

An inside look at the hardscrabble plains

An image comes to mind at the mention of the High Plains: an empty but picturesque farmhouse, roof sagging like the back of an old horse, porch falling off the foundation, and screen door swaying in the wind. There's a wide, exposing sky, and an old windmill tilting toward the West.

But what happens when you scratch beneath the surface? What's inside the boarded-up buildings and houses that dot the plains from New Mexico to North Dakota? When were they abandoned, and by whom? What did people leave behind, and why?

In his new book, *Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains*, New Mexico photographer Steve Fitch tries to answer those questions. For 10 years, Fitch traveled the hardscrabble High Plains, with his large-format camera, taking photographs inside abandoned houses and public buildings. Inside, he found shag carpeting, color televisions, tri-color mattresses, and spaceship wallpaper. These artifacts of the not-so-distant past betray the fact that many of these boarded-up homes and public buildings were abandoned, not 80 or 150 years ago, but less than 20.

By placing the abandonment of homes, schools and churches within our lifetime, Fitch exposes something the nation has ignored: Decay, poverty and loss are not things of the past. According to the most recent census, depopulation in these rural communities is accelerating: The region has become one of the poorest in the country, and towns and counties can no longer support public institutions such as hospitals and schools (*HCN*, 1/15/01).

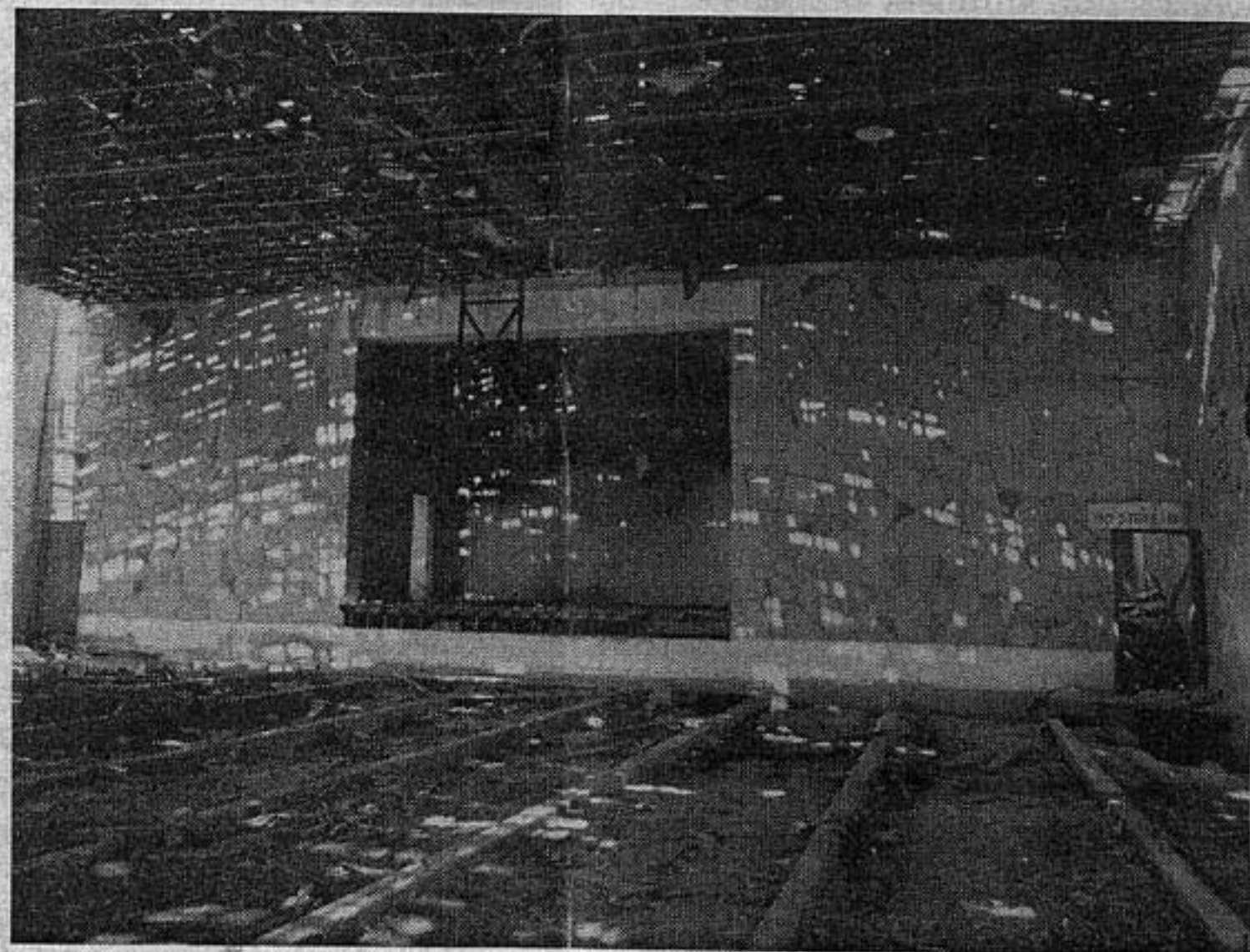
Fitch's book is a portrait of the heartbreak that continues to confront communities across a huge swath of middle America, and a reminder that hard times on the High Plains are not just a romantic image from a distant past.

—Ali Macalady

Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains by Steve Fitch
175 pages, paperback \$24.95. University of New Mexico Press, 2003



At left, living room in a house near Ludlow in eastern Colorado, July 6, 1999. Below, a gymnasium in a WPA-built school in Wheatland in eastern New Mexico, July 17, 1992. STEVE FITCH



CALENDAR

The second **Prairie Dog Summit**, "Protecting Prairie Dogs and Safeguarding Grasslands," is **July 26-27** in **Denver**, Colo. Visit www.prairiedogcoalition.org or call 303-492-4422.

The **Colorado Renewable Energy Society** is holding a conference in Montrose on **July 27-29**. Citizens, community leaders and energy

Have no doubts, go higher

To have lived in the highlands has rendered the lowlands incomplete. My intellect rebels at such thoughts, but in my heart I feel it to be true. I am inflated by the mountain. Tendrils of perfection reach out from my past, usurping the present.

Randy LaChapelle
When In Doubt, Go Higher

I opened *When In Doubt, Go Higher*, a collec-



ing attempted a solo ascent of some mountain I've never heard of.

Alas, I was wrong. The vast majority of stories reprinted in this anthology are written by people who weave great tales with self-deprecating good humor and a journalist's eye for detail. And actually — though the *Gazette's* editor, M. John Fayhee, might disagree — this is an anthology of love stories: love found on a ferry from Seattle, a love of high places and cold mountains, a love of the West and its freakshow litany of characters.