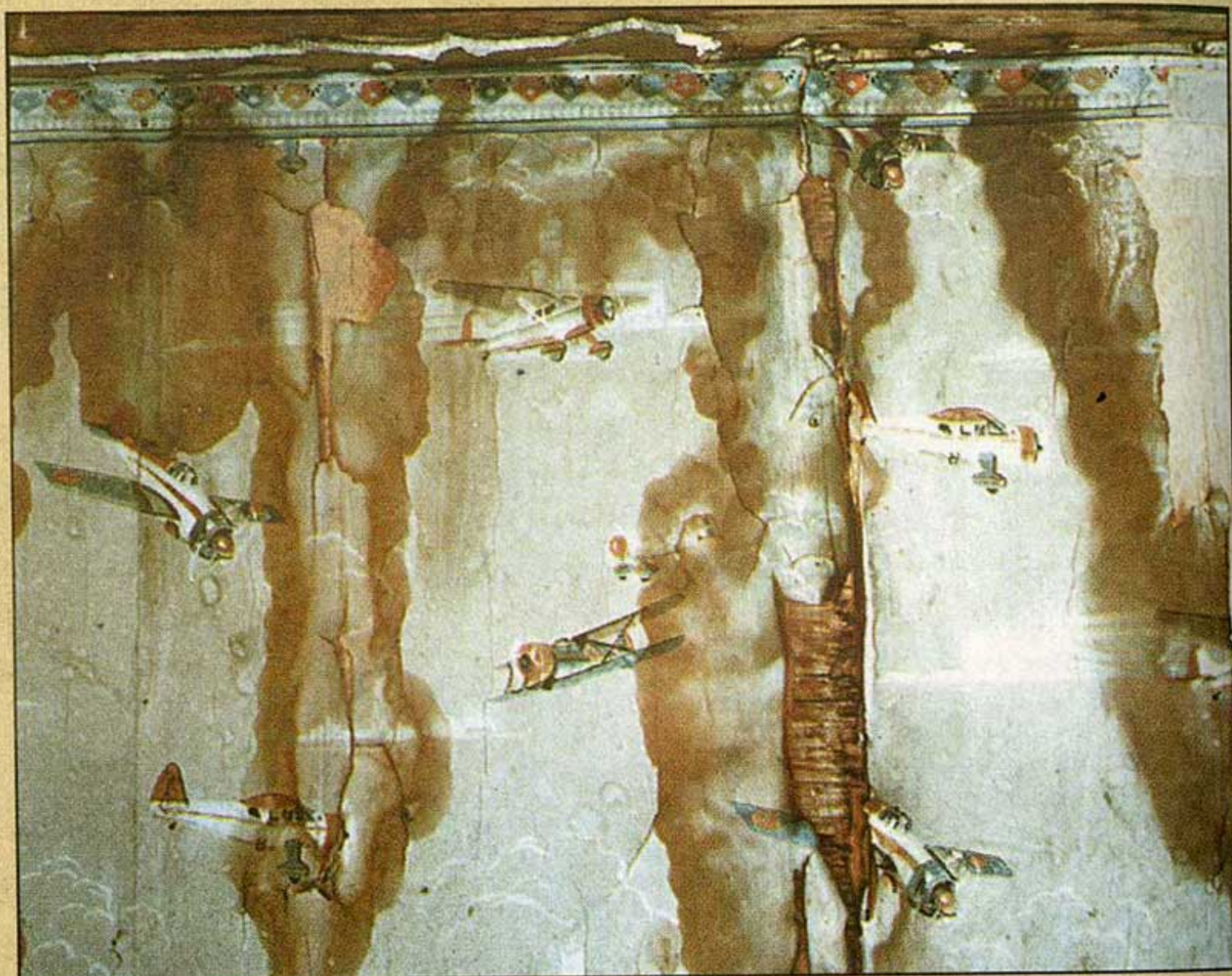




Classroom in a school, McEllister, eastern New Mexico, 1994, Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 inches



Airplane wallpaper in a child's bedroom, Yeso, eastern New Mexico, 1992, Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 inches

POIGNANT PASTS

Steve Fitch's 'Archaeology of Abandonment'

By Craig Smith
The New Mexican

Most of us would hurry by a desolate homestead, lonely in the tall grass, in favor of a house filled with light, people and the warmth of life.

Not photographer Steve Fitch. He would tarry at the homestead. To him a lonely ruin demands exploration; it calls with all the poignant power of a distant siren.

The abandoned structures of America's prairies have absorbed Fitch for nine years and yielded *The Archaeology of Abandonment: Photographs From the High Plains*. In recognition of that body of work in progress, the New Mexico Council on Photography gave Fitch the 1999 Eliot Porter Fellowship, a biennial award of \$5,000.

Jurors for the 1999 award were Abigail Adler,

Van Deren Coke and Erin Wright.

Fitch's first interest in abandoned structures dates to 1991, he said by phone from his Peña Blanca studio. He and his wife owned land in New Mexico then and would come out from the East every summer to visit.

"I had noticed all the abandonment, and when we moved here in 1990, I started going out on the plains to explore the wide-open spaces," Fitch said in a recent interview. "We were building a house on our land here and I started checking inside a few of these places, more out of curiosity than anything else."

In May 1991, Fitch, who also works in neon, took photos of an abandoned honky-tonk in Vaughn, with the idea of possibly installing a neon sculpture there. He liked the pictures so much that he began the ongoing project.

Using an 8-x-10 large-format view camera, Fitch traveled and photographed on New Mexico's high plains to the east and north. He sought out empty churches, schools, houses, bars, dance halls — any once-inhabited building that still stood but was unused.

"Personal interest connected me with those abandoned places," he said. "My grandfather had been a homesteader in South Dakota. I had crossed the plains numerous times. I always liked the space and being out on the plains.

"I was then building a house and raising two little kids and it was interesting to see these places coming apart. Here I was, at that time doing what all these people had done — settling down and building a place with hopes and expectations of being there a long time.

"Just the idea of stacking adobes and stuccoing the house, and then looking at these houses, built of rock or adobe or whatever materials they could use — empty."

Both looking and photographing were humbling experiences, he said. Right before his eyes was the message: You may fail; you may pass; you may not survive here.

Perhaps because of that message, Fitch finds his greatest fascination in photographing interiors. At times he will show the expanse of the outdoor plains through a door or window. But more often the focus of his work is inside the structure.

"You always have lots of light bleeding in through windows, doors, bullet holes," he said. "I think the outside is represented best by pure white light coming in.



Honky-tonk near Vaughn, eastern New Mexico, 1991, Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 inches



Kitchen in a house in Modoc, western Kansas, 1995, Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 inches

Steve Fitch,
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“And there’s an anthropological interest for me. I’m interested in the artifacts and traces people left. Exteriors are more generic and not as interesting (as interiors). Inside, all kinds of things get left, even personal photos.

“To me, to leave snapshots is the saddest and most interesting thing.”

Fitch is assistant professor of photography in the art department at The College of Santa Fe. He also has taught at University of Texas and lectured at Princeton University and University of Colorado.

His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City; the Museum of International Photography in Rochester, N.Y.; the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth; Harvard University; and the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts.

While a number of 19th-century structures are left on the high plains, Fitch takes most of his photographs of 20th-century buildings — mainly because older edifices usually have no personal traces of inhabitants.

“Almost from the beginning of the late 19th century, buildings began to be abandoned even though population was growing for some time,” Fitch said. “When I find a place completely gutted it’s not as interesting to me as when something is left.

“I photographed some schools that

were actually WPA-built. One school opened in the '30s, near the Texas border, with 350 students. When it closed down in the early '60s it had eight students.

“I find abandoned schools with really big gymnasiums and rooms — but with just one family living nearby.”

Fitch plans to use the fellowship to complete his project, photographing areas he hasn’t yet visited. “In particular, I want to get to places farther away — the western Dakotas and eastern Montana, eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska.

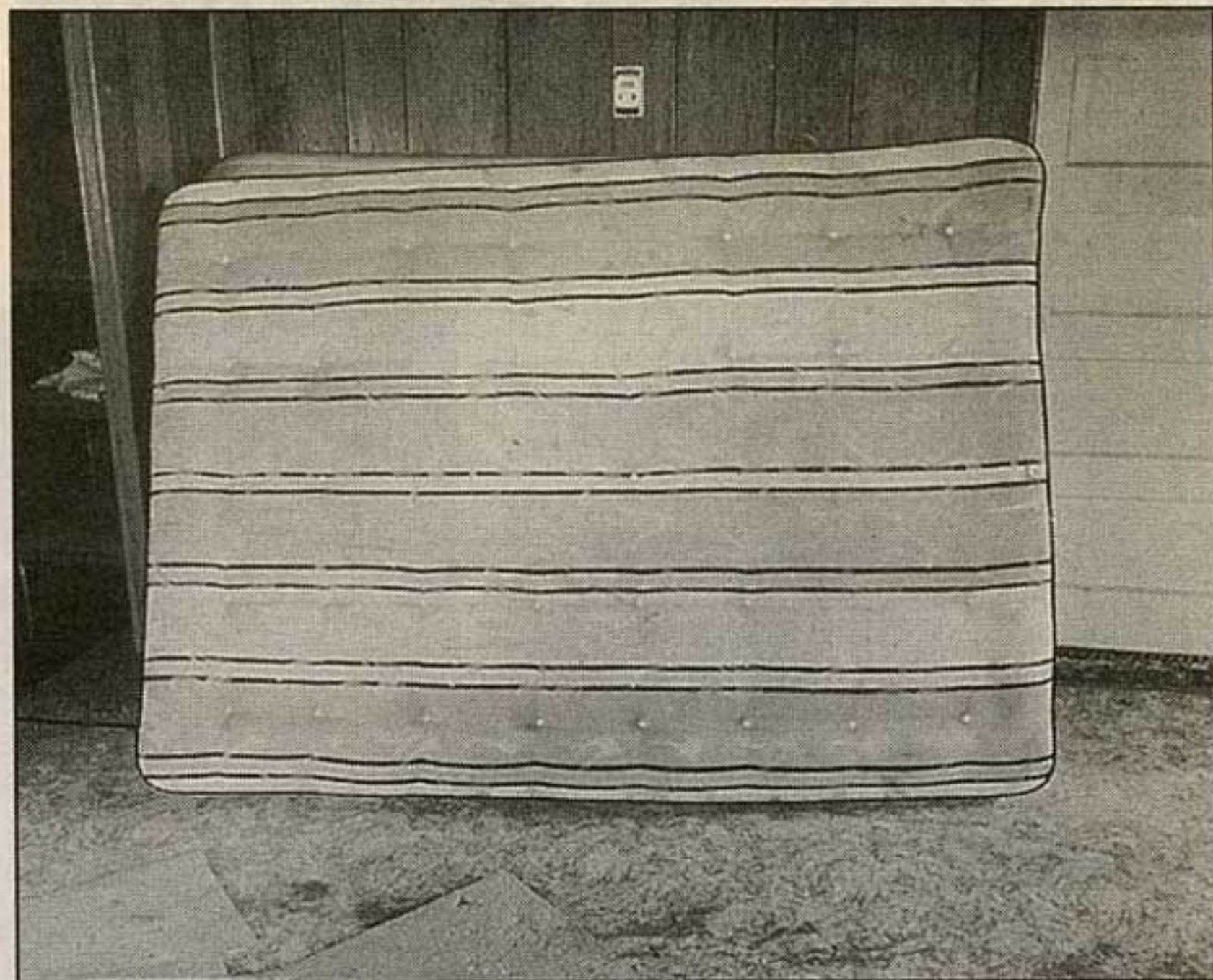
University of New Mexico Press is planning to do a book on the project and UNM art museum is going to organize a traveling exhibit of Fitch’s work, he said.

Fitch also will have a small exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe in April.

Looking back at his work, Fitch said one of the most unsettling things about it is the sense of timelessness one feels in the abandoned buildings.

“I photographed one place and left,” he said. “Two years later I went back there and climbed in the same window. My original footprints were still there, untouched, in the dust — with a light coating of new dust on them. That was spooky.”

▼ Eliot Porter, Willard Van Dyke, Beaumont Newhall and others established the New Mexico Council on Photography in 1985. The nonprofit organization supports and encourages photography in the state through



Mattress in a house in Yoder, eastern Wyoming, 1995, Ektacolor print, 16 x 20 inches

educational activities, enhancement of public and private photo collections, and grants to working photographers.

Programs include the annual Willard Van Dyke Memorial Grant of \$1,000 to an emerging New Mexico photographer, won in 1999 by Sterling Trantham of La Mesa; the biennial Eliot Porter Award of \$5,000 to help a New Mexico photographer complete a

major project; a special-projects grant to assist photographers, writers and/or scholars in exhibiting or publishing photography projects on issues relating to New Mexico.

The Council also administers the Jane Reese Williams Endowment and Collection of photography.

For more information about the council, call 455-2478. ◀