



Shadow of Sandra and David Plowden, Adair, Iowa, 2008/© David Plowden photo

PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID PLOWDEN HAS GIVEN UP HIS TRAVELING SHOES, BUT WORKING ON HIS ART? NEVER

focus as big as all outdoors

BY DONALD LIEBENSON

David Plowden's second-floor office in his Winnetka home is not the sanctuary that was his now-shuttered basement darkroom. It is more prone to distractions, but that is just one of the allowances that the celebrated 80-year-old photographer has made to age, health and advancing technology.

He has not been "in the field" this year. "I don't think I will go into the field again, but I'm working on several book projects, so I'm not in any way retired," he says. "I just don't feel compelled to drive thousands of miles around Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa. I loved doing it, but I don't feel there's anything more right now that I feel the need to go out and photograph."

Plowden's singular contribution to American photography can be gleaned from several titles of his published photograph collections spanning more than half a century: "A Handful of Dust: Disappearing America"; "Requiem for Steam"; and "End of an Era: The Last of the Great Lakes Steamboats."

He would come in at "the 11th hour," he says, to preserve some of America's defining iconic places and engineering marvels while they remained. It started with powerful, ravishing photographs of his first love, steam locomotives, which were disappearing. "A tremendous loss," he says. "And I began to realize that so many other things were changing after the war. The highway system changed the whole culture, and I set out to document all this before it was gone."

"All this" included America's Main Street and small town life, bridges, steel factories and the landscape of America's heartland, which is the subject of an as-yet-untitled book to be published next year. Plowden's photo-



Armando L. Sanchez/Tribune photo

graphs of Iowa are being featured in a traveling exhibition in that state. They also can be seen in his latest book, "David Plowden's Iowa."

American ingenuity looms large in the Plowden canon. As a child growing up in New York, he loved steam trains like other kids love dinosaurs.

"I was never interested in model trains," he says with a smile. "I wanted the real thing. Make no little plans, right? Kids love dangerous things, and no machine that I had

ever known was as compelling and as awesome. You could see how they worked just by walking up and looking at the wheels and connecting rods."

Pointing to the computer on his desk, which is displaying a database of potential photographs for his next book, he says, "Look at this remarkable machine. You can't see a ... thing. It's in a box. How do you photograph the

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ingenuity of man? You have to find something that's visual. So many things today are covert."

Bridges hold the same fascination for him. "Virtually all of the old bridges are gone," he remarks ruefully. "I always felt bridges were the summit expression of man's guts and ability to build. When I was a kid in my room in New York, I looked out on the East River, and down on the righthand side was the Queensboro Bridge with the Triborough bridge in the distance. I know they had an enormous influence on me."

Following the 1967 collapse of the Silver Bridge over the Ohio River, in which nearly 50 people died, Plowden realized that America's 19th century and early 20th century bridges were in danger of being replaced. He applied for and received a Guggenheim grant to make a visual record of these engineering marvels. Six years in the making, the resulting book was "Bridges: The Spans of North America," which is in its fourth printing.

That also is the title of an exhibition that will open Jan. 18 at the Milwaukee School of Engineering's Grohmann Museum and run through April 28. The museum also mounted an exhibition of Plowden's railroad photographs last year, which was "perhaps our most successful exhibition to date," said museum director James Kieselburg II. "Not only do we admire David's unparalleled vision, but because our focus is on the art of industry and human achievement, we have a real affinity for his subjects: rural America, steam locomotives, steel mills, bridges and the like."

Plowden in person has an avuncular, Walter Cronkite quality. Indeed, he is in a sense a reporter. He considers himself less an artist than "an instrument," he modestly says. "I'm not trying to interpret things. What I'm trying to do is get to the essence of what storms are like, or a grain elevator."

"His beautiful images capture both the America as it was and the America as it is," observes Jim Mairs, Plowden's longtime editor at publisher WW Norton & Co. "In the three decades that I have worked with him, I've never tired of seeing his meticulously made prints of wheat fields, barns, houses, grain elevators, steam engines and ore boats. His documentation of man's stamp on our country over the last half century is a national treasure. His work, like that of Walker Evans, goes a long way toward describing who we are."

Plowden's work suggests that perhaps the biggest part of who we are is the land, our relationship to it and our impact on it. Plowden is selecting photographs that focus on "this great, huge magnificent space that rises up between here and the front rim of the Rockies. All the things I love are huge."

These glorious black and white photographs capture profoundly moving images, at once intimate and panoramic of tilled lands under tumultuous skies, grain silos standing like sentries, and small-town Main Streets that have seen better days.

"I find this part of the country absolutely magnificent," Plowden says. "It is so vast and so marvelous. You get a sense that you really are almost a visitor, and that despite an arsenal of equipment, you can be wiped out in a minute by a tornado. It reminds me a bit of the ocean in that it's an area where weather plays such an important part."

The irresistible lure of the road also figures prominently in these photographs. "I love the idea of a road. It's about the fact that you're free to go," he says, referring to one such photograph taken in South Dakota. "I'm looking down that road and wondering what's over the brow of that hill. Living in an apartment house in the middle of Manhattan, the only way I could see the sky was to peer up, way up above the buildings that surrounded me. The only sunlight we got was reflected off the windows of the north side."

Were Plowden to rest on his laurels, he would have

very plush accommodations. His works are in the collections of such institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Smithsonian, the Chicago History Museum and the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. He was mentored early on by such artists as Walker Evans, Minor White and O. Winston Link. Plowden himself has taught at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design, the University of Iowa and Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

From Evans, whom he met through his first wife, he learned how to understand light. "He was very encouraging," Plowden recalls. "One of the things we used to do was open the windows on the 18th floor of the Time-Life Building (in New York). He would stand there and look, but he wasn't looking at the architecture. He was looking at the architecture of light."

Plowden works only with natural light. "I haven't a clue how to work a flash of any sort," he says, laughing. But it's not really photography that fascinates Plowden: It's the subject matter. "I can't just go out the door and photograph," he says. "I have to have a reason. There are just too many choices."

For decades Plowden focused on what he calls "an unsung part of the world," the heartland's Great Plains and prairies. In his book-lined office is displayed a quote from Walt Whitman, which Sandra, his wife of 35 years, found for him: "While I know the standard claim is that Yosemite, Niagara Falls, the upper Yellowstone and the like, afford the greatest natural shows, I am not so sure but the Prairies and Plains, while less stunning at first sight, last longer, fill the esthetic sense fuller, precede all the rest, and make North America's characteristic landscape."

"I always felt that," Plowden says. "It affirms what I do."

The Iowa pictures of Plowden's being showcased in the traveling exhibition, which is under the auspices of Humanities Iowa and will run through 2014, are revelatory portraits of a part of the country that is conventionally dismissed. "People complain about driving through Iowa," Plowden says. "They

say it's all flat, which is drivel. If you look at the way the clouds and the light play across the land, it's as beautiful as anything you'll ever see."

Plowden took these photos between 1964 and 2009, and has more photographs of the state than perhaps any other subject in his archives. The Smithsonian sent him to Iowa to photograph Grundy County, and later, during the rural farm crisis in the early 1980s, Humanities Iowa and the State Historical Society supported his 1989 collection, "A Sense of Place."

To get these photos, Plowden traveled hundreds of miles a day, starting out late in the morning and staying out until sunset. Early in their marriage, Sandra opted to stay home with their two children. Beginning in 2003, when their children were grown, she accompanied him.

"I've been in all 99 counties," he says. "I have to immerse myself in a place before I take a picture. When I would take my photography students out (on field trips) into towns, I would initially tell them to put their cameras away. I'd tell them, 'You don't know anything about this place. Walk around, talk to people and explore.'"

"David Plowden is rightly considered an American master of the documentary form of photography," observes Christopher Rossi, executive director of Humanities Iowa. "His repertoire is replete with images of

muscular things — trains, bridges, tugboats, steel — and definitely some of that emphasis comes through in his decades-long take on Iowa. I once heard him say, in a wistful mutter: 'I love shovels.'

"But I think people, especially Midwesterners and most certainly Iowans, are struck by how well he captures the placid, commonplace landscape. Some of it is gorgeous in its simplicity and familiarity, but some of it is disturbing, because you know it's not going to be there much longer."

Plowden has lived in Winnetka since 1978 in what he calls a "good old, solid, turn-of-the-century house." He walks with a cane now, and 10-hour drives around the country being at the mercy of the light would be too exhausting, he says.

He has resisted going digital. With an estimated 15 miles of developed film, he now scans and uses Photoshop, which he was taught by former students. (He has three freezers filled with photographic paper just in case he returns to printing his own pictures.)

"The computer, scanning and Photoshop have prolonged my career," he said. "As long as somebody wants the work, I'll keep going. I absolutely cannot let it go. I live for it."

Donald Liebenson is a Chicago-area freelance writer.

From top, "Steve, Davy, West Virginia 1974" and "Yaquina Bay Bridge Newport, Oregon 1968"; opposite page, "Steamer Lone Star on Mississippi River at Davenport, Iowa 1964" © David Plowden photos.



David Plowden's Iowa

Christopher R. Rossi, editor, Humanities Iowa, 99 pages, \$20 (available by calling 319-335-4149)



Unwanted by Kristina Ohlsson, Atria, 368 pages, \$15

The best-selling Fredrika Bergman mystery series from Swedish author Kristina Ohlsson is making its American debut. In "Unwanted," the first book of the series, investigative analyst Bergman is assigned to find a girl who's been abducted from a train. At first Bergman thinks the kidnapping is due to a bitter custody

battle, but as the story becomes more complex, Bergman begins to believe that she is dealing with a cold-blooded killer. Ohlsson keeps the detailed story moving briskly and the reader in suspense.



Married Love and Other Stories by Tessa Hadley, Harper Perennial, 240 pages, \$14.99

In this new collection of short stories, Hadley explores the myriad of emotions involved in familial relationships. The stories, which read like miniature novels, follow characters of all ages and social classes. Using humor, heart-wrenching prose and realistic interactions,

Hadley allows readers to explore all the aspects of love.



Rome: A Cultural, Visual, and Personal History by Robert Hughes, Vintage, 512 pages, \$18.95

Hughes writes a detailed cultural history of the Eternal City, starting with his own encounter with Rome as a 21-year-old young man awe-struck by the city's antiquity.

Hughes discusses Rome's founding and explores the mythologies that would inform the city's art for centuries, through the rise of Christianity, the Crusades and World War II. Hughes died in August.



The Monster Variations by Daniel Kraus Ember, Harper Perennial, 256 pages, \$8.99

A mad man in a truck is hunting and killing boys in a small town. A curfew has been enacted to keep teens off the streets, but it's summer, and James, Willie and Reggie aren't willing to spend it inside. Eventually, the boys discover that the school bully may know more about the killings than he is letting on. Kraus, a

Chicago author, balances the supernatural with the all-too-real challenges of growing up.



Moranthology by Caitlin Moran, Harper Perennial, 256 pages, \$14.99

In a new collection of columns, Caitlin Moran, a British columnist for the Times of London, addresses a wide variety of subjects, including caffeine, Twitter "Ghostbusters," and the royal wedding. Known for her unrelenting wit, Moran will have readers laughing out loud.

— Courtney Crowder