

C. A. Hickman

MORE PEOPLE currently know the appearance of Yosemite Valley and the Grand Canyon from having looked at photographic books than from having been to the places themselves; conservation publishing has defined for most of us the outstanding features of the American wilderness. Unfortunately, by perhaps an inevitable extension, the same spectacular pictures have also been widely accepted as a definition of nature, and the implication has been circulated that what is not wild is not natural. This restrictive interpretation is unintended and demoralizing — a reading that conservationists must now work to correct if their efforts are not to prove counterproductive. Nature photographers particularly need to widen their subject matter if they are to help us find again the affection for life that is the only sure motive for continuing the struggle toward a decent environment.

Consider as a positive example of generous vision the accompanying panoramas of early twentieth-century life on the South Dakota prairie. Views like these remind us of the beauty of the plains — the shapes of trees against the sky, the roll of the land, the richness of grain. If the function of nature photography is to show us nature's loveliness, then

these pictures are successful models of the genre. (A few may object that the photographs are unequally exposed and not everywhere in sharp focus, but to argue technical niceties is beside the point here.)

An obvious question, nonetheless, is whether the pictures, which prominently depict people and what people make, can be seen as inspiring nature pictures. After all, the soil has been broken, the hills are tracked with roads, and cheap buildings have been constructed.

Contrary to popular expectations, many of the best nature pictures — often the truest and finally most reassuring — do contain people and their works. The strength they add to these photographs from the early 1900s, for instance, is fundamental. By depicting human beings, the pictures forcefully record the scale of nature — something we fully understand only when we measure Creation by the size of our bodies and the things they can affect. To see a family in the middle of the prairie allows us to know that the land is a finality, that it will be there longer than human beings or anything they fabricate. In this way, the pictures contribute to wisdom, which in turn gives us a basis for calm. EX-TEXT?

Here, I am not questioning the value of photographs by Ansel Adams (two of whose prints hang in my home) or Eliot Porter. Their pictures of uninhabited nature are important exactly because they reveal the absolute purity of wilderness, a purity we need to know. Attention only to perfection, however, invites eventually for urban viewers — which means most of us — a crippling disgust; our world is in most places far from clean. Photographs that suggest an Arcadian landscape are recognizable from the city dweller's perspective as partial visions, and they make us uneasy. We feel our defenselessness against what we will encounter on the street. How can trees in Sequoia National Park save us from the concrete-and-glass brutalities of New York City? The

answer is, in simple emotional terms at least, that they cannot; to be reminded of the trees makes city streets seem worse.

The extensive publishing of wilderness photographs by conservation organizations began in the mid-1950s, at the time of the struggle to save the canyons in Dinosaur National Monument. I recall the desperation of those who hoped to rescue that wilderness from the Bureau of Reclamation; the first summer my father and I ran the rivers there, in 1953, we were reportedly among fewer than two hundred people that season to do so. How were enough people to be informed of what they were about to lose? Photographs — the more extraordinary the better, because the place itself is so remarkable — were the logical answer.

There are now far fewer unpublicized wilderness areas, and there are relatively few converts, with the exception of children, left to be won to the general idea of wilderness preservation. We have fairly well sorted ourselves out into developers, strict preservationists, and those willing if not pleased to accept a compromise. This leaves photography with a new but not less important job: to reconcile us to half wilderness, to what Walker Percy described in his novel *The Moviegoer* as our common "estate," an inheritance reminiscent of "the pictures in detective magazines of the scene where a crime was committed; a bushy back lot."

Photographers who can teach us to love even vacant lots will do so out of the same sense of wholeness that has inspired the wilderness photographers of the past twenty-five years (the deepest joy possible in wilderness is, most would agree, the mysterious realization of our alliance with it). Beauty, Coleridge wrote, is based in "the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse." In this large sense, beautiful photographs of contemporary America will lead us out into daily life by giving us a new understanding



XXI-XXIII C. A. Hickman, *South Dakota*, ca. 1890

of and tolerance for what previously seemed only anarchic and threatening. }

Walker Percy's description of our estate refers, admittedly, to "the scene where a crime was committed," and he is right to suggest thereby that some vacant lots demand, on our part, a judgment before we can accept the ease of a reconciliation with them. This renders the photographer's experience uncomfortable. I remember discovering, one morning while I was photographing along a Denver freeway, a deer's leg under a guardrail; apparently, a hunter had roped his kill to his car and the leg had been broken away in traffic. The smog, the mangled flesh, and the noise of eight lanes of jammed traffic were terrible, and the picture I took — the last I could bring myself to make that day — was full of the disgust I felt.

I continue to wonder about the wisdom of muckraking; ultimately, all photographs are of nature, a subject only ambiguously ours to judge. Given the facts of where most of us are compelled to live, did I help more by condemning what I saw in that scene than I would have had I tried harder to discover a truth beyond the need for reform? → *What is this?*

Nature photography of even less extreme scenes, but photography that acknowledges what is wrong, is admittedly in some respects hard to bear — it has to encompass our mistakes. Yet in the long run, it is important; in order to endure our age of apocalypse, we have to be reconciled not only to avalanche and earthquake and hurricane, but to ourselves. *It.*

C. A. Hickman, the amateur photographer who made these views in about 1890 (Plates XXI-XXIII), was forthright; he included elements that were by common photographic standards imperfect — a broken-down hay wagon, a quantity of weeds, a woman who shades her face into confusing obscurity. Hickman's inclusiveness pays off, however, with

pictures of significance that help us, a long way from Eden, to endure and even enjoy life. The people stand there virtually in the way; yet, at the same time, they establish the vast dimensions of the pictures and thus reassure us that they and we are not all-important – certainly not powerful enough to cause anyone to despair.

We end with a paradox: in some nature pictures, it is precisely the troublesome, intrusive people who disclose nature's best truths.

These particular pictures are, of course, doubly enjoyable because the people themselves, however disruptive, are likable; they understand what the pictures are about. We can see by the places they choose to pose and the way they situate themselves that they know their size and affirm it. They are content to be remembered feeding the chickens, not the sort of activity recorded by turn-of-the-century captains of technology.

Of all the people in the pictures, it is Hickman himself, who got his shadow in by mistake, that impresses me most. To sweep the lens of a panoramic camera over so much is to rival Whitman. Awe must have induced the photographer to trust in the ultimate beauty of the whole landscape, primordial and man-made; how else would the pictures have been possible, except in the realization that no subject is finally unworthy, unnatural, or unsafe?

The context of this essay
could form a basis for
my solo show?? 6/1/95.
with peaches pretty
heavily here. 108. What kind
of truth is a post-modern
era??