

Picturing Americana

BY JOHN BEAHER

The late Cliff Edom, BJ '46, drilled one simple tradition into the Missouri Photo Workshop students: "Truth with a camera." The workshop is an enduring experiment in photojournalism, still imbued with his spirit.

Each summer for nearly 40 years, Edom, a professor of journalism, selected a small town in Missouri and transformed it into a laboratory for the latest photojournalism techniques. The workshop matched promising photographers from around the world with a cadre of instructors who were the best in the business — professional shooters and photo editors from some of the biggest publications in the country.



Downtown Rolla, at the corner of Pine and Ninth streets, 1955, by James L. Grant, BJ '48.

The photographers were turned loose to tell a story of small-town life through the lens of a camera. Nearly 2,000 photographers have participated in the workshops over the years. At nightly critiques, their work was alternately praised and blistered by the instructors.

"These guys never pulled their punches," recalls Bill Eppridge, BJ '60. "You never forget the lessons you learned in those workshops." During a career that's included jobs with *National Geographic* and *Life* magazine, Eppridge, now a contract photographer for *Sports Illustrated*, has returned often as a workshop instructor.

Another longtime workshop staff member was Angus McDougall, pro-

fessor emeritus of photojournalism. At early workshops, McDougall says, photographers used the heavy Speed-Graphic press cameras, which meant many photos were posed or set up. "That was the mark of ability at that time, to set up a picture so it looked unposed." Now, the much lighter 35mm cameras help capture "honest, candid slices of life," McDougall says. "The workshop spans a pretty big chunk of photographic development."

Before his death in 1991, Edom was hard at work on a book about the workshop's history. The book was a family affair, written with the help of his wife, Vi, and daughter Verna Mae Edom Smith, AB '51. Former workshop staffers and faculty from the School of Journalism also helped. *Small Town America: The Missouri Photo Workshops 1949-1991*, was published in 1993 by Fulcrum Publishing of Golden, Colo. It has 236 pages and costs \$39.95.

Communicate

Have you ever photographed the Columns on Francis Quadrangle? If so, you've helped make them the second most photographed landmark in Missouri. Jesse Hall's 100th anniversary will be observed in 1995. What are your fondest memories of the Quad?

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David Arnold, MA '70, photographed this rite of passage at a 1969 workshop in Forsyth.

It was several thousand pictures ago, but Don Ipock, BJ '83, of Kansas City remembers this one frame that he shot in Poplar Bluff in 1985. Ipock documented a few days in the life of a single mother and her extended family, and their "struggle to make ends meet from one generation to the next." The tattoos on the arm of her younger brother tell their own story.

The rising tide of social ills

As the Great Flood of 1993 rolled through Missouri, the devastation revealed just how fragile many rural institutions are, says Dr. Joanne Mermelstein. For rural Missouri, she says, "The flood was one more calamity in a long series of calamities."

Since the early 1960s, Mermelstein, associate professor of social work, has worked with the problems of rural Missouri. She's charted how a collapsing farm economy has impacted north Missouri — an aging population in desperate need of social and medical services, rising rates of children in poverty, schools and businesses struggling to survive. When the dairy industry in southwest Missouri hit hard times early this decade, she saw those same social pathologies "like a tornado moving south," just as the experts predicted.

"The rural shakeout is pushing wave after wave of people into rural

poverty," Mermelstein says. "When the farm economy starts collapsing, it takes with it agribusinesses and then regular businesses."

And as the need for social services increased, a squeeze on state budgets meant fewer dollars for social services. "As caseloads skyrocketed in rural Missouri, the number of caseworkers diminished," she says. "Agencies were spreading so few personnel so thin it was not possible for them to do the job."

Why are social services important in rural Missouri? "The spaces between the cities are becoming the asylums for the city. The homeless are moving out of cities into rural areas. The destitute, the deprived, the deprived — everything the cities can't handle is going to be out there," Mermelstein says. "The pretty pictures of rural life, when you look closer, aren't very pretty."

"The workshop was terribly intense. There was an enormous amount of pressure to do your very best," says John Glover, MA '72, of Fort Walton Beach, Fla., who took part in the 1971 workshop in West Plains. Glover examined the lives of a farm family rearing a houseful of foster children, when he photographed the youngsters helping out with chores, right. "The foster father didn't ask; they just knew to go help," Glover says.





Participants in the 1986 workshop in Hannibal washed into town along with a flood on the Mississippi River. Ben Harris, BJ '87, of Grand Forks, N.D., tagged along with a local restaurant owner, left, to show how she coped with the disaster. He remembers her irritation at facing another day of high water. Harris also remembers the nightly editing sessions by oft-crusty professionals. "I got my taste of humility," he says. "They gave you plenty of opportunity to dig your own grave."

Bill Eptridge, BJ '60, of Wilmington, Del., choked on grain dust while he took a close-up look at the daily operations of a grain elevator, above, in Aurora in 1960. "A couple of my cameras ceased functioning and had to be cleaned," he recalls. "I think I stopped coughing two months after the workshop." Eptridge now is a contract photographer for *Sports Illustrated*.

Charting regional change

How is rural Missouri changing? That depends on whom you ask and at what part of the Show-Me State you look. The experts agree that typical rural Missouri is anything but typical. "In some ways Missouri is a regional microcosm of the United States," says Dr. Daryl Hobbs, professor of rural sociology.

The beginning of the Corn Belt sprouts up in north Missouri. The state's sun belt, stretching from Branson, to just south of Columbia, bristles with well-heeled retirees and businesses flush with tourist dollars. There are pockets of Appalachia-like poverty scattered through the Ozarks. Missouri's economy is powered by agriculture, mining, manufacturing and lumber industries.

As director of MU's Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis, Hobbs has examined the changing face of Missouri. In a tier of counties across north Missouri, the population peaked around 1900. Many of those counties lost 20 percent of their population during the 1980s. Mom-and-pop stores on Main Street lost business to regional shopping areas like Kirksville, St. Joseph and Springfield.

Age demographics are changing across much of rural Missouri. In north Missouri, young people are simply moving away, looking for more opportunity. That same explanation

doesn't account for the rising number of elderly in Missouri's sun belt counties. They are moving there to retire, lured by affordable housing and a high quality of life.

Some factors hold true statewide, Hobbs says. Ironically, as population went down in rural Missouri, employment went up. "How did rural families adapt?" Hobbs asks. "They put more family members to work." The number of women working outside the home skyrocketed.

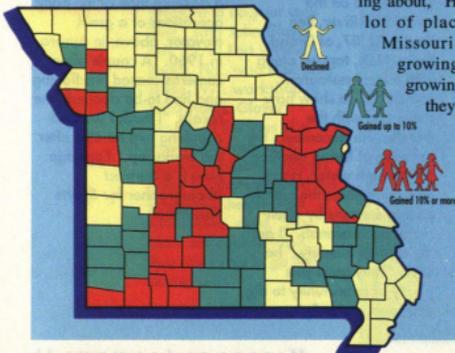
One of the biggest changes in out-state Missouri is the growing number of part-time farmers. Today, 71 percent of Missouri farms have gross sales of less than \$25,000 a year in agricultural commodities. "There's no question that an increasing number of rural Missourians gave up trying to make a living on the farm," Hobbs says. "Over the last 20 or 30 years more diversified sources of income have kept rural Missouri afloat."

With all the changes in the rural economy, not many small towns have gone under. "The towns remain, but they have very few services," Hobbs explains. "They lose the doctor first, then retail outlets. They might lose their school to a consolidated district. They literally become bedroom towns."

The same outlook doesn't hold true for all of small-town Missouri. Urban sprawl has brought a new wave of prosperity in some areas. "It depends on what part of the state you're talking about," Hobbs says. "There are a lot of places out here in rural Missouri where population is growing; income and jobs are growing. It's because of where they're located."

"What rural Missouri needs and lacks are sources of employment with higher skills and higher pay. Without that, the economic gap between rural and urban areas will continue to grow."

Population shifts from 1980 to 1990



A circle of down-and-out friends was the subject of Sarah Leen's photo essay at a 1978 workshop in Lebanon, Leen, AB '74, of Washington, D.C., was on hand when one of the women suffered convulsions and was comforted by her friend, above. Now a free-lance photographer for *National Geographic*, Leen has been an instructor in five workshops since her student days at Mizzou.



A fishing expedition was launched, left, along the shady streets of Forsyth in this 1950 photo by Charles Shaw, BJ '50, and Hal Power. Forsyth, deep in the Missouri Ozarks, was the home of Cliff Edom and the site of the workshop four times.