
Pro Rege

Volume 45 | Number 4

Article 3

June 2017

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2017) "Humility on the Plains," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 45: No. 4, 23 - 27.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss4/3

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Humility on the Plains



by Jim Schaap

Our neighbors have that iconic Harvey Dunn portrait of early Great Plains life, *The Prairie is My Garden*, on their living room wall, bold and wide, as moving as the wide landscape just outside their door.

I'd seen it before, often, but somehow forgotten Harvey Dunn, the artist, South Dakota's pride; so not long ago we decided to stop at the



gallery at South Dakota State University, where the permanent collection includes a number of Dunn's Dakota landscape portraits, and an exhibition of his work was featuring some memorable prairie skies.

The show was wonderful. If you love the plains, it's not difficult to lose yourself in the world of Harvey Dunn. Truth be told, it may well be easier to love Dunn's bold and expansive portraits than the Plains themselves.

His admiration, his love for women, was evident too. Prairie women are often front-and-center in his work—enduring figures of significant strength, who through sheer will make pioneer Dakota life work for themselves and their families.

A woman is the central character in the drama

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unfolding all around in *The Prairie is My Garden*. It's possible that her own garden on the homestead is only potatoes and kale; but whatever her lot, she knows the pasture just beyond is royally bedecked with blossoms of every color in the rainbow, one spacious bouquet. The wind blows over an almost featureless landscape, but her fortitude out there

along the creek makes clear that she's not about to raise her family without holding on to beauty.



Fixing Fence also features an enduring female lead, her husband assigned only a supporting role. Doing what has to be done requires a team effort, and while he is himself quite the romantic figure, fully as handsome as she is, it's his wife who works without a coat, doing the tough job of stretching barbed wire. She seems remarkably young, doesn't she? But Dunn put her at the heart of things to make clear this young lady is a beauty, but no wall-flower.

The age of the barn behind them suggests these two aren't pioneers, but neither do they specialize in ag business. If there are children, they must be back at the house. Meanwhile, the work demands four hands, all of them calloused and tough.

And it's a fearful sky back there, isn't it? Black and gray clouds menace like unearthly windows, so dark and dramatic they become yet another character in the prairie drama that seems to make the fencing operation so pressing. If her hair weren't blowing the way it is, if it were primly pinned, the whole painting might look more staged, more romantic. But the voice of the roiling sky and the advance of the wind announces something's coming. No matter what will fall or how it will, the skies are ready to storm.

The title of *Just a Few Drops of Rain* seems so understated that you can't help but wonder if it's a joke. The wicked skies present a whole different story, after all. Anyone who's ever lived out here—

where weather almost always comes in spades—knows that some skies send out immediate alarm. It's time to keep an eye on the menacing darkness and the cellar door open behind you.

Just exactly why Dunn's hero is out-and-about isn't easily explained. More than just a shower is about to descend, but she's not going to be bested by bolts of lightning or a downpour that would wash out gullies, if there were any on the plains. She has things to do. Then again, it could be that the mad sky feels to her like an adventure.

If she weren't walking as proudly as she is, if her face weren't turned into the wind, if she weren't looking up into what must be the last band of open sky—there's sunlight on her face, after all—we might fear for her. Harvey Dunn loves her and her gamey fortitude.



She is what she is, what the prairie has shaped her into becoming, I suppose; and she is not easily beaten. That frame house back there seems far more at risk than she is.

Walk through a gallery of Harvey Dunn paintings, and you can't help but remember a story that few of us tell anymore, the rugged story of homesteading families out on the Plains or at its borders. There's not a freeloader in the bunch, all hard-scrabble farm folks breaking ground for new communities and new worlds, investing a lifetime of sweat equity into the dream of prosperity offered in land of their own. That story—and let me say this bluntly—is, almost entirely, a white man's story, a European-American saga that's not so much despised these days as purposely neglected, even

quietly suppressed.

The sheer size of the story can hardly be exaggerated. The Homestead Act began in May of 1862 and promised 160 acres of land for a filing fee and a pledge to “improve” the place. By 1900 two million people had moved out to the Great Plains, a place once named despairingly as “the great American desert” by map-makers and explorers. Hundreds of thousands were European immigrants with less experience in America than ability with the language. Homesteading states created ad programs to attract hard-working families from Germany and Denmark, Hungary and Russia, Holland and Iceland—and many more.

Women like the storm-chaser in *Just a Few Drops of Rain* were included in the government’s offer. They too could get “free land.” Some worked as domestics to keep themselves afloat, even as they improved their 160 acres.

Harvey Dunn’s homesteading women work hard, but they’re not rich. And the truth is, many left here with their husbands and families, simply giving in to the arduous life that dry land and inconsistent rainfall created out on a treeless land so open there was no place to hide, no place for a space of your own.

This woman, were she real, could well be buried today in some California cemetery because she likely left the homestead when that sky turned thick with red Oklahoma dust some years later. Thousands like her made exodus. Just as hard-working, just as determined, they quit, bereft of dreams, packed their families and everything they could pile on the pick-up, and moved west, anywhere but here.

No matter the dire isolation they suffered, the mud floors beneath their feet, or the snakes squirming out of the dirt ceilings of the sod houses, what his hearty pioneer women lived through in a downright mean climate, their story—and the story of their families—is only half the tale. The white, homesteading story is an epic that hasn’t lost its sweaty heart and soul. It remains rife with heroic

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victories and catastrophic losses, hasn’t lost any of its power or force of character, only its appreciative audience because it’s just plain more difficult to be proud of Dunn’s characters today, 150 years later.

Last fall, I spent two weeks on an art residency at the National Homesteading Monument, just outside of Beatrice, Nebraska, well off the beaten path. It’s a gorgeous place, run by people who believe in the importance of history. But the story the Monument tells, no matter how difficult and ultimately heroic, will always be muted by the fact that when white folks—man, woman, and child—moved in, they moved red men and women and children out. Like the buffalo, our First Nations people were just simply in the way. White America had the temerity to call that takeover “Manifest Destiny.” That’s

what makes talking about homesteading heroism difficult, and Dunn’s prairie heroism less radiant than it once seemed.

When my own great-great-grandparents came to Wisconsin in the 1840s, they displaced Kickapoo and Sac and sent the Winnebagos, who now live here on the emerald edge of the Plains, 500 miles west. White folks came and built and conquered. It’s an old story that moves through American history like a wave.

In 1846, Derrick Hartman and his family, just off the boat, bought forty acres of unimproved land near what was Milwaukee back then and proceeded to try to settle. Life wasn’t easy for an immigrant frontiersman. Horror fell all around. In succession, Derrick Hartman lost his wife, three sons, and a daughter to a plague of something that has gone and likely went unreported. I wish I knew how a pious farmer like himself reckoned his fate with the hand of the God he worshiped through that travail.

Here’s what I know of his story, from a biography of Edgar Hartman, his remaining son, in a Sheboygan County (WI) history:

With his father and the remainder of the family, our subject came to this county in 1846. They were compelled to take their axes and cut roads land,

paying \$1.25 per acre. This property was in the midst of the forest and had never before been occupied by white settlers. Then the hardships and trials of the early pioneer were experienced, for they had very little to eat, not much clothing, and scarcely any of the comforts of life. The red men were still numerous in this section, but were not troublesome to the white settlers, except as beggars. The first home of the Hartman family was a rude log cabin, with puncheon floor, and the chimney was a simple stovepipe thrust through the clapboard roof.

My ancestors came and built and conquered. I am who I am, in part because sometime early in the 1840s, Derrick Hartman decided, somewhere in Holland, that his family could have a better life if they'd leave the old country and strike out for a new one in what was for them a whole new world.

When he got here, most of what he learned grew from the deaths of four of those he loved and whose lot he'd meant to change by coming to a new world. I'm sure he wasn't thinking about the Native people who'd occupied the lakeshore where he chose to live, wasn't thinking of them at all. They were, back then, little more than beggars, the note says, mostly a bother.

The story Harvey Dunn's work features is my story too, for better (undeniably heroic) or worse (unendingly tragic). In America, it's the white man's story, a story—as a Navajo friend of mine likes to say—of an immense wave of illegal immigration. All of that is there, all of that you can't help but see in the gutsy heartiness and the violent skies of Harvey Dunn.

It's a great story that requires muting.

Years ago, in South Africa, some friends took us to see the Afrikaner Museum in Pretoria, an immense structure created to honor the story of the Afrikaner people, a story many white South Africans with Dutch names are rightly proud of retelling. We were there not long after Nelson Mandela came from prison to become the first black Prime Minister of the country. A spirit of jubilation was all around. Optimism abounded.

I didn't say what I was thinking because I was a privileged guest, but I couldn't help thinking that some of honor and glory of the Afrikaner story had departed in the wake of the evils of apartheid. Given

what had happened and what would in the New South Africa, I couldn't help but feel that it was going to be difficult to ascribe honor to a story that deserves it—a story of grit and resolution and victory against what should have been insurmountable odds, both in colonization and in the Boer War.

But in the new South Africa, the story the country would tell would not be the same as that told by the majestic power of the Afrikaner museum because the new story had to include Nelson Mandela's and that of millions of others not spoken of. Even if the history of the Boer War didn't change, telling the story would.

As expansive as the canvases of Harvey Dunn are, there's another story behind them, one that's there even though it's not in the brush strokes.

I can't help it—I admire them anyway. Harvey Dunn was an illustrator and a teacher, a visual artist who made a fine living on other people's projects and in other people's magazines. Great Plains portraits like these grew out of his own passions and vision, however, and this is the work that's lasted in museums and private collections. They document a story that will forever be worth telling, even if they will always require an asterisk, a footnote, an addendum—another epic altogether.

Here's one more Harvey Dunn prairie sky, this one overlooking a funeral so seemingly anonymous that the only way to distinguish the racial and cultural character of the grieving is by what can be noted from their clothes and the outlines of the wagons they took to get up the hill to the cemetery.

Put scaffolding up there, outfit the mourners in feathers and paint, in breechcloth and blankets, and somehow the story would be the same, wouldn't it?—the land, the sky, the depth of sadness. In the final decades of the 19th century, from the distance Harvey Dunn establishes, change costuming and the look would be the same. Human grief is larger than we are. Even if the grieving were Native people, the crosses would be there, Father DeSmet and dozens having been around for decades.

The American Great Plains tell a host of stories really, but two of them date from the 19th century—one is white and one is red, but both are human, full of joy and sorrow, love and loss, all of it beneath that immense prairie sky.

Harvey Dunn was a teacher, too, with a gallery



the Yankton Sioux, who once roamed the grasslands here, must have set up camp. From right there at the hairpin turn, you can see for miles. An old neighbor once told him that he occasionally found artifacts right there above the beaver dam.

All of that got me to thinking that maybe some old 19th-century beavers engineered a dam back then too, created something of a swimming hole right there, a place where you could

of admiring students, one of whom never forgot the mission their teacher set them on: “The most valuable thing Dunn taught us was honest dealing with our fellow man and a constant gratitude to the Maker above for the privilege of seeing the sun cast shadows.”

That kind of ethic reaches beyond culture.

Not long ago my neighbor took me out along the Floyd River to show me where a colony of beavers had constructed a dam and thereby created a swimming hole convenient for underground dens only they can reach, an amazing construction really, worth seeing.

He told me that right there, at that big bend,

pull fish from deep holes where the river turns, a place to swim, even in drought. The Yanktons may well have found a beaver dam like the one that was there and determined it was a great place to set up camp.

Like the skies in all those Dunn paintings and the rolling prairie beneath, the beaver are still here, even though the land is a checkerboard of beans and corn these days, and the Yankton are a hundred miles west in South Dakota.

In some ways, little has changed. The beaver probably may tell their own story.

I find all of that humbling, finally—don’t you? Humbling, but it makes me smile.