

Prairie Schools:
Imagination and Memories

A Photographic Portfolio

by

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The schools were built when there were enough farmer's children to be educated. I imagine several families sat around a kitchen table and decided where the school would be located, who would provide materials and how soon after the harvest the building would begin. A community event, like an Amish barn raising established a center of education in this remote part of Oregon. A school teacher was sought out, and hired. She (for who else could educate and civilize a farm boy?) moved to the school and lived there next to the classroom. The furnace warmed both her and the students. She taught reading, writing and arithmetic. The students learned their lessons and grew up in this one room school.

The state said it could educate the children better in town. Prairie Schools were no longer needed. The school marm went back to the town to teach other students. Another conference of the families was held. Now they talked about other uses for their fine school. How much hay could they stack without collapsing the floor, and would the seed mill fit in the cloak room, and what to do with the left over desks and text books. The building scarried on as gymnasiums, hay barns, granaries and unfortunately, shooting targets.

When I was making the photographs of the Fairview School, an old woman same over and started talking with me about the building. She said it had only been closed about thirty years. Later, her grandson and granddaughter joined us, and told us that the school had been abandoned in the 1930's, not the 1960's. He allowed as that as grandma was getting older, her memory sometimes played tricks on her. We talked about how long I had been in the building, and he was puzzled why I would spend so much time photographing an abandoned school.

Why would I photograph an abandoned school? From a sheer aesthetic sense, I enjoy the form and texture of old buildings. There is a craft in construction and love that is lavished on old building that is absent from today's buildings. But as you spend time in such a structure, the question of the passage of time and events raises questions. Who read these books? What did the children learn from them? Were they inspired by the stories, poems and songs? How many children went through the doors? What did they find after they walked through them? If asked, what would their memories of the Fairview School be? What would I find when I walked through the doors?

What wonderful questions these are. For all but very few people, these questions can only be answered by your imagination. Let your mind walk through these photographs and let your imagination create the memories of these Prairie Schools.

The Photographs

Cottonwood School

Cottonwood School, Interior

Shaniko School, Desk Frame and Bell Pull

Shaniko School, Wall Detail

Shaniko School, Old Desks

Fairview School

Fairview School, Door and Bookshelf

Fairview School, Abandoned Book

Fairview School, Damaged Books

Fairview School, Reading Books

Fairview School, Front Porch

Shaniko School

Shaniko School, Furnace

Kent School, Back Hall

Shaniko School, Front Classroom

Fairview School, Three doors

Kent School, Gymnasium

Shaniko School, Piano and Music

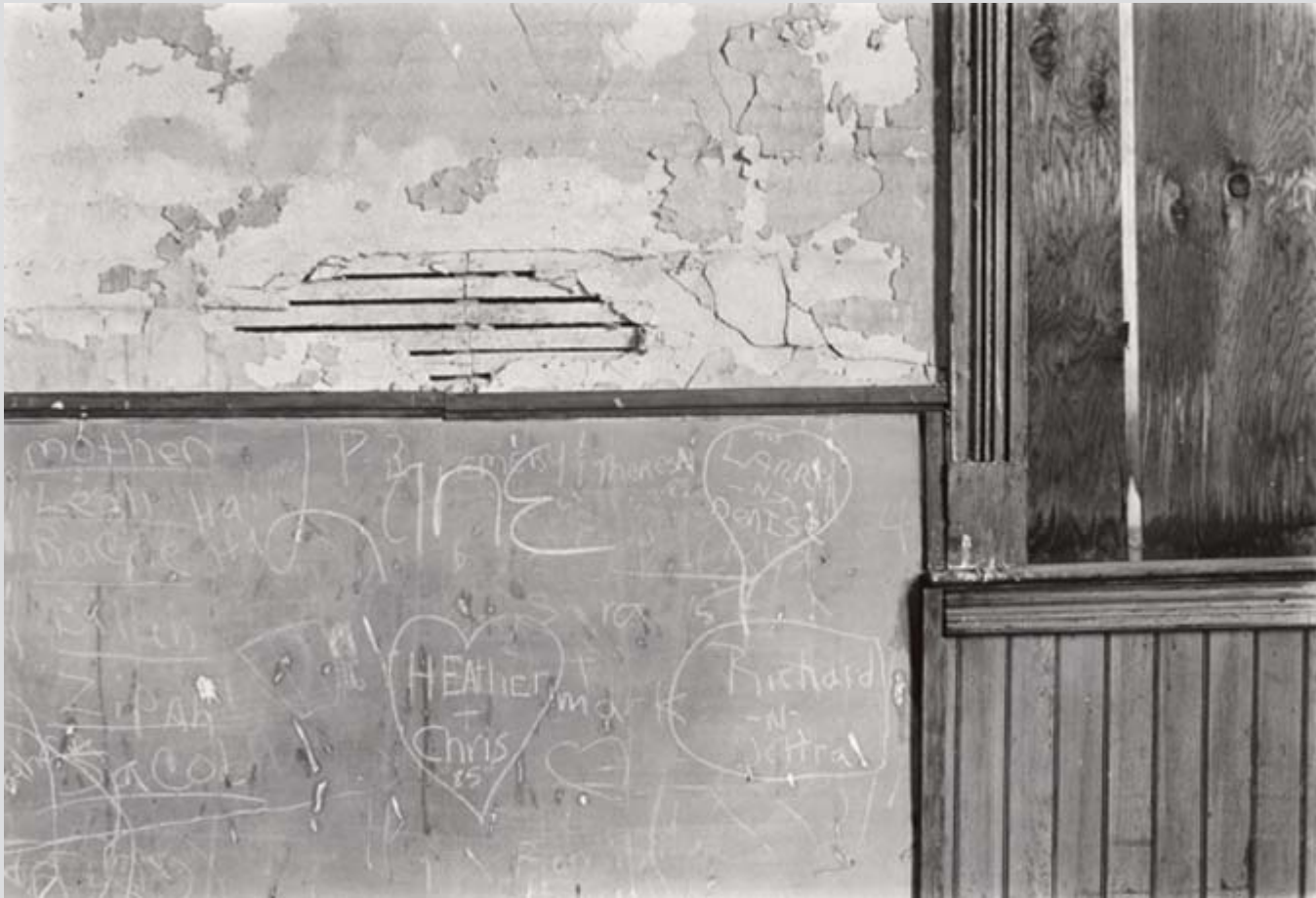
Fairview School, Damaged Books, II

Kent School, Dawn











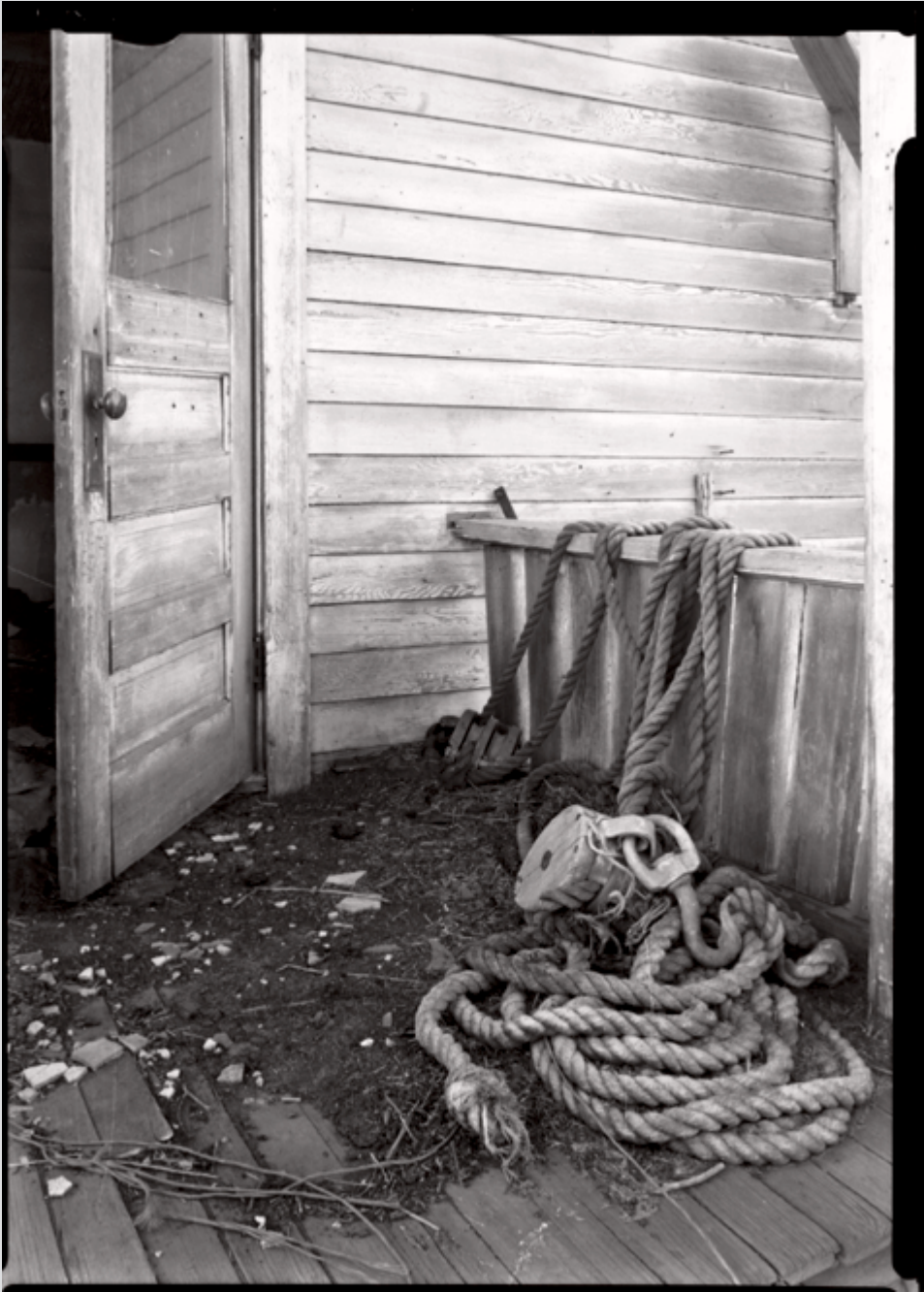






























The Final Words

Most of these images were part of a two man show held at the Horace Williams House in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 2002. This show was the first show where a portion of the images were printed from digital negatives. For those interested in that process, a standard silver gelatin print was made from 35 millimeter or 4 x 5 sheet film. The print was scanned and perfected with Adobe Photoshop software. The resulting computer file was then printed on a sheet of lithographic film on an image setter. The enlarged film negative was contact printed on Crane's Platinotype paper. Other prints were made directly from 5 x 7 Kodak TMAX 400 sheet film on commercially coated Palladio paper.

The images were created on several photo safaris throughout the high plains of Eastern Oregon.