
Wisconsin Then and Now: the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Rephotography Project represents the final product of an endeavor from 1996 to 1998 by modern photographers to create over two hundred new images based on historic images of Wisconsin. This project, sponsored by the Wisconsin Historical Society (formerly the State Historical Society of Wisconsin), also led to the development of a museum exhibit, numerous traveling shows, a calendar, and a teaching guide for primary school teachers. In the introductory essay, Nicolette Bromberg, project director and former curator of visual materials at the historical society, discusses how she selected images for the project that broadly represent the millions of photographs preserved in the archival collections. The original photographs range the gamut of production sources from studio photographers to newspaper lensmen and amateur shutterbugs. The arrangement of historic and contemporary images into the broad topics of physical and cultural landscapes, and informed by the captions written by Bromberg and the rephotographers—although it is not always clear who authored which descriptions—combine in the book to create new meanings through a melding and comparing of the past with the present.

The images presented in the book have been provided broad interpretive frameworks in essays by Thomas R. Vale of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who describes the physical landscape of the state, and Steven Hoelscher of the University of Texas at Austin, who contributes an insightful analysis of its cultural landscape. Vale has co-authored his own books of rephotography that demonstrate physical landscape changes along highways in the western United States, U.S. 40 Today; Thirty Years of Landscape Change in America (1983) and Western Images, Western Landscapes: Travels Along U.S. 89 (1989). Here he provides an erudite trip through the physical landscape of Wisconsin, implementing parenthetical references to images in the project to illustrate the journey. Hoelscher draws on his expertise as a co-author of The Cultural Map of Wisconsin (1996) and his current work on turn of the twentieth century Wisconsin photographer Henry Hamilton Bennett to embark on a more ambitious effort to furnish the contextual cultural circumstances for selected images. Both essays provide viewers with foundations for recognizing the value of the imagery of the project.

The images represent the strength of this book. For their part the rephotographers in the project created images based on exact, subject-centered, or interpretative representations of the historic images. An example of this interpretation is a powerful pair of photographs used for the book’s cover and highlighted by Hoelscher in his essay. One of the photographs in this pair consists of an image of a family behind a table covered with an agricultural bounty in a burgeoning cornfield. In September 1895, Harvey J. Perkins captured this image for the pages of Northern Wisconsin: Handbook for the Homeseeker published the following year, a booster publication prepared by William Arnon Henry, the Dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin to attract immigrants to settle the cutover region of the northern counties. This historic image is juxtaposed with a photograph of the Xiong family by Jacob Stockinger, showing the Hmong farmers from Eau Claire behind an equally bountiful
table selling produce at the Dane County Farmers’ Market, in Madison, 1997. These images generate multiple meanings for each other about agriculture, immigration, and family in Wisconsin across a century-long divide, just as other linked images demonstrate constancy and change in the physical and cultural landscapes across time in the state.

Nonetheless, the book does suffer from some editorial deficiencies. It could have benefited from maps outlining the tour of Wisconsin provided by Vale or locating the individual images within the state. Aside from listing individuals in the acknowledgements and in passing references in the text, the book neglects to provide sufficient biographical information about the original photographers or project rephotographers. Consequently, readers do not adequately learn about the individuals who produced these impressive images. Finally, the essays refer to photographs scattered throughout the book which leads to an inordinate amount of flipping back and forth through the pages. A better editorial decision would integrate reduced images within the essays.

Still, the photographs in Wisconsin Then and Now are remarkably reproduced. Bolstered by the interpretive essays, they provide valuable views of the past and present landscapes of Wisconsin.

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