

THE LEGACY OF COUNTRY GRAIN ELEVATORS

A Photo Essay

by Barbara Krupp Selyem, with photographs by Bruce Selyem

A bounty of grain has always indicated the prosperity of a civilization. Throughout history the largest percentage of any population has necessarily been employed as farmers. But twentieth-century advancements in transportation and technology have brought about steady and substantial change. And change usually follows a course of denial, resistance, resolution, and finally acceptance. As we have shifted from a rural to urban population, it is only natural and predictable that we cling to something with which we identify. The country grain elevator is a nostalgic icon of our agricultural heritage.

In the 1860s country grain elevators began springing up along the Kansas skyline and for nearly 140 years have been majestic symbols of the bounteous fruits of our labor. They are a trophy to the pioneer's rise over seemingly insurmountable obstacles in his quest to feed his family and ultimately the world. Elevators have given us roots and welcomed us home. They represent man's contribution to the prairie landscape. With reverence, we have called them "Prairie Skyscrapers," "Sentinels of the Prairie," and "Prairie Cathedrals." Sadly that which was once a monument to prosperity now marks the grave of a vanishing way of life. At the close of this millennium, we reflect with appreciation on this seemingly timeless structure.

Looking at a modern atlas, it is easy to locate what is or might have been a rail line. One phenomenon of the railroad building boom in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the spacing of towns every six to ten miles in grain producing regions. This spacing created by the railroads was based on the availability of water and fuel, potential grain production, the ability for the farmer to deliver his harvest by team and wagon and return home the same day, and to prevent other rail lines from building in the same area.

Barbara Krupp Selyem worked in the grain industry in Missouri for twenty-two years for a company that manufactures grain-handling equipment. She records and writes about the history of grain elevators that her husband Bruce Selyem photographs. Bruce is recognized as a leader in preserving the history of country grain elevators, and he founded the Country Grain Elevator Historical Society. Using their respective talents, Barbara and Bruce produce "Old Time Elevators," a regular feature for Grain Journal, a grain industry magazine.



Ashland, Clark County, Kansas

Grain was a much sought after commodity, and elevators were necessary to receive, weigh, store, and transfer it. At first the railroad financed country elevators, but this practice was restricted in the 1870s. To attract investors, railroads offered incentives such as nominal lease rates, spur lines, no time limit for loading and unloading cars, and special rate arrangements. With little government regulation, new grain companies were established, and by the 1880s Kansas alone had 125 new grain elevators. The history of these companies, the creation of farmer cooperatives, and the evolution of agriculture in North America is a complicated study. Conversely the elevators that were built were astonishingly simple.

The basic structure included storage bins, a drive shed for protection from the weather while unloading grain, and a scale room where weights and grades were recorded. An office/engine shed was connected to the elevator by a walkway, which also served as a cover for the drive shaft and belt that ran from the engine to the leg. This separation was desirable as a safety precaution to prevent explosions ignited by engine fires. Teams of horses powered earliest elevators, but steam- and gas-powered engines soon replaced horses, and in the early 1900s electric motors began to replace the engines.

Most commonly country elevators were constructed of wood, which was readily available and inexpensive. Some elevators were cribbed, a technique whereby wood was stacked horizontally, with broad sides together, interlocking at the corners log-cabin style. Beginning at the base with two-by-eight or two-by-six boards (depending on the intended height of the structure) and decreasing in size to two-by-fours as the walls rose, the boards were nailed together using twenty-penny nails. Although common in Kansas, this construction was more widely used in the northern states and Canadian provinces, probably due to the availability of material and more severe weather conditions.

Other elevators were built using stud or frame, sometimes called balloon, construction, which was less expensive than cribbing. Horizontal wood bands placed every four feet vertically secured the perimeter, and the bins were interlaced with a maze of tie rods extending through the bands to provide support. Stud elevators were more prevalent on the Central and Southern Plains, particularly in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Oklahoma. Most wood elevators, crib and stud, were sided with metal or asbestos to prevent fire. Regardless of technique, their form, function, and appearance were basically the same. Brick and tile elevators also were built as

fireproof alternatives to wood. They were more expensive and lacked the strength necessary to withstand the pressures of stored grain. Around the turn of the twentieth century with the invention of the slip form, concrete became the preferred alternative method of construction.

The inner workings of the country grain elevator involved only a few integral parts. These included the scale, receiving pit, bucket elevator, drive, distributor, spouting, and bins. It was so simple it adapted easily to change, which contributed to its decades of continual use. As we have noted, for example, the gas engine replaced horsepower, and electricity replaced the engine. It is interesting that even our most modern facilities use basically the same equipment.

What then caused the demise of country grain elevators? We assumed they were built to last forever, when in fact their useful life was estimated to be about forty years. With fire such a formidable foe, the average life span was actually much less. The loss to fire, however, does not evoke in us the same sense of tragedy as abandonment and their purposeful demolition. Elevators are casualties of change. Since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the small family farm has vanished, replaced by larger, technologically advanced operations that are more productive and profitable. They in turn created greater demands for more storage. For a while with the addition of annexes and steel bins, the wooden country elevator was able to adapt.

As farms grew larger and more mechanized, the rural population began shifting to the city, resulting in the closure of many small-town businesses. With fewer potential passengers and freight, the rail companies began to re-evaluate certain lines, often finding it necessary to abandon them and subsequently remove the tracks. Without rail service many elevators were forced to close, but some survived by trucking their grain to larger terminal facilities. With the additional transportation costs, rising railroad lease rates, and taxes, profits dwindled and basic maintenance became unaffordable. Elevators deteriorated and became fire and safety hazards. Some were sold for private storage. A few were moved. Many were demolished or simply abandoned.

Those rail lines that continued to operate had to be competitive with highway and water transportation so they turned to the use of unit trains. Priority service and rates were given to grain companies based on the number of cars that could be dropped and loaded at each siding. Country grain elevators with limited capacity and slow speed could not meet these demands. One large concrete

facility, strategically located along the tracks outside township limits, could replace eight to fifteen old wood elevators. In many cases grain companies chose to demolish the old structure rather than sell it to the community or a local farmer, thus creating a competitor.

The loss of country elevators is very complex. Often speculation on their demise centers on greed, whether on the part of the railroad or the growing conglomerate big grain companies. Simply, what has rendered them obsolete is their limited storage capacity, the development of new and safer building materials, and changes in technology. Until we discover a good adaptive use for obsolete grain elevators, they will continue to be demolished.

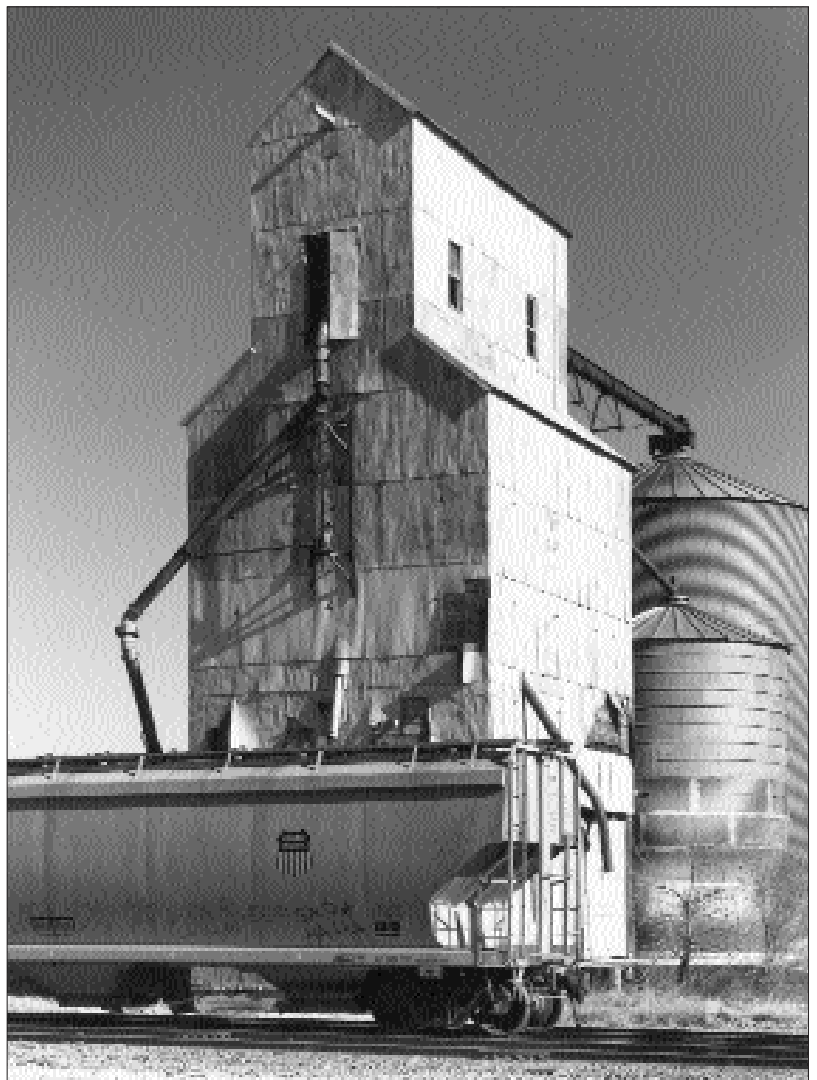
Truly the disappearance of country grain elevators marks the end of an era, but these buildings have not vanished quietly into history. This architecture, unique to North America, provided amazing structures. They were designed for function and simplicity without unnecessary decoration. They were meaningful edifices that aided meaningful work. They were engineered to endure the tremendous pressures of stored grain while protecting our harvest from hot dry summers and cold blustery winters. They were fortresses against fierce prairie winds and violent storms.

This stark structure is not void of beauty and form as some might propose. That notion is erased by a single sunset gleaming on the elevator and casting shadows of interwoven spouting and conveyors. It is an imposing structure, as it stands majestically alone on our prairies, a tangible and symbolic interruption in the line between the heavens and the earth. Within its walls, accompanied by choirs of meadowlarks and mourning doves, we can hear the whispers of our ancestors dreaming of a better way of life for their children and grandchildren.

The country grain elevator is a familiar form, which appeals to us on many levels, both physical and spiritual. It evokes in us a sense of nostalgia as we yearn for church socials and county fairs. Within its domain, we knew each other by name and stopped to visit on the town square, in the post office, or local cafe. It reminds us there was once a place where travelers felt welcomed, and those we passed were acknowledged with a friendly nod or gesture. Under its silhouette our families worked, played, and prayed together. It is a cultural monument that identifies who we were and who we are.

To the community, the elevator was an employer, customer, and investor, a vital commercial hub. Although its primary function was to store and merchandise grain, it was not unusual to find an elevator that sold fertilizer, feed, seed, coal, lumber, and other commodities. On a grand scale, it was the community's domestic and international connection. But to the local farmers, who gathered there for morning coffee, it was a place to interact with friends, tell stories and spin yarns, share laughter, and understand tears.

It is now left to the painter, photographer, historian, and poet to capture the essence of the country elevator. They are the ones who will weave the threads of function, architecture, and social significance into artful tapestries that will be used by future generations to evaluate and appreciate its legacy.



Cheyenne Wells, Colorado

COUNTRY GRAIN ELEVATORS

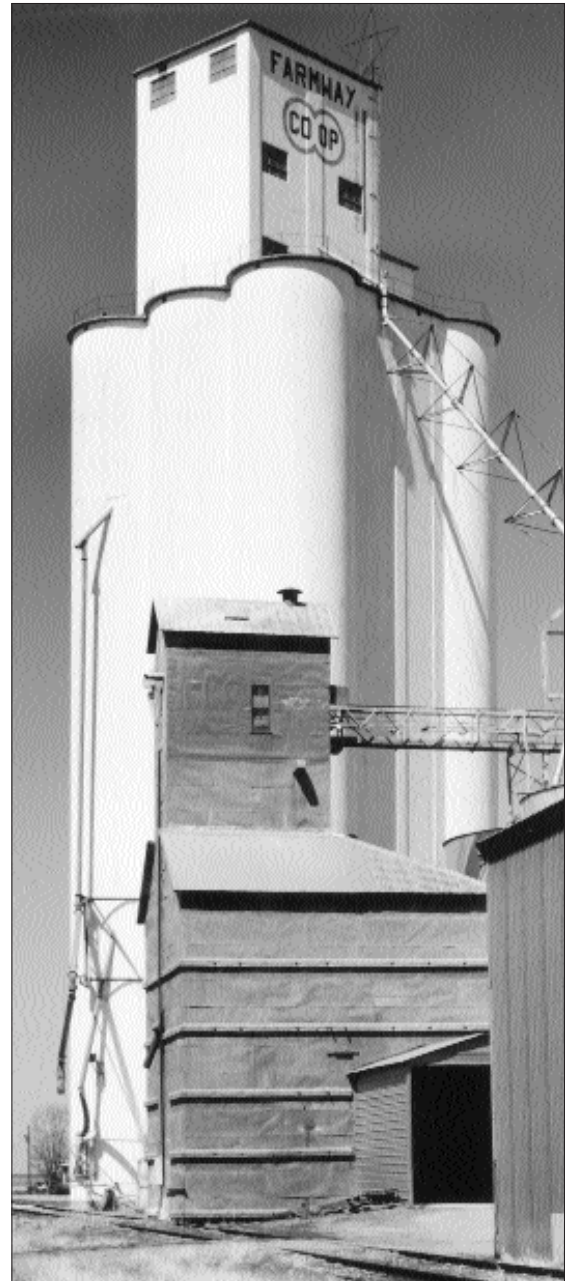
(Unless otherwise noted, all elevators are in Kansas.)



Above: BIRD CITY, CHEYENNE COUNTY

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Right: DENMARK, LINCOLN COUNTY





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BROWNELL, NESS COUNTY

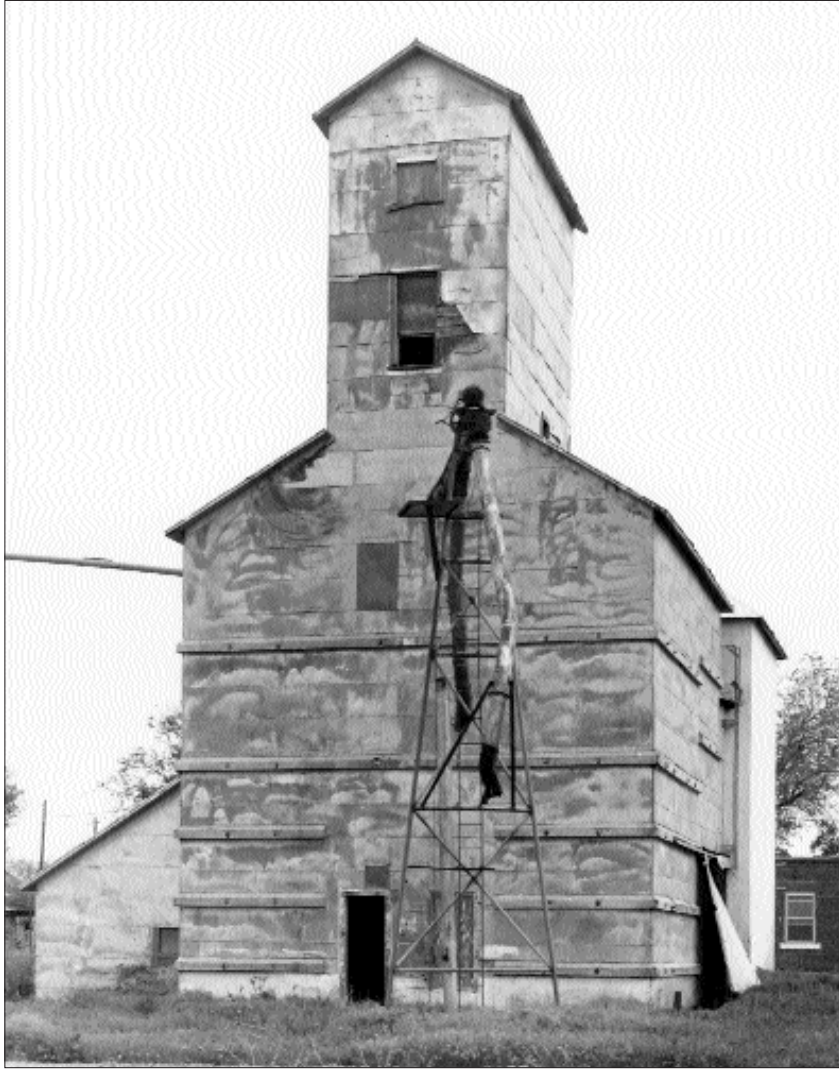


Above: BROWNS SPUR,
KINGMAN COUNTY

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Right: NICKERSON,
RENO COUNTY

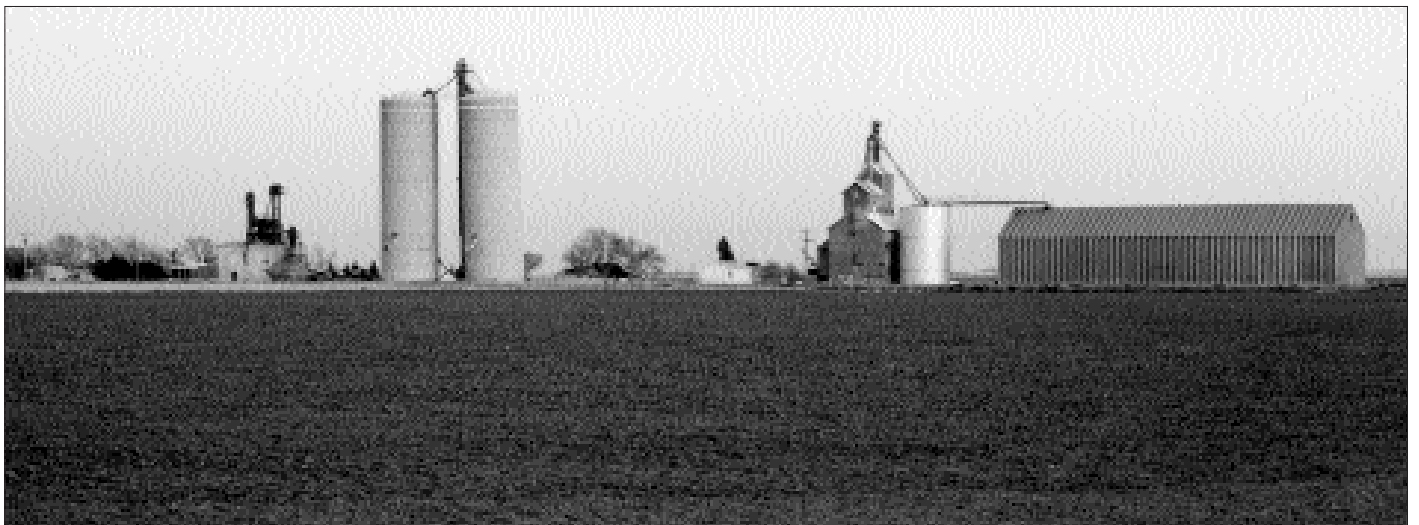




*Left: COLDWATER,
COMANCHE COUNTY*

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Below: GEM, THOMAS COUNTY

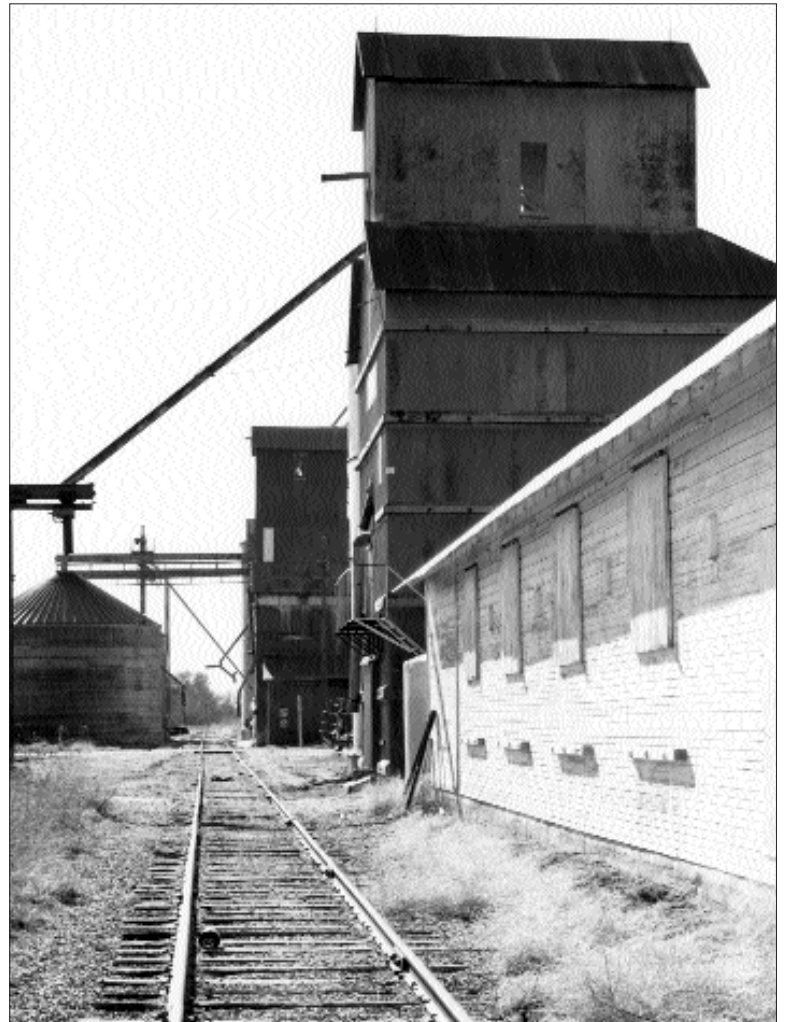




*Above: WALLACE,
WALLACE COUNTY*

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*Right: HERNDON,
RAWLINS COUNTY*



Right: KANOPOLIS,
ELLSWORTH COUNTY

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Below: LUDELL,
RAWLINS COUNTY



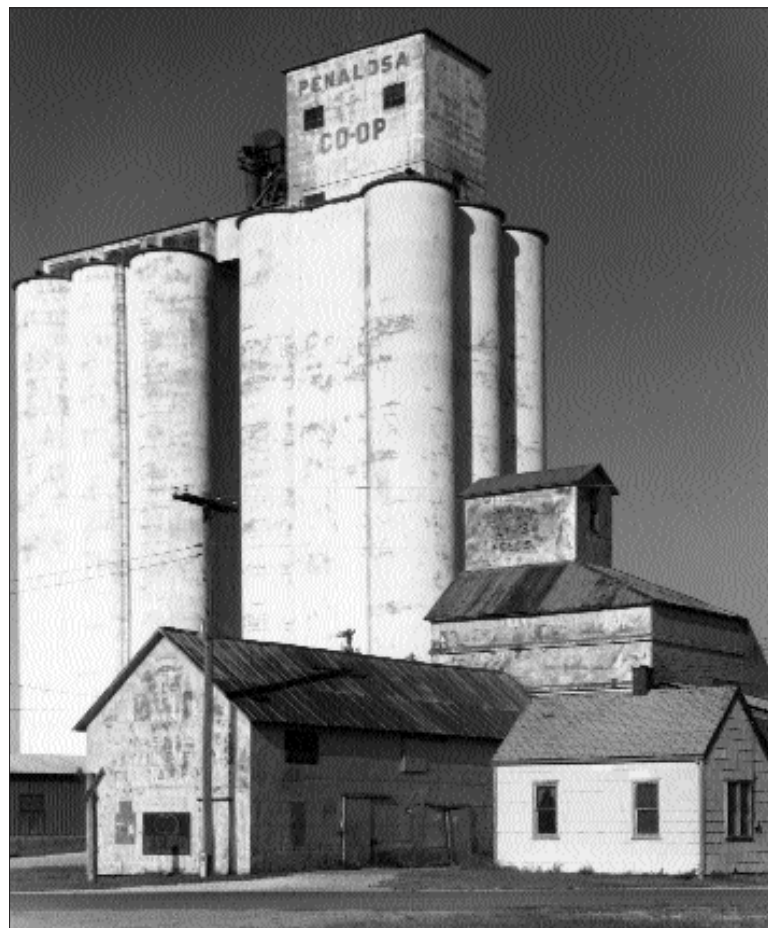


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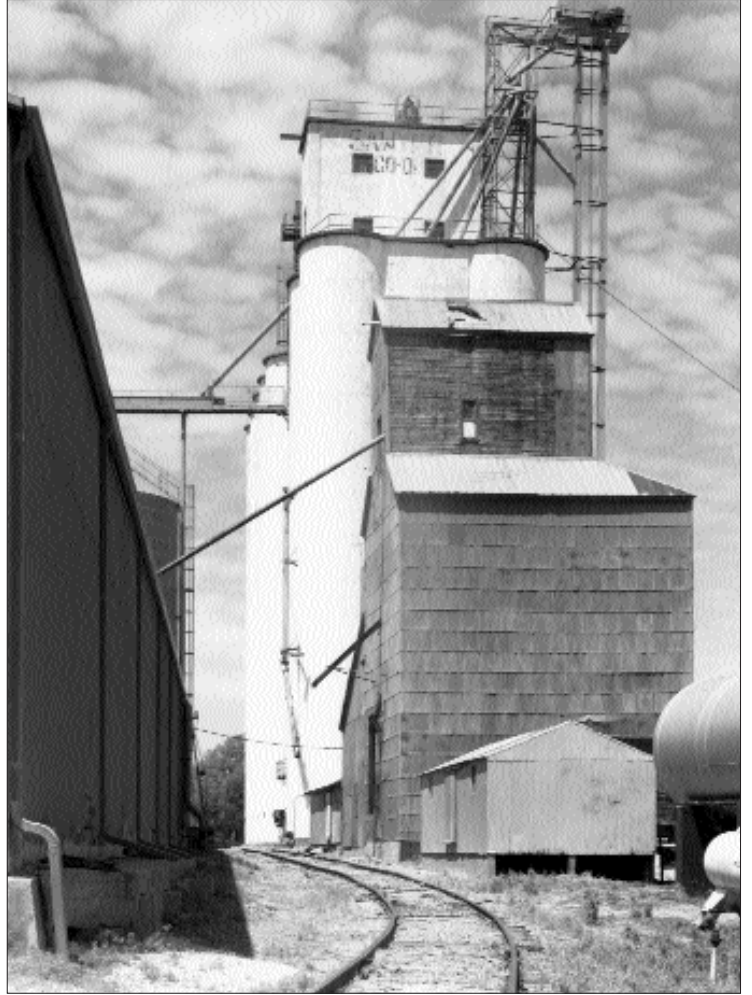
*Left: LAKE CITY,
BARBER COUNTY*

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*Right: PENALOSA,
KINGMAN COUNTY*



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Right: SAWYER, PRATT COUNTY



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Left: WEBBER, NEBRASKA





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Left: SHIELDS, LANE COUNTY



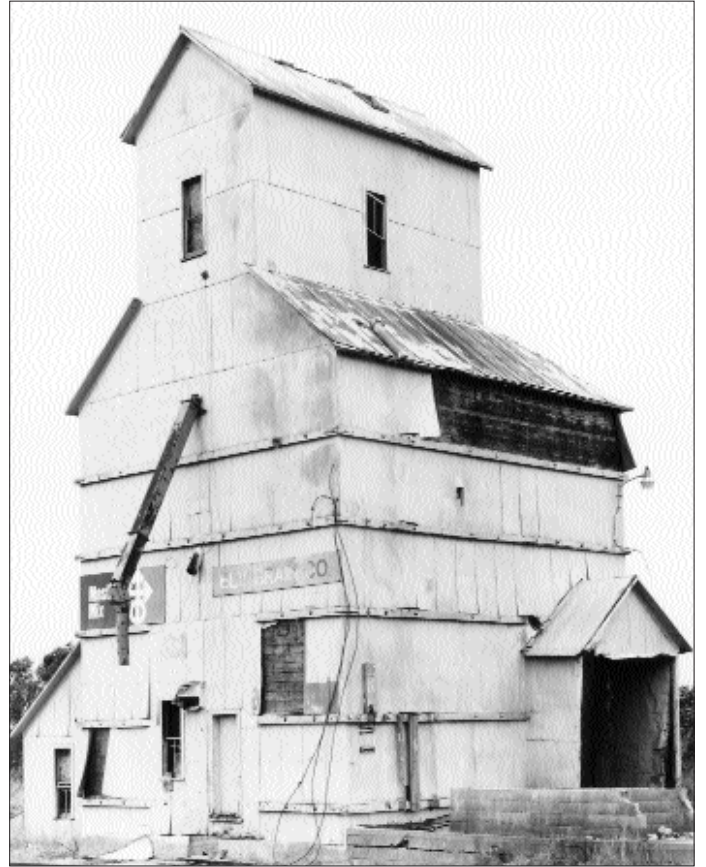
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Right: VONA, COLORADO

Right: BOSTWICK, NEBRASKA

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Below: ZENDA, KINGMAN COUNTY



SELECTED READINGS

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