

HOW TO READ A FARM: STORIES FROM THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF BOWMAN COUNTY, NORTH DAKOTA

by

Thomas D. Isern and Tricia Velure Nissen

A historian need not believe in ghosts in order to hear voices from the past while tramping about the farms and ranches of the Great Plains. During the summer of 1997 we trod the farms, ranches, and small towns of Bowman County, North Dakota, conducting the Architectural Survey of Bowman County under a grant from the National Park Service via the State Historical Society of North Dakota. This resulted in the documentation of 253 sites comprising more than 1000 features and the compilation, along with the survey forms, of some 2050 photographs. Although the survey included several small towns—Haley, Gascoyne, Scranton, and Rhame—the majority of the sites surveyed were farms and ranches.¹

Our study of the historic buildings on farms and ranches reveals that their material culture, the aggregation of buildings and structures, was in one sense geological. It was to be expected buildings would have accumulated in patterns over time, patterns that are recognizable in the way geological strata are recognizable and that correspond to themes in regional agricultural history—settlement, the rise of pastoral and cereal cultures, mechanization, modernization. These patterns should be readable. The historian should be able to tell the story, or a story, of the farm or ranch on the basis of its material culture.

It is not that simple. The layers of material culture did not just accumulate in sequence. Rather they were commingled with elements of synthesis and adaptation. Many of the buildings on a given site are likely

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to be relocated structures. Following initial settlement, a rapid consolidation of holdings took place as speculative homesteaders and investors sold out to neighbors. A second wave of consolidation commenced during the late 1930s and continues to the present. The buildings on abandoned farms and ranches did not just disappear. They went walking—homestead shanties, granaries, barns, the whole lot—and found new homes and uses on surviving farmsteads. Many sites thus accumulated twenty, thirty, or more buildings.

Farm and ranch sites are highly synthetic in this regard, as well as in the continual adaptations made to buildings to fit them to changing needs. Several homestead shanties might be joined together and stuccoed over to make a ranch house for growing family. Venerable barns no longer used for dairying are modified for working beef cattle. Obsolete chicken houses, bunkhouses, and granaries become storage buildings and workshops.

The result is that the historian on site, listening for the story of the farm, hears from its buildings a multitude of voices, some in harmony, some in polyphony, making it difficult to discern the narrative. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of this paper is that as a result of experience in the documentation of many sites in a given area, the attentive historian can construct a credible narrative of the farm or ranch based on its material culture.

We have tested the proposition through the three case studies treated in this paper, cases selected because they comprise rich aggregations of buildings and because they represent a continuum of farm and ranch operations. Our treatment of each begins with a discussion of the farm or ranch by the first author, Tom Isern, based solely on the material culture documented on site. He attempts to tell the story without reference to written or oral sources. Then the second author, Tricia Nissen, responds with a narrative augmented by research in written sources. The written documents consulted included published local histories, transcripts of oral interviews, deed records, and tax records.

First, a few words as to setting and circumstance. Bowman County is the southwestern-most county of North Dakota, nestled into the corner alongside South Dakota and Montana. Pastoral occupation of what was



Horse barn

The Bradac Ranch headquarters site straddles the upper reaches of Little Beaver Creek, a tributary of the Little Missouri, in the broken-to-badlands country of northwestern Bowman County.³ Likely the outfit was in operation in the open range days prior to the turn of the century, and when the railroad approached, established a permanent headquarters at this site. The ranch house on the south creek bank dates from the first decade of this century. The renovations and additions made to the house indicate successive occupation by probably three generations of the ranching family, but its survival as main residence, rather than its replacement with a modern home, indicates only modest prosperity.

A collection of buildings roughly contemporary with the house provide an index of ranch life at the time. Most prominent is the handsome arch-roofed horse barn, with a remnant spar of its hay hood protruding from the north end. The ranch never milked more than a cow or two; the barn was for sheltering horses and, in the capacious loft under that arch roof, storing hay. In the second half of the century, however, the number of horses required for the operation decreased, and the need for cattle shelter and handling facilities increased. So a cattle shed was built nearby, and a lean-to covering pens for working cattle was added to the barn.

Although milking was not the metier of this cattle ranch, there are certain other material evidences of self-sufficiency or diversification—

to become Bowman County commenced in the 1870s and 1880s with open range sheep and cattle outfits establishing headquarters on the Grand River, the Little Missouri River, and lesser watercourses and herding their stock on the uplands. Almost nothing remains of the material culture of this open range ranching era. With the exception of certain buildings in the inland town of Haley, established on the Grand in 1898 as a stop on the stage route from Dickinson to Belle Fourche, no buildings in the county date from prior to about the time the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway built through the county in 1908.

The railroad spawned the towns of Gascoyne, Scranton, Buffalo Springs, Bowman, Griffin, Rhame, and Ives and also engendered occupation of the land by homesteaders. Settlement included little planned colonization or organized ethnic occupation; ethnic patterns are mixed. Over time patterns of rural residence and land use evolved according to circumstance and environment. Depopulation and consolidation are continual themes, at least until quite recently. Sheep and cattle ranching predominate in the more rugged landscapes of the county, especially the badlands-border areas along the Little Missouri in the west part of the county, while wheat farming predominates in the better arable lands of the eastern and central parts of the county. Most operations, however, are mixed, comprising both cereal grains and livestock.²

The Bradac Ranch (Tom's Reading)

Bradac ranch house
on south bank of
Little Beaver Creek





Horse barn

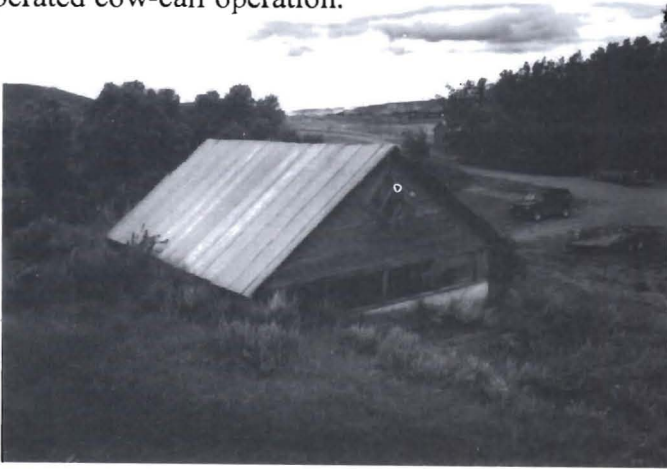
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most notably an impressive chicken house of unusual design, built into a southeast-facing hillside. Across the creek north of the house, the outfit fed out a few steers each winter in a shed ingeniously designed with grain bins on a higher level of the slope. Just below, near the creek, they hung meat in a springhouse.

Mechanization added layers to the material culture of the ranch but did not change its character. There were a garage and machine sheds, but not much grain storage. Right down to the present this remains a family-operated cow-calf operation.



Chicken house



Grain bins

Springhouse



The Bradac Ranch (Tricia's Reading)

Tom's account of the Bradac Ranch is generally sound, but the chronology is off slightly owing to a relocation revealed by the documents. The Bradac Ranch headquarters originally was located a half-mile south of the present location. With local advent of the railroad in 1908 open-range ranching operations quickened, and two newcomers on the scene were Lars Larsen and Austrian immigrant Alois Bradac. No buildings were on the present Bradac Ranch site; it was part of Larsen's ranch. Larsen's operation went under with the collapse of the cattle market in 1921. Bradac then acquired some of Larsen's lands and moved his ranch house, along with some outbuildings, to the present headquarters site in 1922 to 1924, when he also built the arch-roof barn.⁴ As Tom believed, three generations of a single family—the Bradacs—have owned and operated the ranch since Larsen's foreclosure in 1922, gradually augmenting their landholdings through the years; by 1955 they owned 55 quarters of land in the vicinity. Tom also believed this property has primarily been a cattle ranching operation from the start, with only slight diversification into other animals or small grains. Records concur. For instance, in 1937 the family owned 165 cows, 5 bulls, 30 calves, 35 horses, and just 3 pigs.⁵

The Deutscher Farm (Tom's Reading)



Deutscher farm house

The Deutscher farm is situated in the rolling wheat country of northeast Bowman County.⁶ This place would have been settled in about 1907, although no trace of a farmhouse dating from that time remains. The cross-gabled main residence on the place dates from the 1910s, but judging by the more recent foundation, was moved here from some other location, perhaps in the 1920s, and has been renovated since the 1960s. It is puzzling that the farmhouse is currently unoccupied; this indicates some discontinuity in succession.



Dairy barn



Hay-bale chicken house—two views



The residents and operators of this farm came from Europe or from some general-farming area of the midwest, because they went in for diversified agriculture. Granaries dating from the earliest years of the farm are evidence of cereal farming, but they are less impressive than the large, gambrel-roof dairy barn. The barn shows evidence of recent rehabilitation, including re-framing of windows, a sign that although there may be some disjuncture in residential succession, the farm remains in the hands of a family with some tie to its history. Particular evidence of early determination to establish diversification is an unusual and impressive chicken house, fifty feet long, the walls laid up of hay-bales and stuccoed over. Someone here was determined to keep a big flock alive through the North Dakota winter!

The early owners of this farm were inventive, mechanically inclined folk. The farm complex includes a blacksmith shop; a large wooden granary converted into a very large self-feeder for hogs; and in the middle of the farmstead, some sort of utility building that once was topped with a windmill, likely for generation of electricity. In the 1940s and 1950s they put up quonsets for their machinery.



Granary

This farm persisted and expanded while others failed or were sold out, and thus it accumulated a number of buildings moved in from other sites—particularly granaries, both handsome wood-frame granaries dating from 1910 or so and round metal bins dating from the 1940s and 1950s. During this same time the diversification that had marked the earlier farm disappeared, leaving only a specialized grain farm—and just a few hens left in the chicken house.

The Deutscher Farm (Tricia's Reading)

Tom's reading of the Deutscher Farm proved to be another accurate one. Although there are some discontinuities in residential succession, there are none in farm operation, for the original owners, James and Mary Svestka, were the great-grandparents of Stephanie (Deutscher) Kelner, co-operator of the farm today. The Svestkas acquired the property in about 1910 by relinquishment of a previous occupant who suffered a fire; they proved up on it in 1915.⁷

Based on the existence of a dairy barn, chicken house, hog feeder, and granaries dating from the 1910s and 1920s, Tom asserted that this farm was diversified from the start. Indeed, as of 1922 the Svestkas were growing wheat, oats, corn, millet, and spelt. They likely raised flax at some point, as evidenced by the flax bales used to build the chicken house, and milked as many as 44 dairy cows.⁸ Tom deduced that the Svestkas expanded their farm operation by acquiring lands (and thus buildings) from neighbors who sold out, and that subsequent operators gave up the original diversified character of the farm. The documents agree, but also reveal that the process traveled a rocky road. By the early 1930s the Svestkas owned 6 quarters of land, but they had mortgaged heavily to buy it. In the mid-1930s they temporarily lost all the land for delinquent taxes, although remaining as farm residents and operators. In the early 1940s they redeemed their holdings and even added 2 more quarters. With the good grain market and the expanded land base, the family ceased milking.⁹

Tom believed, too, that the Svestkas were inventive, mechanically inclined people. Doug Deutscher, grandson and second owner of the property, agreed, saying also that his grandfather read farm magazines and technical literature. The idea for the flax-bale chicken house came from James Svestka's reading in farm magazines. James also was among the first in the region to buy milking machines and the first in the vicinity to construct a silo.¹⁰

Grand River Farm and Ranch (Tom's Reading)



Grand River farm house

The Grand River Farm and Ranch is located on a bench just north of the Grand River in the southeast corner of Bowman County.¹¹ This is a mixed landscape, with the river bottom and the rough hills on its north side used for grazing, but with nearby, rolling uplands used for grain farming. The Grand River Farm and Ranch complex comprises twenty-eight buildings, evidence that its material culture was swelled by additions from surrounding operations that were abandoned.

The residence situation here is confusing. The current operators live in a modest stucco house dating from about 1950 and situated on the north, high side of the farmstead. The previous generation on the place, however, lived in a two-story frame farmhouse down the hill, a house that

was moved to this site, judging by the foundation, no earlier than 1930. About the same time the owners built a cozy stucco bunkhouse nearby for the hired man. In addition there is another moved house that has been converted into a tack room, and a frame bunkhouse or residence for a family member is under halting construction. The owners of this farm either brought in residences from elsewhere to succeed their original ones, or they came from another place, took over this one, and moved their buildings with them.



Two-story frame farm house

The settlement generation and its successor did only modest cropping and emphasized livestock, several kinds of livestock. High on the slope, along with other material evidence of hog culture, is an old homestead shanty that was converted to a hoghouse. Farther down are sheep sheds, and below that a cattle barn, along with a couple of chicken houses. Sometime after 1950, though, the hogs, sheep, and chickens dwindled, and cattle assumed primary importance on this place. A trench silo, elaborate feed bunks built conveniently into the slope above the feedlot, and most of all, multiple cattle sheds were added.



Homestead shanty converted to hoghouse



Chicken house

Furthermore, the emphasis on cattle culture prompted greater emphasis on saddle horses and thus construction of a horse barn and corral complex.



Feed bunks built into slope above feed lot

At the same time, this farm operation acquired wheat land, and with the rising importance of wheat culture, began to add granaries. The evidence that this emphasis on wheat came after 1950 is that there are no wood-frame granaries, only more recent round bins. First quonsets and then additional steel buildings provided working and storage space for the tractors, implements, and combines required for the wheat acreage.

The first garage on the farm, dating from the 1920s, was succeeded by a schoolhouse moved to the farm site and converted into a more spacious garage. This is merely one more evidence of the highly adaptive and synthetic nature of the farmstead, which has been generally re-made since about 1950.

Grand River Farm and Ranch (Tricia's Reading)

Unfortunately, I cannot alleviate all of Tom's confusion on the story of the Grand River Farm and Ranch. The deed and tax records conflict

with each other as well as with an oral account of the property given by Ed Ward, the current owner-operator. It appears that the property has had as many as nine owners, but only two families, the Rasmussens and the Wards, as occupants and operators.¹²

I can, however, comment on the nature and extent of Grand River's operation. As Tom noted, this site comprises 28 buildings, many of which, he believed, came from neighbors who abandoned their farms after the settlement boom. The material core of the headquarters, however, was a blended farmstead. The Rasmussen family occupied the present Grand River Farm and Ranch site in the 1940s, while the Wards lived on the river bottom a mile east. Following a serious flood in 1947 the Wards moved west and took over the Rasmussen site, moving their two-story frame house with them. The little red bunkhouse they situated nearby was an old shed they converted and stuccoed. The stucco house that is the present main residence was built to accommodate Ed and his bride, Joan Peterson; their son Al is a present co-operator and lives in a nearby town.

The buildings gave Tom a good indication of the diversity of Grand River's operation. He noted the early emphasis on livestock including hogs, sheep, chickens, and cows; the focus on cattle by the middle of the century; and the extension into small grains around that same period. He believed that the earlier diversification of the operation had been narrowed to focus on cattle and wheat. In fact, diversification has continued, perhaps even increased, because as the verbal evidence shows, the headquarters site is not the whole of the Grand River Farm and Ranch. Ed Ward has bought another farm two miles north, in the hilly country where he once herded cattle as a boy, and moved his substantial hog and sheep operations there. While engaging in extensive grain farming, he still considers himself mainly a stockman.

Conclusion (Tom Cuts His Losses)

Comparing my narratives of three farms as told by the material culture thereon with Tricia's narratives enlightened by documentary evidence, I am chastened but not embarrassed. I completely missed the

relocation of the Bradac ranch; closer examination of the ranch house foundation might have betrayed that, and thus prevented my mis-dating the horse barn, an important feature, by as much as a decade. The reading of material evidence on the Deutscher Farm proved reliable, but the documentary evidence added drama to the story—the ambitious Svestkas expanding during the 1920s, suffering financial embarrassment in the 1930s, and rebounding in the 1940s. It was on the Grand River Farm and Ranch I went most seriously astray, for by focusing on the material evidence of the headquarters site, I got no clue of the continued sheep and hog operations, which had been moved to a satellite headquarters.

My first conclusion from this exercise is one that any good historian would have predicted: we do best by using a variety of sources, the more diverse the better, and checking them against one another. My narratives based solely on material evidence were incomplete at best and sometimes erroneous. The same, however, could be said of an account written entirely from verbal sources without considering the material evidence. This leads to another conclusion, or at least an assertion, not so common among historians, judging by their writings on the agricultural history of the Great Plains. The conclusion is that the material evidence is rich and powerful and is neglected by traditional historians at their peril. The material evidence speaks more concretely than statistics of the great winnowing of farms and ranches that has taken place over the generations and of the survival strategies of the stickers and survivors. It also provides a richness of detail about daily life—keeping chickens alive in North Dakota, for instance—not captured in the legal documents and too often filtered out of the oral histories.

For generations the agricultural historians of the Great Plains have bemoaned the decline of the diversification practiced by traditional family farms and replaced by commercial monocultures. Perhaps it is time for historians, too, to practice some diversification—enriching their narratives by use of material evidence.

NOTES

1. The Historic Architectural Survey of Bowman County is project # 38-97-12037-36, Historic Preservation Department, State Historical Society of North Dakota. All project files cited herein are in possession of the SHSND; a general report on the project is *Historic Architectural Survey of Bowman County* (Fargo: NDSU Institute for Regional Studies, 1998). A world wide web site for the project is located at <<http://www.plainsfolk.com/bowman/>>. The research which is the subject of this paper has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, a division of the United States Department of the Interior, and administered by the State Historical Society of North Dakota. The contents and opinions, however, do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United States Department of the Interior or the State Historical Society of North Dakota. This program receives Federal funds from the National Park Service. Regulations of the U.S. Department of the Interior strictly prohibit unlawful discrimination in departmental Federally Assisted Programs on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, or handicap. Any person who believes she or he has been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility operated by a recipient of Federal assistance should write to: Director, Equal Opportunity Program, U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service, 800 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20002.
2. The standard county history is *Prairie Tales* (Bowman: Rural Area Development Committee, 1965) along with its companion volume, *Prairie Tales II* (Bowman: Bowman County Historical Society, 1989). On the local environment see C.G. Carlson, *Geology of Adams and Bowman Counties, North Dakota*, North Dakota Geological Survey Bulletin 65, Part I, 1979, and Donald D. Opdahl et al, *Soil Survey of Bowman County, North Dakota*, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, in cooperation with the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, 1975. General descriptions here given are, however, based largely on the site surveys and oral histories compiled parcel to the Historic Architectural Survey of Bowman County (hereafter Bowman County Survey) and thus on file at the SHSND.
3. Bradac Ranch Site, 32BO949, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.
4. Main reliance for reconstruction of the history of the Bradac Ranch was on two bodies of county records: tax records of the Bowman County Treasurer, and deed and mortgage records of the Bowman County Register of Deeds, Bowman County Courthouse, Bowman, North Dakota. Tax records consulted: Personal Property Tax List, 1915; Real Estate Tax List, 1915; Tax List, 1925; Tax List, 1935; Tax List, 1945; Tax List, 1955. Deed and mortgage records: we began searches in the Index to Deeds, researching by legal description of known Bradac Ranch properties, and then branched from there, using the alphabetical index to follow individuals and entities discovered in the earlier searches, examining 23 instruments (deeds, mortgages, leases). Also

important was a telephone interview with Scott Bradac, 21 April 1998, notes placed into Site File 32BO949, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.

5. Specific facts from: Tax List, Bowman County Treasurer, 1955; Final Decree of Distribution, 17 February 1937, Misc. Book 10, pp. 201-02, Bowman County Register of Deeds.

6. Deutscher Farm Site, 32BO840, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.

7. Documentary research on the Deutscher Farm comprised the same county tax lists as for the Bradac Ranch (see note 4). Deed and mortgage research, again conducted in the same fashion, drew on 12 instruments (deeds, mortgages, leases, other documents). See also telephone interview with Doug and Gloria Deutscher, notes placed into Site File 32BO840, Bowman County Survey, SHSND. The Svestka homestead patent is in Book 120, p. 20, Bowman County Register of Deeds.

8. Seed Grain Contract, James G. Svestka and Bowman County Commissioners, 1 April 1922, Mortgage Book 55, p. 652, Bowman County Register of Deeds.

9. Loss of property, redemption of same, and expansion of farm documents in mortgage and deed records of 1930s and 1940s; see also Deutscher interview notes, Site File 32BO949, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.

10. Deutscher interview notes, Site File 32BO949, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.

11. Grand River Farm and Ranch Site, 32BO825, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.

12. Documentary research on the Grand River Farm and Ranch comprised the same county tax lists as for the Bradac Ranch (see note 4). Deed and mortgage research, again conducted in the same fashion, drew on 24 instruments (deeds, mortgages, and other documents). See also telephone interview with Ed Ward, 20 April 1998, notes placed into Site File 32BO825, Bowman County Survey, SHSND.