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Picturing Utopia: Bertha Shambaugh and the Amana Photographers

Abigail Foerstner
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Some of the photographs stand best alone as striking compositions, but the entire body of work that builds into a composite history is more important than any single image…The touching sight of a knitting lesson mid-stroke, the innocence of a game of Ring Around the Rosie, the utilitarian order of utensils in the communal kitchen: each is a vision of the Amana society preserved by Shambaugh. Each is a memory of the past captured on a glass negative. Together they provide a history of a time, place, society and idea that time and technology effaced decades ago.

Foerstner brings new life to these old images and she puts them in perspective. She provides a history of the Amana society, a strictly religious communal society that strove to create the ideal community during its 100 years of existence that began in Germany and died in Iowa. Foerstner provides a history of the photographers that compulsively strove to record it.

Shambaugh was the first of these photographers. She captured their simple dress, simple homes and simple games with an adoring, artistic lens. She beautifully frames a garden scene with brush and uses natural light streaming through a window to give an air of enchantment to an empty schoolhouse. “Bertha Shambaugh saw clearly—as many observers did not—that the Amanas had developed a communal society to free people for religious devotion rather than as a political end…The Community of the True Inspiration of the Amana had carved out a bit of heaven on earth,” Foerstner writes.

Just as important as Shambaugh’s own work was the work she inspired in others. She opened the door to a host of other photographers and their images, such as William Miller’s journalistic recording of tragedies, Peter Stuck’s crisp shots of natural blooms and grasses and William Noah’s subdued silhouettes.

Foerstner expertly details the lives, times and focus of nine major photographers with biographies and examples of their work. A photographer herself, Foerstner goes about this task with an eye for detail readers will appreciate.

This book offers readers a glimpse into the simple life that could not survive in a complex world. Readers are left with a sense of longing for the mostly forgotten principals of the Amanas and a respect for the insightful photographers who dedicated their time and talents to making sure the utopia would be remembered.
MARJORY RAYMER (March / April 2000)

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