

Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair. By Leslie Prosterman. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. Pp. xi, 220. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$24.95.)

Leslie Prosterman is one of the first authors in a long time to study agricultural fairs at the county level. The only comprehensive study to date of any state's county fairs is a volume from the WPA's American Guide Series entitled *Fairs and Fair Makers in Kentucky* (1942). Most fair research has focused instead on the influence of state and world fairs. In Indiana, for example, the history of the Indiana State Fair and fairground is chronicled in Paul Miner's *Indiana's Best! An Illustrated Celebration of the Indiana State Fairgrounds, 1852–1992* (1992), while a history of county fairs remains to be completed. As Prosterman points out, it is difficult to believe this pervasive community institution has persisted for so long in the United States but captured so little academic attention.

Prosterman's book is based upon interviews with fair participants and event judges at fairs in central and northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although her research data is now somewhat dated, her interest in exploring how community values and individuals interact in the formation of aesthetic taste is not. Understanding the human capacity for individualism or conformity within a range of community values is invariably the object of much research.

The book gives a brief history of fairs and the ways they have been administered, and it discusses premium books as they differentiate classes of entries and the process of judging. Prosterman shows how judging, the evaluative process, provides a means of community and individual communication in reciprocal interaction. She uses the county fair to show how communities reinforce a collective "ideal." According to Prosterman, in the whole structure of county fairs harmony is insisted upon. "The county fair represents a world they would like to exist and highlights rules of conduct, sets of judgment, from which they know they deviate but which reinforce a sense of togetherness in a fractured and strife-ridden world" (p. 12). To celebrate farming as a way of life, fair organizers perpetuate a life idealized, away from pressure to change.

Prosterman's point about reciprocity is a good one, but if there is reciprocity between individuals and the community, it also exists between the community and the strife-ridden world. Fairs do change and have done so in the presence of agricultural stress. Although our society still retains a nostalgic ebullience for the yeoman and agriculture, farm closings and a decline in the number of family farms is the somber contemporary reality. These factors have strongly affected fairs, and with the book's short study period it is difficult to show how much.

Prosterman's work also raises a question about the potential regionality of county fairs. To contrast her findings to fairs in the Midwest, for example, midwestern fairs are focused almost entirely on youth, not adults; they also are almost always funded by public monies, not by private stock corporations. These examples showing difference only stress that there is room for more research on county fairs in the United States. Prosterman's contribution has, as good research should, raised questions for others to consider.

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Barns of the Midwest. Edited by Allen G. Noble and Hubert G. H. Wilhelm. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995. Pp. xi, 295. Figures, illustrations, references, index. Clothbound, \$50.00; paperbound, \$25.00.)

While many books on barns have focused on their inherent beauty, *Barns of the Midwest* chronicles all facets of barn construction, function, heritage, and geographic distribution. Editors Allen G. Noble and Hubert G. H. Wilhelm, both well known in the agricultural history field, have successfully brought together other specialists to compile this scholarly book. Their well-developed insights into and interpretations of barn types, form, function, and history are assembled in numerous chapters.

Barns of the Midwest addresses the tremendous diversity of midwestern barns by examining barns from the early ethnic structures to the newer and larger barns designed for specific purposes. Included are informative chapters on early log-crib, threshing, dairying and tobacco barns. Other chapters take the reader into the intricacies of the modern midwestern barn. Subject matter as diverse as barn extensions and barn decor and preservation is also adequately portrayed. Especially gratifying are the two fine chapters by Lowell Soike, whose grasp of agricultural history, combined with his flair for writing, provide the reader with a sense of living during the time when these structures were being constructed.

Of special interest to Indiana round barn enthusiasts (and to this reviewer) is the excellent chapter on nonorthogonal barns by Keith Sculle and H. Wayne Price. Sculle and Price add to Indiana's round barn history by providing an interesting discussion, combined with never-before-published photos of Indiana round barn builders, Benton Steele and Horace Duncan. But it is not just Indiana's round barns that Sculle and Price portray. They successfully describe Indiana's contribution to the round barn construction that occurred in the Midwest between 1880 and 1920.