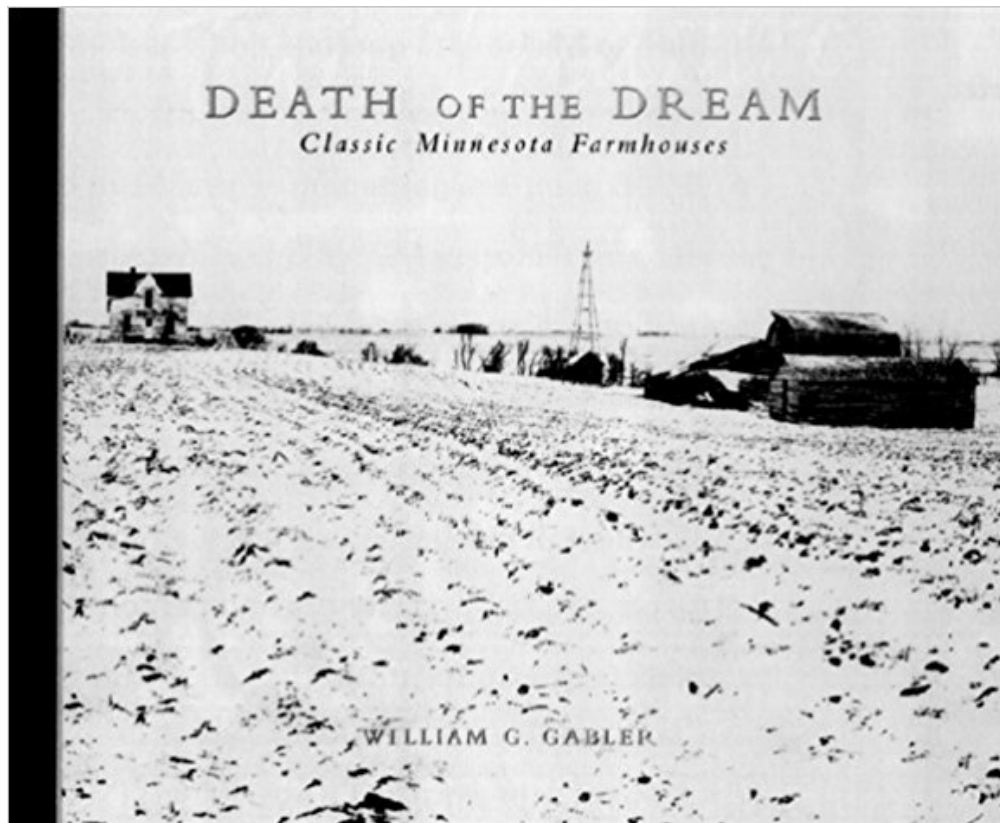




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Death Of The Dream: Farmhouses In The Heartland



Synopsis

The industrialization of America economy between 1862 and 1893 provided pioneer farm families with the means to realize their dream on the Minnesota prairie. At the same time that complex machinery and railroad transportation became affordable, the United States government made available millions of acres of free land, which attracted thousands of European immigrants to the American Midwest. The way of life of these first industrialized farmers gave the nation much of its economic might and many of its characteristic values. It also fostered a distinctive wave of Victorian-era architecture. The concept of the so-called L-house evolved out of hard experience on the land rather than from philosophical musing on the drawing board. The classic farmhouse was a structural species evolved through adaptation to a specific set of economic circumstances. Now the last of these original farmhouses are disappearing. Many of them have been left standing open, neither locked nor boarded up. Once a house is abandoned, it becomes subject to damp and decay, which removed the paint, wallpaper, and plaster. Air and light and heat enter through broken windows and rotted roof to dry and bleach the boards. Cleaned to the bones, the house becomes stark and silent, belying the color and variety of the life that went on within it. How these classic farmhouses looked outside and inside, how they fit into their farmsteads, and how they sometimes evolved from small simple shapes into large compound structures as the families prospered is detailed in "Death of a Dream." Some of William Gabler's stunning photographs are composed of a dozen or more negatives taken from varying positions to better illustrate the many aspects of his subjects.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

William Gabler's artful, evocative photographs of Minnesota farmhouses amply illustrate the story of their rise and fall detailed in the introduction text and comprehensive captions. Wheat production stimulated the invention and use of complex machinery developed during the industrial revolution in the United States. This fact, coupled with the availability of inexpensive farmland, drew thousands of European immigrants to Minnesota. In 1883 Minnesota was the country's chief wheat-producing state and Minneapolis was the worldwide capital of flour-milling. Minnesota farmhouses are often termed Victorian with Gothic influences, but in fact they enjoy a style distinct from English architecture built in the time of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). The Minnesota homestead had qualities particularly adapted to the Midwestern prairie and differed from the European framing model in which farmers lived in the village and walked to work in the fields. American homesteaders preferred the more isolated, but in other ways satisfying, prospect of living on their own land. Typical farmhouses were sited on a low rise to provide efficient water drainage and proper air circulation. Their basic outline was an L-shape that could be expanded as necessary. Barns, situated diagonally across the barnyard from the farmhouse, were typically made of wood planks and featured gambrel roofs. Farmsteads included front yards, back yards, and various outbuildings. Gabler describes and illustrates the areas of the farmstead, the construction of its buildings, and the layouts of farmhouse rooms. He notes that, "Such beauty as they possess resulted from practical necessity and not from an imposed aesthetic philosophy." However, as the photographs in this volume demonstrate, it is nonetheless beauty, made more poignant by the gradual disappearance of these prairie homes. -- From Independent Publisher

Death of the Dream is beautifully done - the photography and the music are so appropriate to the subject matter. This is well worth seeing by anyone who loves mid-west history.

highly recommended

gave as a gift and it was well received

I could hardly believe finding this book, as I have spent many an hour driving through the countryside and looking at the forgotten old houses - and better still, I am from Big Stone County. I'd give much to know just where that little family cemetery shown on the last page is located. Last summer my sister drove from Kansas and I from Washington and met up back "home" in Big Stone

County. An aunt and uncle took us around to several little country cemeteries where we have great-great grandparents buried. We did visit the Prior Township house our dad grew up in - now deserted and looking very much like the interiors of the houses in the book. We reminisced about stories our dad had told us about all eight boys sleeping in the big low-ceilinged bedroom upstairs where Grandpa sometimes stored his seed corn and the little shed that the boys would slide off into piles of snow and get scolded for. The black and white photos are beautiful and heartbreaking - the houses, the graves, the desolate snow-covered fields. I should think that anyone from the prairie who enjoys history would really enjoy this book.

good book

This is an amazing book about the old farmhouses! The book specifically focuses on the houses in Minnesota, but anyone who wants to know about farmhouses will love this book! I live in an old house in Michigan, and many of the descriptions fit my house to a "T!" I have learned a lot, and I am thrilled to death with this book!

Published by Afton Historical Society Press, Afton, Minnesota, *Death of the Dream* is beautifully illustrated with photos of old Heartland balloon frame farmhouses, mostly from Cottonwood County, Minnesota. Bill Gabler, the author and photographer, tells in great detail the history of these simple, frame structures that were the predominant style of homes in early farming communities in the Heartland. Gabler is an excellent story-teller and photographer. Through his photos and narrative, he also chronicles the lives of the farm families who built and lived in these simple, unpretentious farm homes. By telling of the disappearance of these farmhouses in the Heartland, Gabler also tells the story of the disappearing family farms. This is an excellent historical accounting of an aspect of Americana that is fast disappearing. The book has also been made into a public television (KTCA-TV St. Paul, Minnesota) documentary by the same title. The only fault I found with the book is that individual people and their personal stories are absent from both the photos and the history. The documentary, however, includes both of these.

How alive they were in their picture. *Death of the Dream* frontispieces its title page with a photo taken when the houses it chronicles were as alive as the faces in the picture. It is well-preserved, showing a family of eight seated at a linen-covered table (lace or embroidery beyond either their means or self-identity), half-curtains on the window above, one man the only person to gaze into the

camera (the patriarch, surely, though he looks middle-aged); the others in reflective downward gaze as though having just returned from a burial. Women, their hair up in buns or braids, wearing dresses collared to the neckline, skirts to the floor. Above them a framed family photo and clock on the wall (catalog-bought, no doubt, whose ornate carving seems incongruous given the tablecloth). Only cups and saucers are on the table; it must have been tea time. The tiny symbols of the good life in those days are not many, but abundant-the pitcher of milk and honey in a jar, lamp in the center, side dishes, salt, the pooch snoozing contentedly under the table. It is the beautiful young woman on the left who most grabs the eye-not for her looks but because the picture was taken c. 1890 and her grandchildren's grandchildren's children are among us, perhaps looking at this book. What would she tell them? That a pretty summer sky of peach-hued clouds is also a sky of no law and no mercy? She knew this, said it in the avoidance of her gaze. Prosperity teetered alone on the last edges of the day, and one day during her lifetime the remnants of economy shifted irrevocably out from under the livelihood of the faces in that photo, as it did thousands of others too. The family farm is a factory farm now. Leaving behind . . . what? The fears of the landholding life, the women alone pushing the pram, the humdrums of the hearth, the half a loaf uneaten, the missing shingles on the roof, the walls that need paint, the averted eyes of the friends at church, the grief recurring in husband-is-gone dreams. Then or now? All in a picture. Good, solid, uneventful countryside faces, as plain and hardworking as their shoes. Not the setpiece farms of TV and movies, but of gardens and furrows and drudgework and rain, lived in a prosperity affording perhaps but one portrait in a lifetime. Lives not of comforts or goods or openings at theater, but of the sun and the wind and the dusk and the summer, the indomitable spirit of the Plains, and the immense span of years that was their being then, and will be until the last house in this book is no longer evident a house. Somewhere along the way from that picture to this book, the Plow That Broke The Plains was broken by those plains. William Gabler is as good a tale-teller as he is a photographer, and his text is so informative one can read it several times and still notice things anew. His pictures have an overlit quality that does not come across as overexposure (he's too accomplished a photographer for that) but as his wish to wring the last of the light out of a darkened dream. His pictures are so much more than "pictures." Only in ink upon paper do we see these old buildings defecting remnant by remnant into the wither of time. On the paper of our minds, thanks to Mr. Gabler, we see so much more. He has captured the dismemberment of a culture, the culture of the standalone farming family who fed a country from an annual turn of sod under the annual turn of sky. Simple, seemingly, his photos, seeing that which is invisible but there. That one over there, atop the low roll of hill, there lived Widow X or Widower Y, seeing their lives through to the end on the soil where their lives were

made, wresting from the earth each year's glean not of wheat by the bushel but carrots and radishes and plums by the basket. We see them mirrored in Mr. Gabler's houses, their forlornity, stature much shorter than it once was, back unbent but a hand that trembles. Not a bitter harvest by any reckoning, but an ever-harsher one, yes, that. Once they were content. Once they were spiritually strong, for the vastness of nature under the unceasing sky informed the upright steeple on the horizon where God really lived. But now not. It's self-evident from the fact that these pictures, these houses, exist. Not dying, but dwindling. Losing their rooflines and paint as a dowager loses her strands of hair. Metaphors not of decay but of deconstruction, yielding back to nature the cellulose and pigment and glass and iron which nature once bestowed. We see in them not old wood and window, but ourselves. The economy these plains and these people made possible ran away from them, off to the cities, just as it is running away from us, content under our GOur selves are in Mr. Gabler's pictures, for these empty husks of house are where the culture of consumption is taking us. Not unto death as these provisioners of the past were taken, but into discard, our lives a blister-pak on the trash of the used; all to a failure to partner with the God our souls and religions say we have but our horizons do not confirm. How we wish, like the farmers who built these houses, to elope off with Destiny the Giver, not the Taker, of life's things. Their goods may not have been great. They were.

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