Memories and Magic We Kept in Attics

Seems to me that houses these days have no attics, and I think that’s sad.

In what might be his most famous book, Curtis Harnack, born and reared just outside Remsen, spends an entire essay on the attics he explored as a kid in his ancient Iowa farmhouse, one complete chapter of his celebrated *We Have All Gone Away*.

That wasn’t enough. A few years later he followed up with yet another memoir of the farm, *The Attic*, proving thereby that attics are actually treasure troves.

A stuffed pelican stood guard at the doorway to the Harnack attic, a miserably strange old thing his uncle shot on their farm simply because he’d never seen one before, then had it stuffed for the same reason. "You couldn’t just toss a pelican," he says, so it became an upstanding citizen of the upstairs attic.

We’d ride the humped, feathered back as if it were an ostrich, stare at the yellow glass eyes and stroke the lizard-skin pouch under the beak, not finding plump fish there, only shifting granular wood pulp, like in the limbs of dolls—stuff of no life.

That’s only half true. Harnack’s childhood imagination gave the bird life when he and his cousin found their way up and into “the fabulous tree house of the family, enchanted by these talismans of other lives, earlier existences.”

Most attics are junkyards of stuff rarely lugged back into circulation. But something about the relics make tossing them unthinkable. What Harnack remembers is an assortment of oddities.

. . . chamber pots, chipped-veneer dressers with murky mirrors, empty dish barrels, used wrapping paper, cribs, playpens, old toys, copies of *National
Sixty years later, that kind of list reminds me of Dad’s Navy stuff and Mom’s high school cheerleader’s megaphone. When I held those things in my hands, they verified that my parents, once upon a time, had been people I’d never quite know.

Curtis Harnack left that old farm house and northwest Iowa at his mother’s pointed insistence, if you believe the tale he tells. But the farm place that figures into his writing, still there and still in the family, has a forever place in his memoirs keep.

After graduating from Grinnell, Harnack tried to put Iowa in his rearview mirror, took up residence in New York, and married Hortense Calisher, an urbane, city-born novelist unlike anyone he could have found in Remsen. For most of his life, Siouxland’s Curtis Harnack wrote books and ran Yaddo, arguably the nation’s most prestigious artistic retreat.

He died five years ago now, in 2013. He was 86.

Time will sort out what will remain, but right now what comes to the top of the books he created are his memoirs of an life on a farm just south of Remsen, and an attic full of treasures it took him two books to document.

Here’s an idea. Take highway 3 east out of LeMars sometime and drive through Remsen. Turn right on the blacktop and take it south for a mile or so past the farm where Harnack was a boy, where the attic probably still exists. Don’t bother the residents—they have their own lives.

Then turn back to town and when you see the cemetery, take a left, drive slowly up the hill until a hefty granite monument says “Harnack.” Get out of your car and visit the stone because there beside the big family marker, half
buried in the earth, is a little rectangular memorial inscribed with Curtis Harnack’s name and pertinent dates. You’ll not see it if you don’t get out of the car.

Here’s the story: Curtis Harnack, born in Remsen, died in New York, New York. But before he did, he insisted his ashes were to be cleft in two piles, then placed in two urns. One of those urns is somewhere in Gotham, but he insisted that the other one be buried right here in Siouxland, beside his family in good, rich Iowa soil. It’s no secret, but only his family knows—and now you do too.

I don’t doubt that in some of Remsen’s older homes, Curtis Harnack’s books are stuck up in the attic somewhere. No matter. If you listen to him, that’s not all bad.