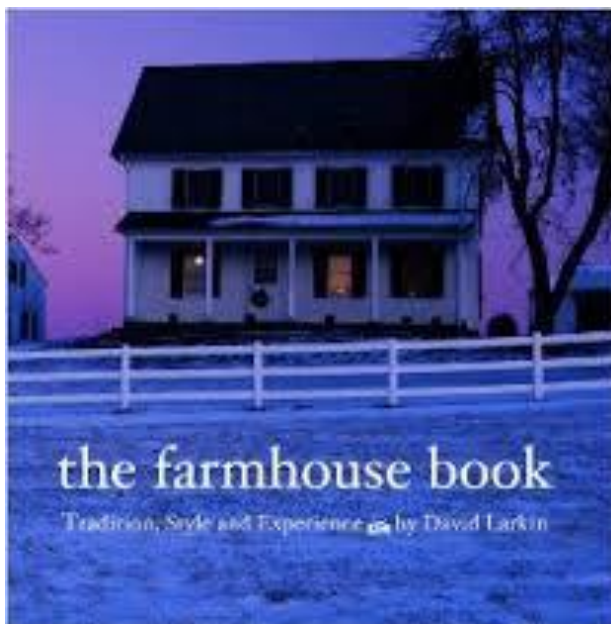


The Farmhouse Book by David Larkin

A Review by Garry Victor Hill



The Farmhouse Book: Tradition, Style and Experience.

An Illustrated Documentary by David Larkin

Photography by Carl Socolow, Michael Freeman, Paul Rocheleau, and Jessie Walker

New York: Universe Publishing, 2005.

Note: All pictures used in this review have been put through the copyright process of request through feedback. No image except from the above book cover is from David Larkin's work, although they depict similar buildings.

Usually books about rural dwellings can be categorised two ways: the coffee table glossies and those that are essentially manuals of some sort. The glossies are usually strong on beautiful images and weak on information. They usually say little if anything about the agricultural development that lead to the beautiful house they depict and less about the business of farming. The more informative books are usually manuals of some kind, sometimes obviously so, if they have titles such as '*How to Build Your Own Farmhouse*' or *Restoring a Victorian Farmhouse*. Others

such as guides for tourists are a little less obvious. They usually have a chronology and mention the original builders' name and subsequent owners and also describe building materials and give size measurements. Sometimes diagrams and black and white illustrations are included. Such texts deal with a type of reality, being rich in facts, but as with the glossies, the reality of living a farm life, its chores, inventiveness, challenges, regularity, problems and rewards are at best, only hinted at.

The Farmhouse Book: Tradition, Style and Experience does something different, which makes it very welcome. Like the glossies beautiful illustrations abound, with abundant colour photographs. Like the manuals, it has an extensive glossary and architect's drawings of the houses, delicately coloured to show the reality. This book also contains an enormous amount of other technical information, therefore containing the best of both book styles. However it does more than this: although barely a single person gets a depiction, it brings alive the world of American farming families. Their experiences, their way of life, their ingenuity and their adaption to their environment permeate the book.

Although it is only 224 pages long, large segments of America's farming world are dealt with in detail. Some sections are not. The Southern plantations, the sodbusters' mud huts, the modern agro businesses and windfarms are barely mentioned, if that. Although all of these examples are the centre for agricultural businesses, they cannot be called houses. The same obviously must be true of barns and mills, which are barely mentioned, but David Larkin gives them separate books. This enables him to focus on the various traditional styles of the American farmhouse, from the beginnings of colonial times to their restoration at the start of the twentieth century. The majority of the farms depicted here were built in the period between the 1700s to the 1880s. Apart from written primary sources, Larkin only uses photographs made for his book from still existent houses. He does mention restoration work and modern additions.

Differences in era, origin, season and climate are accounted for: no over generalisations emerge. The ethnic background of the first builders, the foreign origin of their building ideas and the way they adapted those ideas to American conditions are mentioned. The well-known English, Neo-Classical and Pennsylvania Dutch styles are dealt with, but the less well known German, French and Scandinavian influences, which went far beyond the East Coast, are also covered. The Shakers and the Spanish influence in the West also have coverage

and photographic examples. More of both of these cultures and Amish, Mormon and Mennonite examples would have been welcome additions. More depictions of farmhouses from the 1890s onwards would have also been welcome.

Unfortunately to do full justice to all the diverse groups and eras would have meant the book would have been at least twice as long and probably taken another year's work. What is here does more than give a sense of the beauty of American farmhouses and explanations of how they functioned. *The Farmhouse Book* give a sense of the industriousness, ingenuity and dedication of America's early farmers

Wisely Larkin begins with a succinct six page segment chapter entitled 'A Day in the life of a Farmhouse.' As this title suggests, this section takes the reader through the traditional farming experience in the days before electricity and does not sentimentalise rural life: whatever the season, some task always required labour. Workdays began even before dawn. The husband or the male on the property harnessed horses for the fieldwork, while the wife or woman of the house rekindled last night's fire, draws water from the well, the pump or barrels and prepares the dough for oven baking. She or their children collect eggs, and prepare the table for breakfast. If they are lucky they may have fly screens on doors to reduce both a heat build-up in the house and the number of insects inside. The heat from the fire

of course welcome in winter and perhaps autumn, but more rarely in summer. Even so, regardless of the season it must be on, for cooking and hot water. While the men work in the fields, butcher animals or hunt, fish or snare, the women and younger children are involved in assorted tasks. These would include milking, husking corn, collecting and cutting firewood, preserving fruit, crushing apples to make cider, (one of the most popular drinks) churning to make butter or cheese, smoking or curing meat, baking, scrubbing and sanding floors, whitewashing walls, mending and making clothes, making tallow into candles and polishing - shoes, saddles, sills, tools, weapons, kitchen utensils, cutlery. The day that began at 4:30 a.m. ends at 6 p.m. with supper. If tomorrow is not the Sabbath or market day it will be same. Independence and self-sufficiency came with a high price in time, energy and hope. This incidentally is the description of a good day, free of worries about weather, tax collectors, crop pests and diseases, drought, flood or a too successful crop that will lead to over-abundance, lower demand and therefore lower prices.

After this depiction of a day at harvest time the next section is ‘The American Farmhouse Takes Shape’ This section subdivides by region, flowing well from the first farmhouses in New England to those of the West and the prebuilt farmhouses that became popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Interestingly the farms’ architectural designs were often taken from architecturally untrained farmwives who had designed their own farms - and then submitted their designs to rural magazines.

After these two overall views Larkin then specialises in parts of the farmhouse. The interiors, kitchens, parlours, and bedchambers each get a segment where the rooms’ functions are explained in both the text and by captioned photographic examples. Gardens, fences, dining rooms, corridors, porches, bathrooms and attics do not get separate chapters, but they are represented extensively.

As well as the buildings other later sections deal with practicalities. ‘Keeping Warm in a Farmhouse’ not only describes how rural people did this, it instructs readers on the best use of a fireplace. A subsection explains fireplace and chimney safety, choices in picking the best type of wood for fuel - and how to improve the woodpile. The next section ‘Keeping Cool in a Farmhouse’ instructs with practical advice on that matter and then other sections go on to cover making bread and butter, pickling and storage. Not one of these practicalities involves electricity. Apart from the usefulness of such clear practical instructions, these sections also make the reality of farmhouse work vivid.

Another unusual and welcome factor with this book is that it exposes fallacies and replaces them with the realities. Some of the problems came from Wallace Nutting (1861-1941) By the 1900s he had become a very successful photographer, interior designer, manufacturer and restorer who photographed colonial houses as he thought they should be. He then popularised the images through magazines and then sold the things his factories produced to farmers who believed their houses should look like Nutting’s cluttered images. Larkin points out that the evidence suggests that from colonial times to the middle of the nineteenth century most farm houses had the austere, sometimes Spartan look of Shaker houses. Nutting’s murals and fireplaces festooned with brass utensils were only part of the problem. Hollywood depictions or an emphasis on a few magnificent houses such as Monticello, Mount Vernon or Arlington reinforce the misconceptions. Carriages were a sign of wealth, often of being in the upper class

and were not as common as some films and books suggest. As Larkin's use of primary source texts and illustrations of restored rooms both show, chandeliers, wallpaper, mirrors, separate chairs in dining rooms (in fact dining rooms) varnish, identical glass jars for preserves, large glass windows, carpets, armchairs and sofas, paintings and leadlight were rarities until around the middle of the nineteenth century. Only some among the rich possessed such things before then - and some farmers never did.

Floors were sanded or scrubbed, rather than varnished and often timbers did not match in width. Instead of individual chairs tables usually had benches. Even the use of cutlery contains fallacies. Using forks only became widespread after the 1770s revolution. Before then using just a knife was standard practice. This tendency to predate domestic developments is widespread. For many years reed mats were more common than carpets, which rapidly started taking off around 1830. Porches were an imported eighteenth century concept from the Caribbean plantations which became popular on America's southern plantations. Initially they were rarely built with colonial farms, but by 1830 had become extremely popular. Rockers, either on the porch or around the fire, were more common than armchairs. Whitewashed walls, timber or stencilled chintz patterns were more common than decorated wallpaper, which also started taking off in the middle of the nineteenth century, becoming like large glass windows, dining rooms and parlours, a sign of wealth. In the 1920s mass produced sets of identical glass jars replaced the more expensive glass blown jars. When the pressure cookers appeared in the 1930s, preserving pickles, relishes, jams and large amounts of food became common on the farms.

These statements are generalizations. Some among the rich soon had all the material advantages that took others generations to obtain. Some, like the Amish, despised technical advances and made their early ways a tradition. Others lived as frugally as possible to survive the bad times ahead and some farmers stayed poor.

Larkin winds down his book with a list of restored farms paying guests can visit and two communities where visitors can experience the old rural lifestyle by living it. One of these, Eastfield New York State, is an entire eighteenth century village, made by transporting and then restoring old farmhouses. The other is the Washburn-Norlands Centre in Maine. Many farms that once focused on grain, vegetables, sheep or cattle are now specialised, with labour intensive crops such as berries, alpaca, medicinal herbs and rare timbers. Restored farmhouses are now

attracting paying guests, professionals, families and retirees. Often fleeing the big cities, they appreciate what rural dwellers usually took for granted; beautiful views, fresh air, quiet, low crime rates, small schools, a sense of community.

These positive and optimistic developments are matched by sad conclusions. In a way this balances his book: no escape from realities into sentimentality or pretty images works now. Although Larkin does not develop the theme historically, it is worth examining the historical process that leads to his conclusions.

From Colonial beginnings up to the conquest of the west America was an essentially rural nation based in family farms, fishing and market villages and seaports. Jefferson's vision was of an America as populated with a citizenry that was predominantly rural, self-sufficient and independent. They would endure little government and even much of that would be localised. This was a common viewpoint and was essentially plausible in his lifetime, the realistic base was already there. However, rural dwellers as a proportion of the population clearly began to decline as early as the end of the 1840s as mass migration from the Irish famine combined with natural increase to swell the cities. The gold rushes in the west also increased this migratory tendency and also took people off the farms. The Civil War with its rushed industrialisation, high casualties among the young men who worked the farms and devastated farmlands in the south, added to the process. In the urban centres in the period 1870-1914 life expectancy increased. This combined with increasing foreign mass migration lead to mega cities. The 1880s would also see a new development that reduced the dominance of the family farm in American life. Despite the 1862 Homestead Act and the common depiction of the western family homestead in American culture, much of the agriculture and cattle industries of the prairie states was begun by massive companies, often British. Where they did not begin western agriculture they often took it over. This tendency was developed further by American companies in the disastrous 1930s. Despite the Great Depression and the dustbowl disaster that began in 1932 in the prairie states, the peak year for the number of farms in America was 1935. Soon after those numbers declined as farms were abandoned or merged when they were purchased by corporations.

In the Nixon era when farmers protested to one prominent Republican about the waning of rural life he responded not with the usual politicians' soothing and deluding platitudes and waffle but with honest brutality: "Get big or get out."

Basically that has happened. By the 1980s only around 6% of America's population were farming families; by 2005 less than half of that figure were.

Larkin writes of farmland devoured by the urban sprawl of cheap, ugly and overblown modern homes. Often they are so faked that they have imitation clapboard timber made of vinyl and non-functioning, purely decorative plastic shutters bolted to frames. They often make jerry built, ghastly plastic and steel imitations of farmhouses such as those in this book, making that commercialisation worse by adding double rolling door garages, fridges, washing machines and cheap imitation timber fans with electric light globes. That juxtaposition of the crass imitation of functional old things that no longer function with ultra-functional new things shoddily made, conjures up a definition of kitsch. Whatever we think of these original farmhouses, kitsch must be the last word anyone can apply to them as they reflected the genuine virtues of their creators.

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The next pages show the variety within the world of American farmhouses. Images are taken from and accredited to various sources outside copyright.

Images of American Farmhouses



The American Dream: The view from the porch



The William Farley House Interior. This farm house was built around 1645-1665 with additions a hundred years later. As this photo suggests, the fireplace was the centre of the main room, and therefore the home. Public Domain



Thoreau's birthplace in Concord. Wikipedia

The interior of a New England Colonial Home



The Whitmer Home built 1807-1809 Fayette New York State. Note that the house has no porch or shutters. Public Domain



A Minnesota “four square” home. This austere style was based in strong timber building and was popular from around 1850 to 1930. Like many farmhouse styles, it spread to the cities. Wikipedia



Two views of an 1846 Hispanic ranch on the Santa Rosa Plateau California. Public Domain





An imported style: French colonial

A Rocky Mountains Colorado cabin. Termites and fire would have been the drawbacks





The ubiquitous red barn. The matching house is rarer



An 1805 Indiana farmhouse. Could this possibly be for a family with children?



A more prosperous later Indiana farm.

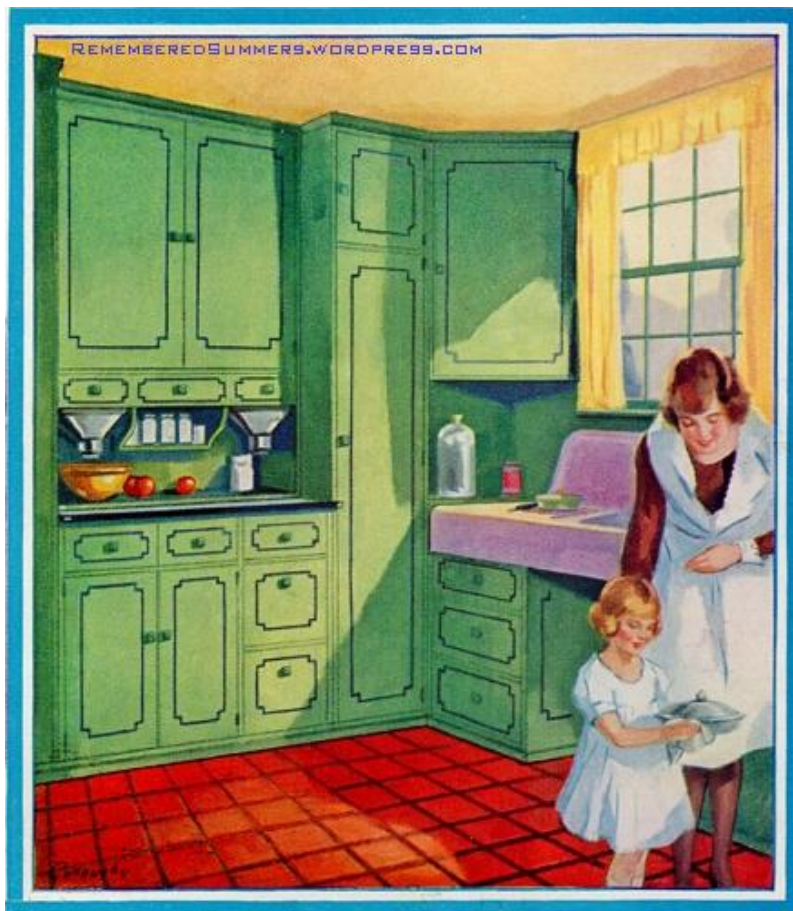


The gas stove for a 1920s kitchen



An Indiana ad from 1922, showing the desired kitchen. Below: The 1918 Texan reality.





The 1920s kitchen galley



A “shotgun” home in Mississippi. Such farms were common with sharecroppers. A Californian bungalow. The style applied to some farms built between the world wars but became predominantly suburban.



