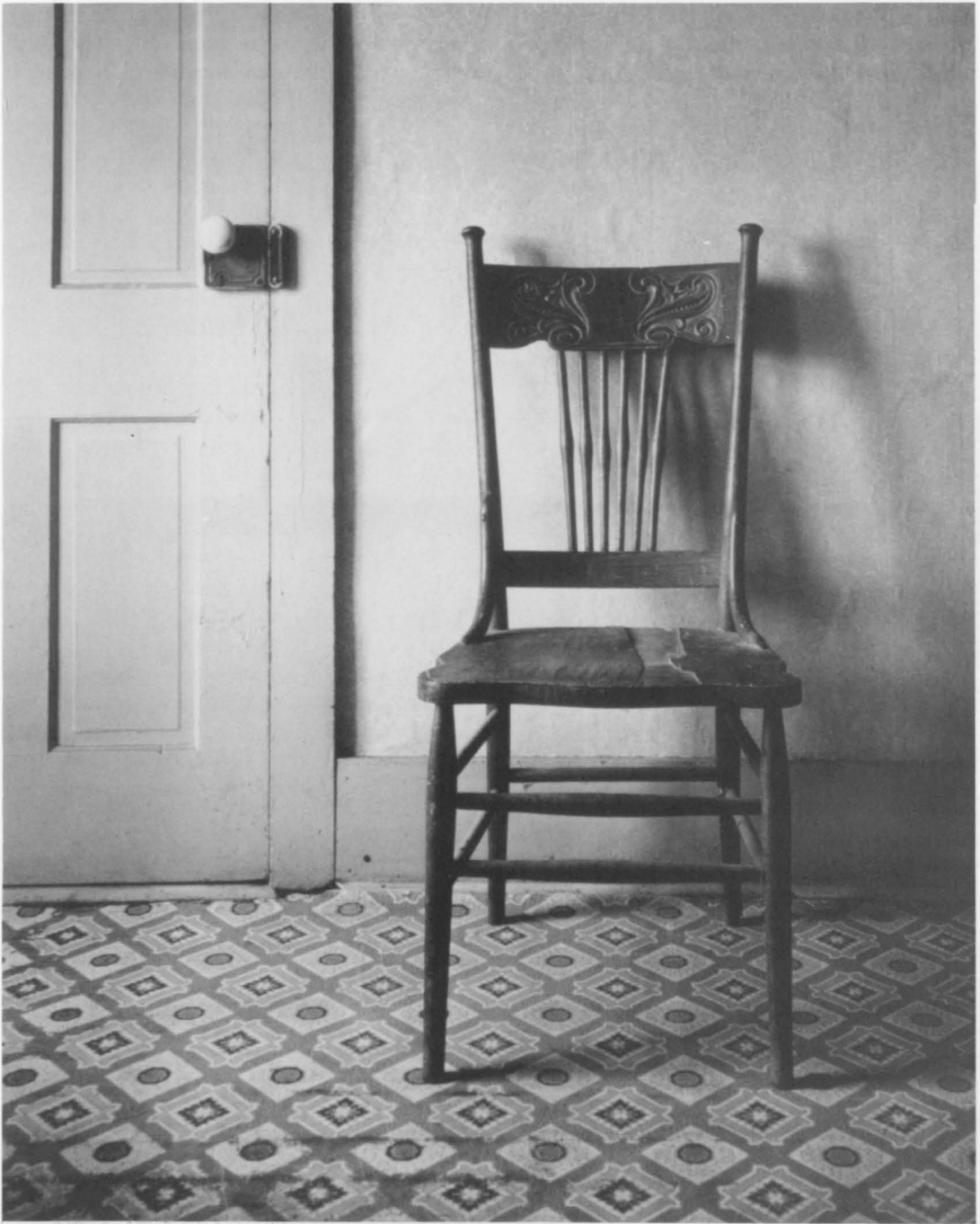


FIG. 4. Straightback Chair, Home Place, 1947. *Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.*

1942, for example, Morris lingers in the light of an open window over a set of old-fashioned shaving brushes laid out on a towel, over apothecary jars and a rough wooden cabinet. The framed photograph of local boosters and the postcards caricaturing life in the West call up early twentieth-century rural midwestern communities' self-consciousness about the establishment of "culture" on the frontier. Throughout Morris's photographs of the home place, he uses details to select and preserve daily elements of a way of life that time is threatening. Examples are an old medical prescription dated "7-23-23" and labeled "one powder after meals" in "Dresser Drawer, Ed's Place"; the enormous cast iron stove in "Kitchen Range, Ed's Place"; and the hand painted mother-of-pearl dish in "Comb on Dresser, Home Place"—all taken in 1947. This use of visual imagery to capture a midwestern reality at the edge of extinction is well established, going back at least as far as George Catlin's rushed series of paintings of threatened Plains Indian tribes in the 1830s. Morris was aware of and sympathetic to the more immediate precedent of Solomon Butcher (see fig. 2), who spent seven years, from 1886 to 1892, photographing the Nebraska sod houses and their inhabitants that otherwise would have left no visible trace.<sup>2</sup> Writing of one of Butcher's photographs—"Solomon Butcher has persuaded this man and his wife to reveal themselves and their holdings, as on the day of judgment, when all would be accountable"—Morris identified the sense of "accountability" to a receding past he shared with Butcher.<sup>3</sup>

Morris's photographs of the home place in Nebraska also offer refuge from time by repossessing a comprehensible, stable, rural world. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, these images employ what Wright called "organic simplicity" to restore the human scale that the city altered for many Americans. "Down erstwhile narrow village lanes one is deep in dark shadows cast by distorted forces," Wright lamented. "Therein lurk the ambitions and frustrations of the human being urbanized out of scale with its own body."<sup>4</sup> In his 1947

"Eggs in Pot, Home Place" (fig. 3), Morris's attentiveness to the nuances of texture, light, and shape, to the smooth curves of the pot and the eggs, to the precise way light strikes one side of these objects and leaves the other in shadow, demonstrates his pleasure in a plainly visible, tactile reality. Morris is drawn to depict the pot because it is worn from daily use in a working environment of clearly defined tasks. No unfamiliar, "distorted" forces interfere with his understanding of that world. At the same time, the image's sharp clarity, the palpability of edge and surface, fixes these objects in space and time. Even the chicken feather's random drift into the purposeful hardness of metal and eggshell underscores Morris's sense of this world's stability, its easy accommodation of transient motion. These images repossess a midwestern world whose essential clarity serves as an anchor against the confusion of change: "What else so instantly confirms our troubled sense of the visible world?" Morris has asked rhetorically of photography. "We need the daily reassurance that it exists."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Morris's photographs attempt to transcend time. In the 1947 "Straightback Chair, Home Place" (fig. 4), a chair and a door occupy space anonymously, superseding the particular uses that chipped and cracked them to become types, *chair* and *door*. The even depth of field denies special emphasis to particular details. No figure or sign of either work or ritual gives this silent scene an explicit human context. Like Cather's Nebraska earth goddess Antonia, these objects become resonating images, larger than human life, that transform time from a process of change to a process of distilling unchanging essences:

Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. In my memory, there was a succession of such images, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the side of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood





FIG. 5. Barber Shop Interior, Cahow's Barber Shop, 1942. Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.



by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes, which we recognize by instinct as universal and true.<sup>6</sup>

In the protective envelope of this photograph's soft light, the motion of the viewer's eye between the balanced halves of the image and over the surface of the doorknob and the carved detail of the chair reaches a poised equilibrium, like the trout that comfort Hemingway's Nick Adams as he leaves behind the war and returns to the woods of northern Michigan at the beginning of "Big Two-Hearted River":

Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Nick holds off the threats of both the past, represented by the disquieting memory of his friend Hopkins, and the future, embodied in the danger of the swamp, Morris disengages these images from the continuum of time, establishing them in an eternal present, where they glow like icons. Similarly, in photographs from earlier trips to the Plains, "Store Fronts, Western Kansas" and "Gano Grain Elevator, Western Kansas" (both taken in 1940), the shimmering harshness of noon light anchors these tentative human facades against the vastness of sky and space, establishing a transcendent state of equilibrium: "It speaks to me," Morris wrote later of the image of the elevator, "like an icon of the tensions that are overwhelmed by the scale of the landscape and seek release in flight."<sup>8</sup>

Thus many of Morris's images use "the Midwest" to resist the notion that we are obligated to time. They belong to the twentieth-century American imaginative tradition

that has celebrated the rural Midwest as a refuge from change. But other Morris photographs belong to a tradition that has located in the Midwest a stage on which the inexorability of time's demands is dramatized. They stress the importance of living within time rather than moving outside it.

Morris confirms time's presence in rural Nebraska, first, by referring directly to it and insisting on its imperative. In "Barber Shop Interior, Cahow's Barber Shop" (1942, fig. 5), he steps back far enough from the pristine, smooth surfaces of the sink bowl, the bar of soap, and the porcelain mortar and pestle, from the old-fashioned gumball machine and the studded, leather-backed wooden benches to reveal an entire wall lined with calendars. By acknowledging time's passage, Morris questions the validity of transcending the merely human through iconic timelessness. Morris has admitted that the nostalgia to which he and Cather and Hemingway are attracted is ultimately evasive:

[Hemingway's] exile is an instance of maintaining himself in the present, but his fiction generally bears witness to the Michigan woods and the notion that a world without men would be a better world. It is essentially a regressive nostalgic commitment. I have had the same problem, and I am working it out in my own fashion.<sup>9</sup>

It is this "working out" of the problem of time that gives dramatic meaning to the pocket watch among the farrago of objects from the past in "Dresser Drawer, Ed's Place"; to the newspaper on which the smooth, hard silverware in "Drawer with Silverware, Home Place" is evenly laid; and to the clock and the wall calendar in the quiet domestic scene of "Living Room, Ed's Place." In all three 1947 photographs, Morris challenges the tempting safety of timelessness.

Morris's photographs also confirm the power of time by insisting on the futility of evading it. If Morris inherited Frank Lloyd Wright's Jeffersonian attraction to a stable set



FIG. 6. Ed's Place, near Norfolk, Nebraska, 1947. Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.



FIG. 7. Visit the Lyric Tonite, Central City, Nebraska, 1947. Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.

of agrarian values, he also inherited Hamlin Garland's confrontation, very much in the realistic frontier tradition, of the disjunction between a fixed version of the past and a changing midwestern present. In Garland's "Up the Coulee," Howard McLane returns from New York to the Wisconsin farm that he remembers as "vigorous, youthful and prosperous" and finds the poverty and uncertainty brought on by the agricultural crises of 1890, by drought, depression, farm mechanization, and the loss of local financial autonomy. McLane quickly discovers the irrelevance of his idealized memories of a midwestern past: "He thought of the infinite tragedy of these lives which the world loves to call 'peaceful and pastoral.' His mind went out in the aim to help them. What could he do to make life better worth living? Nothing."<sup>10</sup>

Like Howard McLane, Morris discovers on returning to the rural Midwest that stopped time is distorted time. In the 1947 "Ed's Place, near Norfolk, Nebraska" (fig. 6), Morris assembles and preserves another collection of rural midwestern objects threatened with extinction: an old gas lamp, a glass medicine jar stopped with a cork, a dated letter, lace curtains against flocked wallpaper. But already time has laid claim to these objects from the past. The lamp is blackened, the curtains are riddled with holes, the light seems to be darkening objects out of sight rather than enveloping them protectively. The order of the world that gave these objects meaning seems compromised into an abandoned jumble; they now seem lived rather than living. Although he was sympathetic to the saving impulse behind Solomon Butcher's images, Morris also saw how they dramatized the same encroachment of time that they resisted:

They [the objects and people in Butcher's photographs] are all displaced in time and space in a way that seems bizarre and unalterable, as if unloaded on this spot from a covered wagon that has proceeded westward. . . . The timely and the timeless are out of phase, ticking in the random manner

of clocks in a clock store. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the comb in "Comb on Dresser" (1947) is missing so many teeth that it is obviously useless. A young child's portrait is discoloring with age, "out of phase," in "Bedroom with Portrait, Home Place" (1947). The bleak "Abandoned Farm, Western Nebraska" (1941) tells the post-Depression story of loss that the hopeless struggles of Garland's farmers foretold fifty years earlier. What Morris describes as "my interest in the old, the worn and the worn out, the declined, the time-ravaged, the eroded and blighted, the used, abused and abandoned" is rooted in his deep feeling not only for the timelessness that holds off erosion but, equally, for the inescapable eroding power of time.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Morris confirms time's demands by dramatizing them as a source of tension. His 1947 "Visit the Lyric Tonite" (fig. 7) ironically exploits the contrast between a still boldly lettered invitation to a local opera house, its vernacular spelling intact, and its rusted-out mounting, overgrown with weeds and surrounded by trash. Yesterday's "lyric" eagerness becomes an uncomfortable silence in today's unforgiving light. No reviving source of life appears in the picture frame. During the period immediately following World War I, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* located the same fatal stillness in small midwestern towns. Left behind by urbanization, these towns turned silently inward. Their failure to enter a changing present is symbolized by their repression of passion. In Anderson's *Winesburg*, Wing Biddlebaum's hands constantly fly out of control, "like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird," exposing his inability either to confront the failed dreams of his past or to locate in the present a satisfying outlet for his feelings.<sup>13</sup> In Lewis's *Gopher Prairie*, the local schoolteacher Vida Sherwin publicly holds off the threat of sex—"With spurious cheerfulness she announced everywhere, 'I guess I'm a born spinster'"—while secretly nurturing fantasies about the local doctor who once "put his arm

carelessly about her shoulder."<sup>14</sup> In both Winesburg and Gopher Prairie, the reader feels a building sense of anxiety, a sense of unrelieved pressure and of impending loss, which characters can escape only by leaving town. The empty barber chairs in Morris's "Barber Shop, Weeping Water, Nebraska" (1947) and "Barber's Chair, Cahow's Barber Shop, Chapman, Nebraska" (1942), with fresh towels draped in hollow readiness over their arms, have the same tense edge of passive anticipation. Just as the recent metal structures in "Visit the Lyric Tonite" juxtapose change against stasis, the crowded shelves behind the barber chairs juxtapose activity against vacancy. The hovering tension in all these images grows from a failure to engage the present directly.

Morris's photographs of Nebraska belong, then, as much to the twentieth-century American tradition that has used the rural Midwest to dramatize time's imperative as to the tradition that has used the rural Midwest to retreat from time. Revealing the disjunction and loss of vitality latent in the impulse to deny time, many of Morris's photographs posit an unchanging Midwest as a warning rather than as a refuge, as a challenge to his own assumptions about time.

Ultimately, Wright Morris's photographs draw their power from the openness with which they acknowledge his ambivalence toward a timeless Midwest. The problem of time in rural Nebraska becomes for Morris an invitation to creative engagement: image-making offers him the opportunity to examine his own vision of "the Midwest" and the needs which that vision feeds. Thus photography offers Morris a way to enter time rather than a choice between holding off or exposing time's losses.

Morris's photographs claim this active role, first, by asserting the centrality of the problem of vision. In many of Morris's images, the process of looking at a scene overtakes the actual scene as the narrative center. In "Through the Lace Curtain, Home Place"

(1947, fig. 8), the camera focuses on the curtain "through" which an armchair, a hazy seated figure, and a doorway are visible. The viewer's struggle to see that scene echoes the problem of the photographer. It is, in fact, the problematic nature of sight with which this image is concerned. Similarly, in "Reflection in Oval Mirror, Home Place" (1947), the distortion created by inconsistencies in the mirror's surface and by the etched pattern around the mirror's edge forces the viewer to approach the process of sorting out a proliferation of images as a problem, complicated by the flowered wallpaper surrounding the mirror and by the family photographs reflected in it. Significantly, Morris uses a passage from Henry James's *The American Scene* as the epigraph for *The Home Place*:

To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically minded—over and beyond an inherent love of the general many-colored picture of things—is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and detached as to be moved to a report of the matter.

Alan Trachtenberg rightly sees this reference as an expression of Morris's commitment to the centrality of human perception: for both James and Morris, "attention is the way we make our experiences vibrant with meaning."<sup>15</sup> By setting up his images through curtains and mirrors, and through windows, as in "Screened Window with Curtains, Home Place" (1947), and through doors, as in "Rock-er, Home Place" (1947), Morris calls attention to the act of looking. In each of these photographs Morris pushes beyond the choice between making timeless icons and exposing time's toll and insists on the human importance of struggling visually with a "Midwest" that suggests both these alternatives.



FIG. 8. Through the Lace Curtain, Home Place, 1947. *Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.*

In keeping with this imperative, Morris actively engages time by asserting the priority of his own creative need. Morris has acknowledged how fully Nebraska became for him in his work what he made it, what he asked it to be: "What if I should tell you that my barren plains, the inhabitants included, are largely a product of my imagination? They arise out of my *need* rather than my experience."<sup>16</sup> The final image of *The Home Place*, the 1947 "Uncle Harry, Home Place, Norfolk, Nebraska" (fig. 9) depicts the uncle to whose Nebraska farm Morris returned, poised at the dark threshold of a barn. As tenaciously as the bright sunlight fixes the crisp detail of the weather-worn boards of the barn wall and the matted straw on the ground, Morris is trying to hold onto "the old man" who never responded directly to his bids for affection—but his uncle's back is turned and his leg is already disappearing in the shadow of the doorway. Describing his fiction, Morris could as easily be describing this photograph: "It is emotion that generates image-making: it is emotion that processes memory. . . . First we make these images to see clearly: then we see clearly only what we have made."<sup>17</sup> In this image, the photographer recognizes his own emotional need for something that he expects "the Midwest" to provide. Similarly, by not cropping his shadow out of the final print of "Model T with California Top, Ed's Place" (1947), Morris makes the recording photographer as fully a part of the photograph's story as the aging car standing impassively at the center of the image.

Morris's immediate visual predecessors of the 1930s, the regionalist painters and the Farm Security Administration photographers, had invited a newly subtle interplay between the two competing traditions of time in the Midwest. Grant Wood's 1936 "Spring Turning" (fig. 10), for example, denies the harsh present of depression-era farming by reducing the Iowa landscape to pristine, fertile waves of lush brown and green against a bright blue sky and spotlighting a figure behind a horse-drawn plow; but, at the same time, the openness of Wood's stylization acknowledges his distortion

of time. Similarly, the subject's gaunt face in Russell Lee's 1938 "Former Sharecropper, New Madrid, Missouri" (fig. 11) simultaneously exposes the pressures of time on the ordinary survivor of the Dustbowl and claims a dignified, erect pose which transcends those pressures. Morris inherited Wood's and the FSA photographers' hesitation between a timeless ideology and a timely realism.<sup>18</sup> But he also went a step beyond their ambivalence and engaged an open dialogue that spoke for the priority of the image-maker's creative presence. It is telling that Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA Photography Unit, rejected Morris's application to the Unit. When Morris brought his work to Washington, "Mr. Stryker looked at my photographs with keen interest, but without enthusiasm. What did I think I was doing? Where, in God's name, were the people? . . . Was I lacking in compassion?"<sup>19</sup> Stryker refused to accept in Morris's work the photographer's refusal either to bear "compassionate" witness to a suffering present or to restore threatened values. As Stryker realized, "the people" were missing from Morris's photographs because the real protagonist in his images was the photographer.

Yet in insisting so narrowly on the province of social responsibility as the depiction of human crisis, Stryker missed the deeply cultural imperative of Morris's images. Morris's creative struggle with the problem of time in Nebraska very much belongs to an America struggling in the 1930s and 1940s with a paralyzing sense of vulnerability and isolation, with a loss of confidence in community and direction, and, finally, in human power. To move beyond the conflict between past and present by dramatizing the creative process itself was for Morris to confirm the possibility of maintaining under pressure a special vitalizing power:

Only at a certain point am I concerned with a holding action. You remember the Beckett quotation in the front of *God's Country and My People* [Morris's 1968 photo-text volume]: "From things about to disappear I



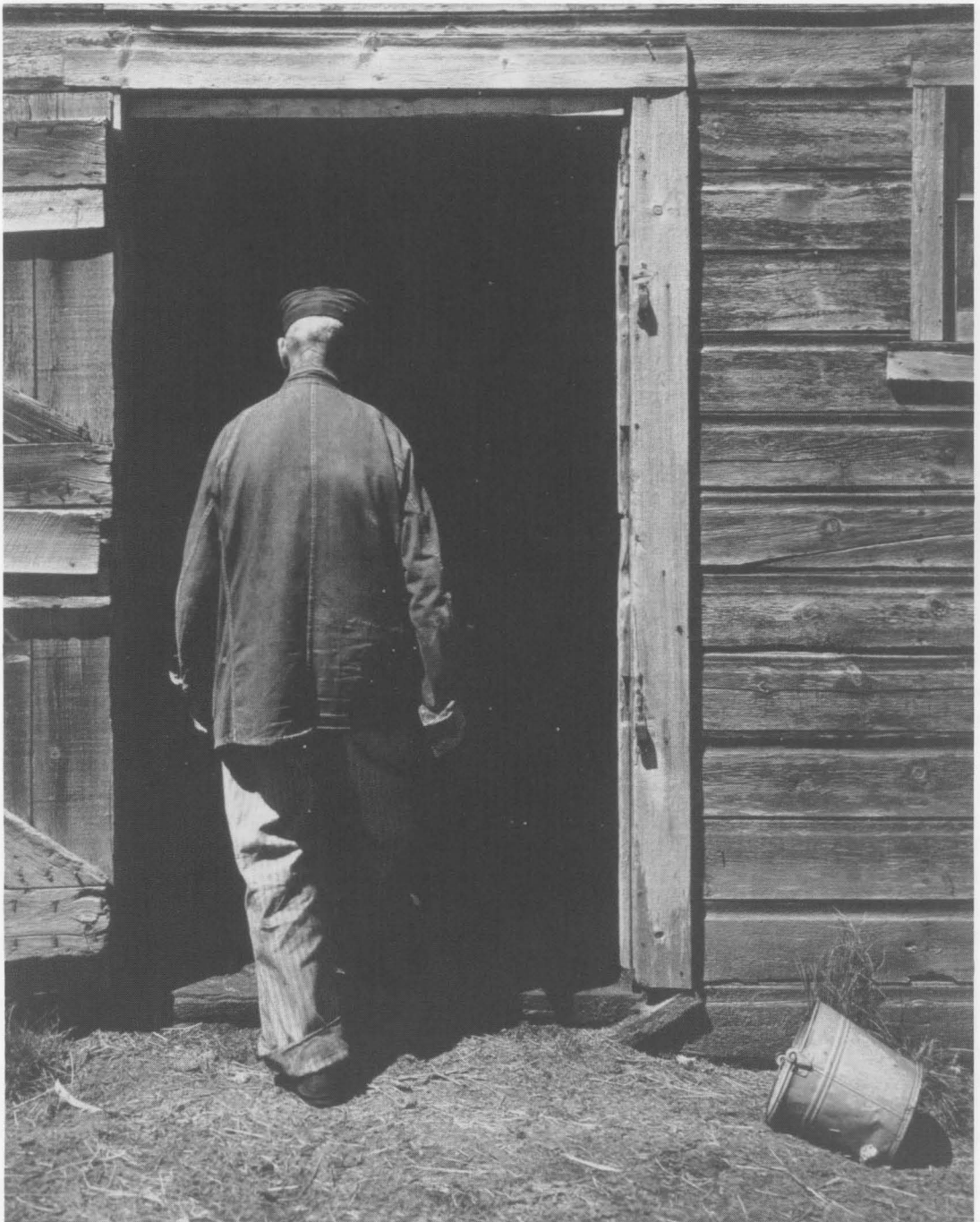


FIG. 9. Uncle Harry, Home Place, Norfolk, Nebraska, 1947. *Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography.*

turn away in time. To watch them out of sight, no, I can't do it." That speaks deeply to me. Very deeply. . . . But there is something different too. . . . I think it is like the replanting of crops. . . . It is an absolute necessity for the mind, like the hands, to replace what is wearing out, to replace the cost of living.<sup>22</sup>

In Morris's 1947 "School Outhouse and Backstop, Nebraska" (fig. 12), a sturdy, compact icon from Nebraska's premodern past appears behind a flimsy frame thrown up more recently on a playing field. Time seems ambiguous in this image. On one hand, against the motionless, plain blocks of the sky and the land, these two human structures simply echo the timeless, still forms fixed by the bright sun. On the other hand, the contrasts between past and present, work and leisure, between the pristine rectangular shapes and the ragged holes in the wire mesh, mark time's passage. The backstop itself ambiguously combines old-fashioned, hand-hewn log construction and modern chicken wire of obviously mechanical production. But this ambiguity is given more

precise meaning by the photographer's ordering presence. The photograph calls unmistakable attention to visual conventions. From the edge of the photograph to the backstop, to the outhouse walls and, finally, to the doorway, this image forms a series of narrowing frames within frames. A grid is marked by the horizon line and the central vertical wire dividing the backstop, by the horizontal and vertical lines of the outhouse's shingles, molding, and clapboards, and is locked into place by the contrasting diagonal movement of the electrical wire. If this photograph's self-conscious subject is photography, it testifies to how fully Morris's photographs claimed "the Midwest" as an arena within which he tested his own ability to respond creatively to a changing world. Like Henry James, Morris came to accept his own vision, his art, as the medium and the mark of his active participation in that world:

On my return from Europe, and before I had written a line of fiction, I found myself evoking in words these epiphanal images from my boyhood, those objects and places,



FIG. 10. Grant Wood, *Spring Turning*, 1936. Private Collection, Courtesy of James Maroney, New York.

coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it. In terms of what was given, I have been destined to be such a participant.<sup>22</sup>

"We make it new, but we do not love what we make," Morris complained in a 1975 interview, mourning America's failure to make a committed imaginative investment in the present.<sup>22</sup> Morris was drawn both to Nick Carraway's return to the remembered clarity of "my Middle West" at the end of *The Great Gatsby* and to the loss of the Midwest—and the America—of possibility that Jay Gatsby's death dramatized. But Fitzgerald's ambivalence between Carraway's "interior brakes" and Gatsby's romantic faith held off a satisfying creative commitment, leaving the end of the novel in a state of limbo between looking forward with hope and looking backward with disappointment:

For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, by openly confronting his own sense of loss and need, Morris was able actively to engage a changing present and to restore to himself the same empowering "wonder" whose loss Fitzgerald had failed to reclaim from time:

We might guess that the artist's talent increased his self-awareness, his sense of uniqueness, distinguishing him from other creatures, this in turn burdening his soul with the enlargement of his sense of wonder. The caves at Lescaux, as well as those near Hannibal, Missouri, in the bluffs along the river, provided refuge for dreamers and image-makers, inscrutably motivated to be more fully conscious.<sup>24</sup>

Wright Morris's decision to give up profes-

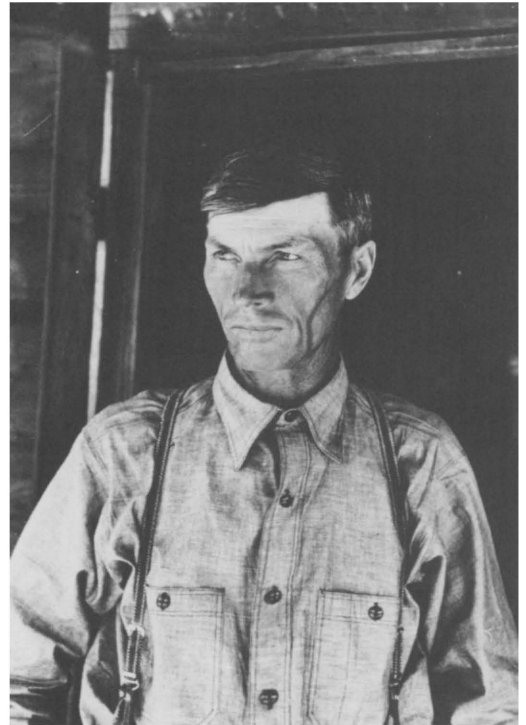


FIG. 11. *Russell Lee, Former Sharecropper, New Madrid, Missouri, 1938. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

sional photography in the early 1950s cut short a promising career. But his photographs of Nebraska had already made a substantial contribution. Most midwestern writers and artists, including Morris himself, left the Midwest for the East and West Coasts and for Europe, and returned to it in their work as expatriates. The polarization of their views of time in that "Midwest" suggests the deliberate way in which they made the place serve them in response to their discomfort with change felt outside it.<sup>25</sup> Morris's achievement was to engage both that discomfort and that "Midwest" in a more "fully conscious" way, to recognize his own task as one of moving beyond loss, of making the present dynamic. In this achievement, Morris took up his own cultural challenge: his images, as well as his words, testify to how fully he loved what he made.

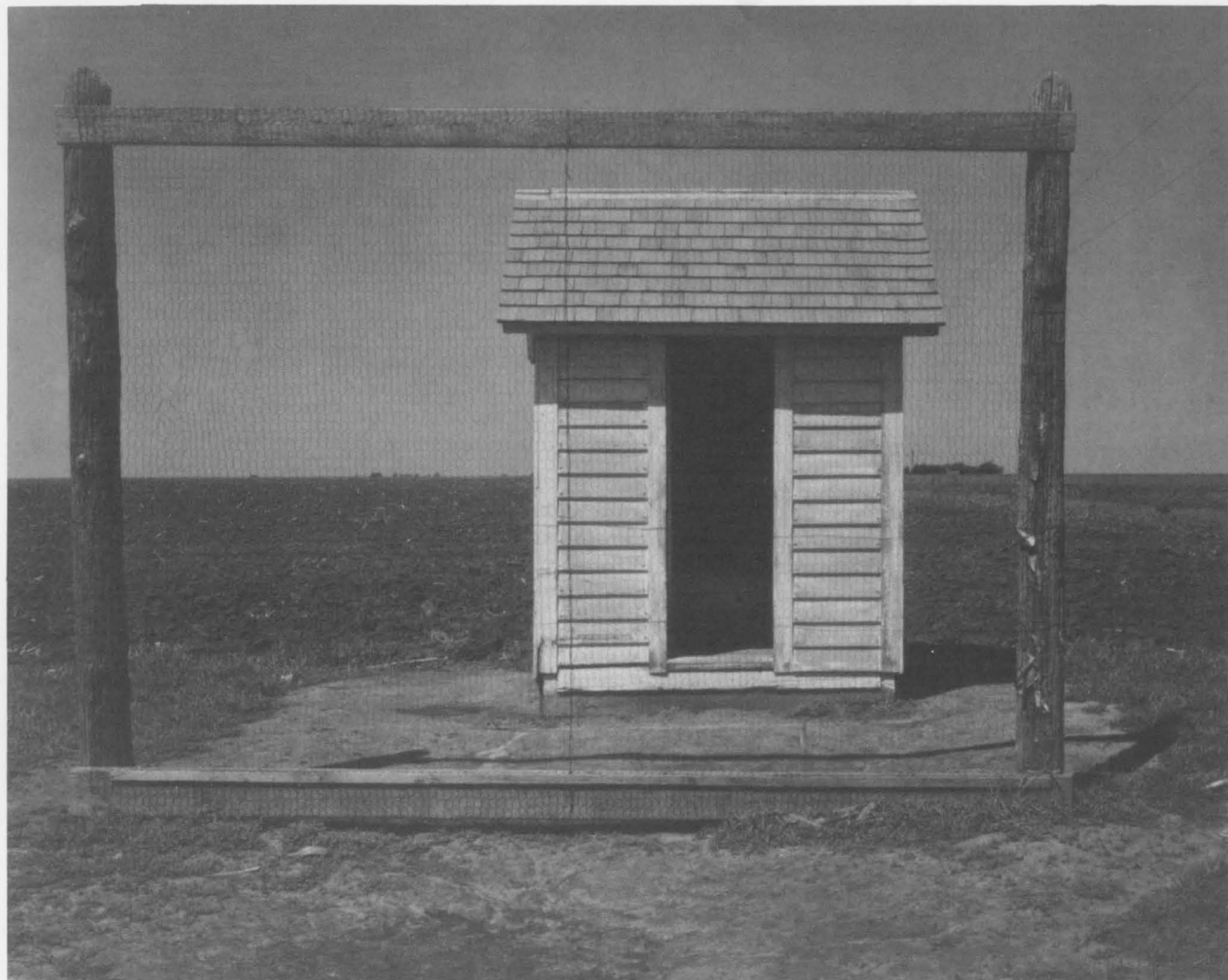


FIG. 12. School Outhouse and Backstop, Nebraska, 1947. *Courtesy of Wright Morris and The Friends of Photography*

## NOTES

I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for supporting my work on this project during the summer of 1985.

1. Although much of Morris's fiction is concerned with the same issues, this essay will deal only with Morris's photographs, which have received much less attention from critics.

2. See John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

3. Wright Morris, "Time Pieces," *New York Times Magazine* 132 (7 November 1982): 10.

4. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Prairie Architecture" and "The City," in *Writings and Buildings*, ed. by Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), pp. 47, 259.

5. Wright Morris, "Origins: Reflections on Emotion, Memory, and Imagination," in *Conversations with Wright Morris: Critical Views and Responses*, ed. by Robert E. Knoll (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 164.

6. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. 352-53.

7. Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River," in *The Nick Adams Stories*, ed. by Philip Young (New York: Scribner's, 1972), p. 177.

8. Wright Morris, "Photography in My Life," in *Photographs and Words*, ed. by James Alinder (Carmel, Calif.: The Friends of Photography, 1982), p. 33.

9. Sam Bleufarb, "Point of View: An Interview with Wright Morris, July 1958," *Accent* 19 (Winter 1959): 44.

10. Hamlin Garland, "Up the Coulee," in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1962), pp. 54, 88.

11. Morris, "Time Pieces," p. 108.

12. Morris, "Photography in My Life," p. 21.

13. Sherwood Anderson, "Hands," *Winesburg, Ohio* (1920; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 28.

14. Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (1920; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 245-47.

15. Alan Trachtenberg, "The Craft of Vision," *Critique* 4 (Winter 1961-62): 44.

16. Gerald Nemanic and Harry White, "Interview with Wright Morris," *Great Lakes Review* 1 (Winter 1975): 7.

17. Morris, "Origins," pp. 155-56.

18. See G. B. Crump, *The Novels of Wright Morris: A Critical Interpretation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 214-31, for a related discussion of Morris as "The Man in the Middle," between realism and "fabulation."

19. Wright Morris, *A Cloak of Light: Writing My Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 51.

20. "Photography and Reality: A Conversation between Peter C. Bunnell and Wright Morris," *Conversations with Wright Morris*, p. 144.

21. Morris, *A Cloak of Light*, p. 227.

22. Morris, "Photography and Reality," p. 150.

23. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), p. 182.

24. Morris, "Origins," pp. 166-67.

25. See Yi-Fu Tuan, "Rootedness Versus Sense of Place," *Landscape* 24 (1980): 3-8, for a very useful discussion of the distinction between an insider's unself-conscious lack of temporal and spatial perspective versus an outsider's self-conscious, deliberate, reflective perspective.