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## Review of *High Plains Farm* Photographs and text by Paula Chamlee

Bill Ganzel

*Nebraska Public Television*

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*High Plains Farm.* Photographs and text by Paula Chamlee. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. Photographs. 176 pp. \$60.00.

The Great Plains is a unique, difficult landscape, and those who live here have to learn to adapt to it. Paula Chamlee grew up on a farm on the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle near Adrian. She left "less than a month after high school graduation" and became a fine art photographer. Three decades later, she returned to photograph the farm "while my parents are still active." What she has produced is a beautiful book that quietly tells the story of lives lived on the edge of possibility. Yet, for me, the story is incomplete.

If you have traveled at all on the High Plains, you know this farmstead. Chamlee's

parents grew up during the Great Depression and have faced almost perennial droughts since. Since the Ogallala aquifer is too deep to irrigate from, their farm is a menagerie of almost-worn-out equipment and out buildings that haven't known paint for a decade. As Chamlee says, "the credo has always been: 'Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.'" To survive by farming dry land on the High Plains is no small feat.

Chamlee says it was important to photograph her home place while "the extraordinary energy and spirit of their [her parents'] presence fills this home place," but you couldn't tell that from the selection of photographs she presents. Only three of the eighty photos show her parents' faces, two their backs at work, two more their hands. The rest are walls, lumber, rusting equipment, caps hanging on hooks rather than worn on heads. Eight photographs are of old vehicles, and at least ten are of weathered wood. The people—her parents, for heaven's sake—are absolutely silent in the book, almost as if they have moved on already, leaving only relics and heirlooms. The viewer is forced to become an archeologist, to divine the meanings of these people's lives through artifacts alone.

Chamlee's intention is to have her audience react to the photographs as art. In the book's main section, photographs are reproduced individually on each two-page spread. Each photograph is precious. Yet the introduction and extensive "Notes on the Photographs" at the back tell a different story. "I used to drive this 1951 International truck. . . ." Although the notes begin to give the reader a sense of how the artifacts were used, what they mean, my preference would have been for a richer presentation combining words and photographs in the way Wright Morris has done.

Chamlee's work provides evocative details, beautifully photographed and printed. But I was left wanting more of the people themselves. More life.

BILL GANZEL  
Nebraska Public Television