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Wright Morris Photographs

Jane T. Anderson

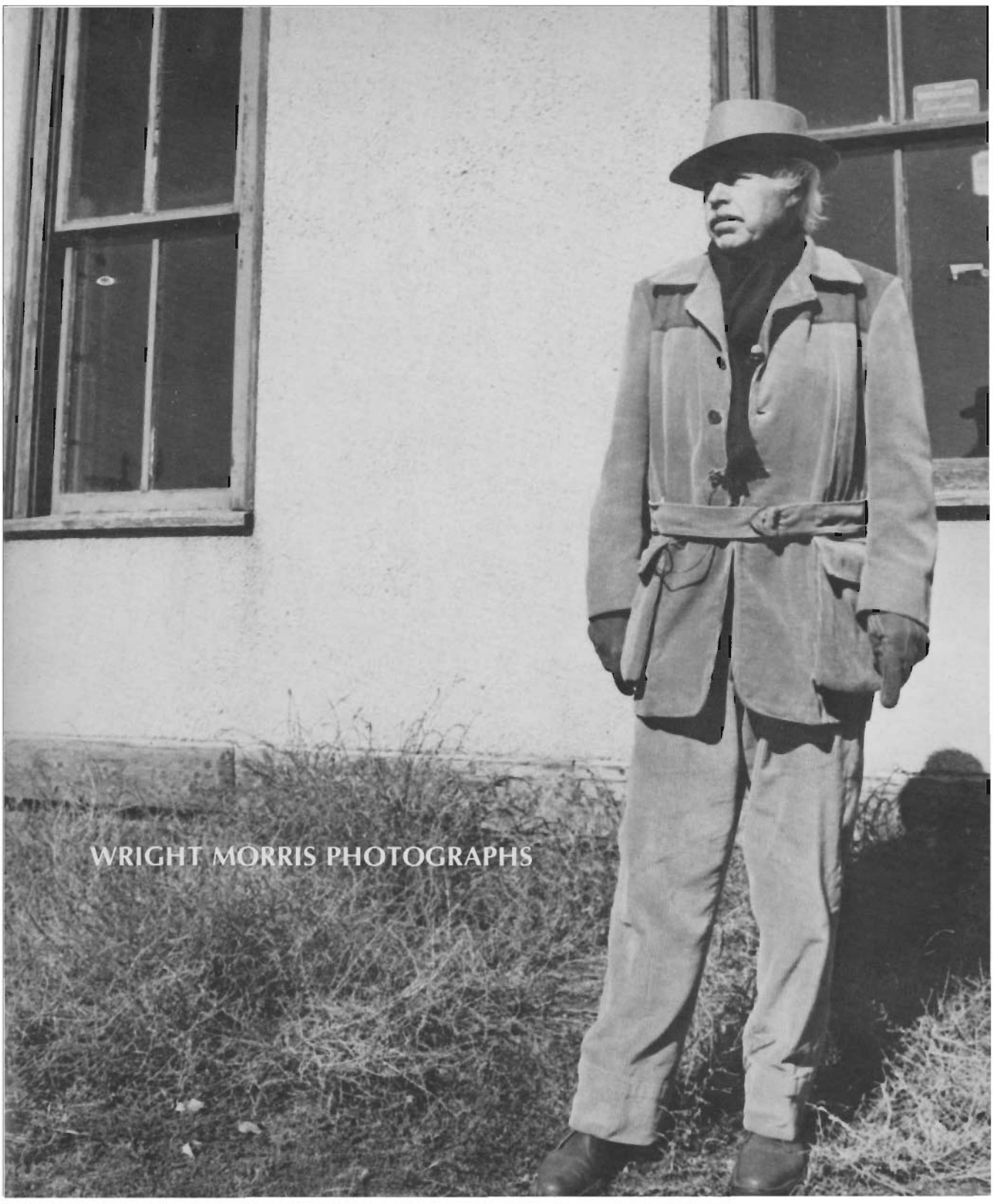
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WRIGHT MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHS

This exhibition is part of the Statewide Traveling Exhibition Program organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Library Commission, the Nebraska Art Association and the local sponsors.

cover: *Wright Morris in Central City*
from television program, “Wright Morris/Repossession”
courtesy of Nebraska Educational Television Council for
Higher Education

back cover: Wright Morris, *Bench in Public Square* Nebraska 1947

WRIGHT MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHS

People do not appear in these photographs by Wright Morris, but they can be seen in the structures they built for living, working and worshiping, in the personal furnishings they collected to comfort their lives, in the pattern of their comings and goings marked by streets and sidewalks.

*"It is my feeling that the absence of people in these photographs enhances their presence in the objects—the structures, the artifacts, even the landscape suggests its appropriate inhabitant."**

These vestiges of their existence tell more about the inhabitants than portrait photographs could. The artifacts in *Eddie Cahow's Barbershop* define Eddie Cahow and the scene *Through the Lace Curtain* identifies the mistress of the Home Place near Norfolk.

*"These are not documents of social relevance: they are portraits of what still persists after social relevance is forgotten."**

Man has left his mark on the landscape with large buildings like houses and churches and with smaller objects like mailboxes, wooden hammocks and public benches. The particular quality of his life is in the weathered wood of *Abandoned Farmhouse with Drifted Snow* and *Church on Rise*, in the old stone of *Marble Facade of Bank* and *Tombstone*; the character of Beaver Crossing is in *View of Main Street* and that of suburban Cleveland in *Sidewalk with Grass*. Mr. Morris says that he was seeking the old things, not from some sentimental nostalgia, but simply because he found them more interesting.

*"It was their pastness that I wanted to salvage. Increasingly the present seems to be that time in which we liquidate the visible past. A less ephemeral one exists within us, and it tirelessly seeks for its likeness. Some will find small shocks of recognition in these photographs."**

It was these aged structures and artifacts through which Wright Morris reestablished old lines of communications with Nebraska. He was born in Central City, Nebraska, in 1910 and lived in the state for fifteen years, but, as he said, he knew little about his past. Morris had been writing and photographing across the United States when he stopped for several days in Chapman. Later visits developed into a book of writings and photographs titled *The Home Place*. A group of these pictures is included in this exhibition along with a large number of others from Nebraska.

In the course of his career he has produced three additional photo-text books, *The Inhabitants*, *God's Country and My People* and *Love Affair: A Venetian Journal*. The last one represents a departure in that the pictures were color snapshots taken, as any tourist might, for his own fireside reminiscence. He found the color dazzling at first, but eventually wearing. He says this is because color makes everything seem important when it is not, and this is probably why serious artist-photographers prefer black and white.

Mr. Morris was actually pursuing two careers and the time came when he had to make a choice. The physical demands of tramping the landscape laden with equipment and hunching for warmth while waiting for the right light probably assure him now that being an author was the better course. Besides, he wanted to write and had "*found that being a novelist is work for four hands, rather than two.*" He has written fifteen books and has been a highly effective teacher of writing. However, if he has given up the rigors of photographing he has not repudiated his photographer's eye. Visual acuity is characteristic of his novels.

Mr. and Mrs. Morris live in Mill Valley, California, but in 1975 returned to Nebraska, where he served as Visiting Professor for the fall semester at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. This traveling exhibition is a small version, a selected portion, of a large retrospective exhibition of Wright Morris photographs which was shown at the Sheldon Art Gallery in 1975.

*All quotations are statements made by Wright Morris in the exhibition catalog, *WRIGHT MORRIS STRUCTURES AND ARTIFACTS PHOTOGRAPHS 1933–1954*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to James Alinder who skillfully printed the photographs from Mr. Morris' negatives, to Ruthanna Russel, Information Director Nebraska ETV Network, who kindly provided the photograph of Mr. Morris, to David Werner who devised special hangers and prepared the exhibition for traveling and to the Gallery Staff who assisted in numerous ways. I am particularly grateful to Wright Morris who came to the Gallery often and shared his philosophy and experiences as an artist in informal conversations while he was in Lincoln.

JANE T. ANDERSON
Director of Extension Services

WRIGHT MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHS

1. *Porch with Torn Screen* Nebraska 1940
2. *Rural Landscape with Mailbox* Nebraska 1940
3. *Abandoned House, Boarded Windows* Western Nebraska 1940
4. *House with Dead Tree* Culpeper, Virginia 1940
5. *Abandoned Farmhouse with Drifted Snow* Nebraska 1941
6. *Church on Rise* Near Seward, Nebraska 1941
7. *House with Picket Fence* Virginia City, Nevada 1941
8. *Road South out of Platte Valley* Nebraska 1942
9. *Log Wall* Rural Ohio 1942
10. *Sidewalk with Grass* Suburban Cleveland 1942
- * 11. *Bench in Public Square* Nebraska 1947
12. *Marble Facade of Bank* Nebraska 1947
13. *Trampled Grass* Nebraska 1947
14. *View of Main Street* Beaver Crossing, Nebraska 1947
15. *Eddie Cahow's Barbershop* Chapman, Nebraska 1947
16. *Tombstone* Near Lincoln, Nebraska 1947
17. *Corn Crib with Cobs at Window* The Home Place near Norfolk, Nebraska 1947
18. *Dresser Top and Mirror* The Home Place near Norfolk, Nebraska 1947
19. *Plant and Plank* The Home Place near Norfolk, Nebraska 1947
20. *Tumbleweeds in Water Tank* The Home Place near Norfolk, Nebraska 1947
21. *Through the Lace Curtain* The Home Place near Norfolk, Nebraska 1947
22. *Duplex* Omaha, Nebraska 1947
23. *Mansion* Southern Ohio 1947
24. *Bureau and Mirror* Southern Indiana 1950
25. *Wooden Hammock made of Barrel Staves* Southern Indiana 1950

* Illustrated

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

1976

August 27–September 24

Holdrege Public Library
Holdrege, Nebraska

September 27–October 28

Link Library, Concordia College
Seward, Nebraska

October 30–December 3

Keene Memorial Library
Fremont, Nebraska

1977

January 15–February 11

Bellevue Public Library
Bellevue, Nebraska

February 21–March 18

Kearney Public Library
Kearney, Nebraska

March 19–April 15

Edith Abbott Memorial Library
Grand Island, Nebraska

April 23–May 19

North Platte Public Library
North Platte, Nebraska

May 23–June 16

Valentine Public Library
Valentine, Nebraska

June 20–July 14

McCook Public Library
McCook, Nebraska

July 16–August 12

Imperial Public Library
Imperial, Nebraska

This exhibition is made possible with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council. Originally established in 1965, and revised in 1973, by the Nebraska Legislature, the Council provides support for a wide variety of programs and services in the performing, visual and literary arts, available to community groups and organizations throughout the State. For further information on how this agency can contribute to the cultural growth of your community, write to: Nebraska Arts Council, 8448 West Center Road, Omaha, Nebraska, 68124.

