

EVERY EMPIRE HAS ITS RUINS. Even the United States, though we scarcely consider them as such when we fly by them on the interstate.

No historical markers or bronze plaques declare their stories.

Across the Great Plains stand the ruins of homes, schools, dance halls and bars once peopled by hopeful settlers under the Homestead Act. Eventually the harsh realities of life in this region eroded the dreams of those pioneers, causing many to abandon their homes and seek opportunities elsewhere.

Those structures already show the effects of time and weather. They have become sanctuaries for birds and rodents and, through the lens of Steve Fitch, temples of lost hope.

For the past decade, Fitch has traveled the High Plains, from Lubbock, Texas, to the Canadian border, photographing the private, time-forgotten interiors of these dilapidated buildings. His images tell the story of a modern-day exodus, of lives once lived and hastily abandoned, of worldly possessions left behind.

Starting today, Feb. 7, the University of New Mexico Art Museum opens a major exhibit of Fitch's photographs, with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. *Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains* runs through March 23 and includes an artist's talk and booksigning Feb. 25. On July 11 the exhibit comes to the Marion Center for Photographic Arts in Santa Fe.

The exhibit is accompanied by a book of the same title published by the University of New Mexico Press. Fitch, who teaches at the College of Santa Fe, was awarded the 1999 Eliot Porter Memorial Fellowship Award by the New Mexico Council on Photography for this project.

"I've always found something poignant about ruins, their connection to history and time passing," Fitch said during a recent interview in his office in the Marion Center. "I'm interested in photography as a witness to history."

While growing up in the heart of California wine country, Fitch photographed the hop kilns in Mendocino County. These unusual redwood structures no longer exist, and Fitch's photographs provide a historical record of these buildings in the local museum. His undergraduate major was archaeology, with an emphasis on the Mayan civilization. He earned a master's in photography at UNM in 1979. Fitch's work may be found in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.

The artist was drawn to the High Plains project because, he said, "These are the ruins of my own generation. That resonated with me. It was humbling to see the remains of earlier people who had tried to settle and stick in a place but who had not succeeded. "And," he added, "this is the one short moment in time when these ruins stand. In 40 years, the buildings will be gone."

Many of these photographs give the sensation of a rushed, perhaps unexpected abandonment. Some have an eerie, postapocalyptic look. In a kitchen in a house near Regent in western North Dakota, underneath decades of dust and animal droppings, plates still sit on the kitchen counter, along with a toaster, a medicine bottle and a half-used jar of Folgers coffee. It's as if someone left one morning fully expecting to return that evening.

In the bedroom of a house near Scranton, western North Dakota, a purse lies on a neatly made bed alongside fancy clothing wrapped in tissue paper. A framed portrait of a couple hangs on the wall.

"Sometimes I'd feel a chill go up my spine," Fitch said. "These places were creepy, stinky, with rodents and birds all around, and then on top



TEMPLES OF LOST HOPE

By Teri Thomson Randall ■ The New Mexican



of it, I was in people's private places. It got to me, day after day. "But on the other hand I enjoyed it. I was on some kind of mission. I felt this was my duty in a way."

Little light finds its way into these interiors. Many are boarded up and shot through with bullets. Fitch typically made exposures of 10 to 12 minutes, sometimes as long as 40 minutes, to get the proper exposure and depth of field on his 8 x 10 view camera.

"We like to think of a photograph as an instant in time," said Fitch. "But in fact, these are durations." The times were so long that Fitch reflects on the images as periods of time in which he physically stood inside the exposure.

Fitch believes most of these homes were built on land settled under the Homestead Act, which Abraham Lincoln signed into law after the secession of southern states. Roughly 270 million acres, or 10 percent of the area of the United States, were claimed and settled under this act.

A homesteader had only to be the head of a household and at least 21 years of age to claim a 160-acre parcel of land. Settlers from all walks of life, including newly arrived immigrants, farmers from the East without land of their own, single women and former slaves, came to meet the challenge of "proving up" and keeping this "free land." The land became theirs at the end of five years if they had built a house, dug a well, plowed 10 acres, fenced a certain amount and lived on the land.

The experiment worked well for those fortunate enough to receive parcels farther east with fertile land and moisture. But along the 100th

meridian, where rainfall is typically less than 20 inches a year, it was next to impossible to sustain a family from the land without irrigation, Fitch said.

"Part of our mythology is what a great thing the Homestead Act was," Fitch said. "But it was more of a failure than a success. "Our culture doesn't like to think about the fact that we can fail, that our way of life can crumble. But all empires fail when they overextend themselves. Just look at Chaco Canyon. And it can happen to us too. American empire, beware!"

In Fitch's photograph of a bedroom wall in a house near Pritchett in eastern Colorado, someone left behind the message "This Is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life," made of large capital letters cut from a brown paper bag. It's a strange sight in a room with a ceiling and walls collapsing and broken plaster littering the floor.

It makes one wonder whether these inhabitants abandoned their spirit of hope along with their homes or took it with them to their next place.

The people who once sat in these classrooms, ate in these kitchens, courted in these dance halls and drank in these bars abandoned these places, yet they weren't finished with life. Most continued to live, to exert their presence elsewhere, to build again, to fashion new lives in new places. As these images suggest, humans are remarkably mobile and transient creatures — like hermit crabs, casting away shells and moving on when the situation dictates.

The modern-day ruins in Fitch's photographs reveal a little-known chapter in the American experience, in a story that yet unfolds. ◀



Top, School chart on a classroom floor in Thatcher, eastern Colorado, June 5, 1995; bottom left, Sunday School in McAlister, eastern New Mexico, Jan. 6, 1994; bottom right, Living room in a house near Ludlow, eastern Colorado, July 6, 1999

Facing page, top, Kitchen in a house near Regent, western North Dakota, May 18, 2001; bottom, Bedroom in a house in Pritchett, eastern Colorado, March 15, 2001. Chromogenic color prints by Steve Fitch

DETAILS

- ▼ *Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains*, photos by Steve Fitch
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. today, Feb. 7; exhibit through March 23
Artist's talk & book signing, 5:30 p.m. Feb. 25
- ▼ University of New Mexico Art Museum, Center for the Arts, UNM campus
(enter on Stanford from Central Avenue NE); 505-277-4001