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To Look for America

★ *New Haven Photographer David Ottenstein documents a disappearing era*

by Michael Harvey



David Ottenstein "In the field" near Atlantic, Iowa.

PHOTOGRAPH: LaVon Eblen.

The demolition of the Hyperion Theater was the turning point in the work of New Haven photographer David Ottenstein. In 1998 the old downtown concert hall, which in its opulent days had showcased everything from the music of Charles Ives to the Floradora two-act comedy, was collapsing and due to be razed. Architect Richard Turlington asked Ottenstein to record it for posterity.

The roof had crashed through the proscenium arch leaving a spindled web of iron struts. The heavy wedding-cake stucco walls were crumbling onto the seats, exposing raw brick and musty lath, and a threadbare curtain hung torn and limp over a stage where players once sang and danced.

Decay and history. Ottenstein loved it.

As a boy, Ottenstein's dream of becoming a photographer was considered preposterous, although it was something that might be supported by a successful career in law. In 1978 Ottenstein came to Yale as an undergraduate to pursue a degree in American studies and photography. Although still convinced he was bound for law school, he took on growing requests from Yale colleagues for sports photographs, portraits of professors or visitors, and became a photojournalist for the *Yale Daily News*. After graduating the requests kept coming, so he decided to give photography a shot and for many years worked as a commercial photographer.

Following the Hyperion Theater project, Ottenstein began looking for other abandoned buildings. With manufacturing in decline throughout the Northeast, old industrial plants with names like Seymour Wire, Mechanicville Hydro and Harmony Mill caught his attention. Attracted at first by their formal beauty, the great sculptured forms of the old machines, their metal surfaces, stillness and weight seemed to translate perfectly into the subtle tones of black-and-white prints. The enormous steel wheels, the cast-iron doughnut-like forms with bolts the size of a fist, and huge serpentine pipes like those in the English Station Electric Power Plant in Fair Haven are a vivid portrait of the age.

And the buildings themselves have a cold beauty, stripped of all refinement, their steel girders and iron staircases carry a feel of hard muscular work. In time, in the quiet emptiness of these buildings, Ottenstein began to feel the presence of those workers, the ceaseless motion, the hum of the looms, the heat of the furnace, the whirl of the generators and the sweat of human brawn.



'English Station No. 13,' from Ottenstein's series documenting the industrial Northeast.

Like the Hyperion Theater, the Sterling Opera House in Derby offered a lighter side of life, and was in far better shape than its Elm City counterpart. It is easy to visualize eager crowds filling the rows of seats. One image shows the wall beneath the stage where decades of performers, following theatrical tradition, had pasted up their posters: *The Queens of Ballet*, *the Washborne Sisters* and *a Mr. C.A. Sampson* (short haired but heavily moustached) who would obviously astound his audience with feats of physical strength.

Ottenstein records these images with a four-by-five-inch film camera on a tripod, which gives him an extraordinary depth of detail. He then scans his negatives into digital format, which allows him to draw information into a print that is simply not possible by the old darkroom method.

The final prints, usually 16 by 20 inches, are

outputted on an Epsom 4000 ink jet printer, which uses a full color spectrum to create richer shades of black. Ottenstein says they will last as long as a silver gelatin print.

A meticulous man, standing in his spotless studio, Ottenstein is the personification of the craftsman in complete command of his resources. He seems utterly at ease with all the technical calibrations and gadgets in his well-organized equipment bags.

In 2004, after reading an article in the *New York Times* on American agriculture, Ottenstein decided to go to Iowa to see for himself. What he found was a parallel story to the demise of manufacturing in the Northeast. The difficulties of competing giant agriculture conglomerates, plus several seasons of difficult climates, was driving many small farmers out of business. Family farms, homes, barns and silos had been abandoned, left to



nature, or demolished before illegal methamphetamine labs could move in and set up business. The traditional image of the American Heartland based on movies, Garrison Keillor or Grant Wood was rapidly changing.

With the help of a friend, Laura Turlington, he made contact with the Center for Prairie Studies at Grinnell College and through the school was able to get a grant. His mission was to document the changing face of the state as big-box stores and suburban sprawl began to kill off small towns and destroy family businesses. For each of the last three years he has traveled there photographing a passing lifestyle, and the destruction of a landscape which has already lost vast quantities of its fertile loess soil due to environmentally insensitive farming.

'Sterling Opera No. 3' (top) with 'Overgrown Farmhouse' from Ottenstein's Iowa series.



The first startling quality of the Iowa images — even as it is, in a way, the most predictable — is the vastness of the land and the eternity of the sky. It is as if the confines of the photograph's frame cannot contain it. If the palpable emptiness and desolation of the Northeast photographs is inside those buildings, here it is outside.

The silence and absence of human presence is unnerving. It is a quieter, more patient existence competing with the relentless whims of nature rather than cold steel — but no less hard. The images, even the indoor ones, depict a simpler uncluttered place. There are no yards with pickup trucks on cinder blocks, or refrigerators dumped in streams. The frugal lifestyle of the farmers has made it easier for their abandoned homes to be reclaimed by nature. It is the new developments that are the eyesore.

Two side-by-side images of graffiti — one in the Northeast, the other in Iowa — tell a different story. In “Masonic Mo. 2” the graffiti is large and loud on a harsh industrial scene. In “Motor Mill” it is discreet, modest, drawn in the dust — and predestined to disappear in the wind.

The Yale Beineke Rare Book & Manuscript Library's Western American Collection



'Schoolhouse at Wade Farm No. 2' from Ottenstein's Iowa series.

has committed to buying 300 of these Iowa prints over three years. This April Ottenstein will exhibit a selection of Iowa

prints at the Exposure Gallery, 1 Whitney Avenue, New Haven. The photographs are also available online at DavidOttenstein.com.