

A Photograph of America / Charles Desmarais



from New York City (section 83): George Washington Bridge, down West Side Expressway to about 40th Street—distance 6 miles.

One nice thing about photography: just when you've decided that there's something basically wrong with the medium as people practice it today — that there is some fundamental gap between your idealistic assumptions about the way any picture's relationship to the world and society *should* work and the way they *really* do — just then, someone comes along and proves you wrong. Right at the point where I had nearly despaired of ever again

finding a contemporary photograph that was both richly original and, at the same time, accessible in meaning and form to a broad spectrum of non-photographers, Reed Estabrook showed me his Big Picture.

Well, not the whole picture; just a fragment of it, really. The entire photograph, when completed, will be 3.3 miles long and will cover an area of 10,200 square feet. What I saw, that first time Estabrook rolled out part of his pan-





orama of America for a group of us at the 1978 National Conference of the SPE, was only about 330 feet of color photograph. It represented a mere 6 miles-worth of New York City, a 39-mile stretch of Wyoming from Evanston to Rock Springs, and the 30 miles of Iowa between Rochester and Mount Joy. (The rest of the country lay home in Estabrook's darkroom. Shot frame-by-frame along Interstate 80 with a camera mounted in the back

seat of his car, the picture was printed by a standard snapshot processing machine, the cutting blade of which was rigged to keep the roll of paper continuous and the horizon of the photograph more or less contiguous.) But that fragment of the whole was enough to convince me that here was a photographic epic — an epic of today in America, and for anyone who wanted to look.

The implications of so enormous and open-ended a



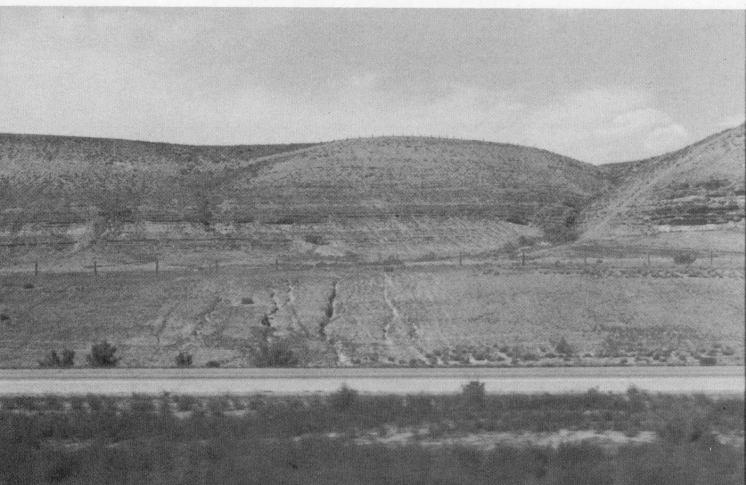


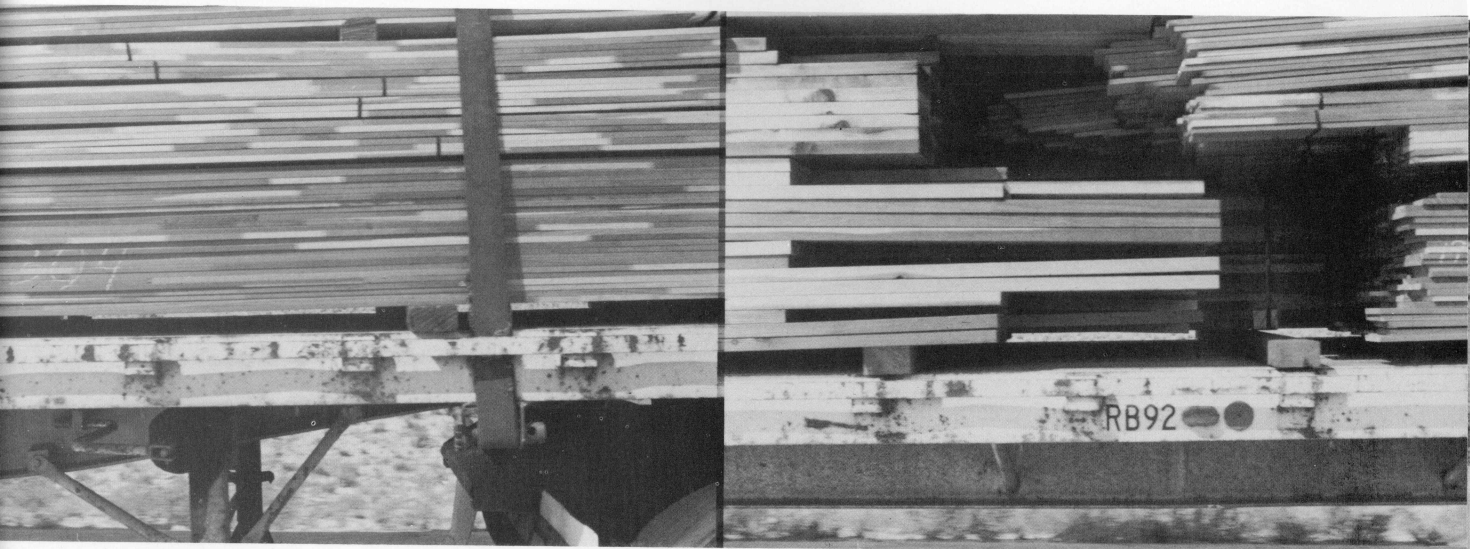
from Wyoming (section 27): Evanston, Wyo., to Rock Springs, Wyo.—distance 39 miles.

project as this can't even be numbered, much less exhaustively examined, by a single journal article written in the heat of enthusiasm. The changes in America's travel habits wrought by the oil companies, OPEC, economic recession, and so forth are upon us even now, so that for most people the memory of cross-continental automobile trips already approaches nostalgia. And with every rise in gasoline prices Estabrook's piece acquires

something more of that strange tension between the familiar and the exotic found in an Evans or an Abbott. The subject matter might recall the work of these more traditional documentarians, but the historiographical parallel actually strikes much deeper: we feel, just as their contemporaries did, that we are examining a description of the end of a world.

Since first viewing the photograph, I have had discus-





sions with Estabrook and on his behalf with regard to an exhibition at some major public space in Chicago, the approximate geographic center of the piece. The possibilities raised by such an exhibit are very exciting: imagine the response of a large audience to a display wrapped five or six times around the quarter-mile long Navy Pier, or threaded through the galleries of the gigantic Museum of Science and Industry. Ideas such as

this one, which cut across traditional social, economic, and educational barriers are rare indeed, and Estabrook's panorama provides a lot more intellectual food than laser shows in the night sky and such.

In an age when few people make art or artifacts as a part of their daily experience, when few people keep diaries or even write letters, the snapshot has been recognized as one of the only primary documents of popu-



America / Desmarais



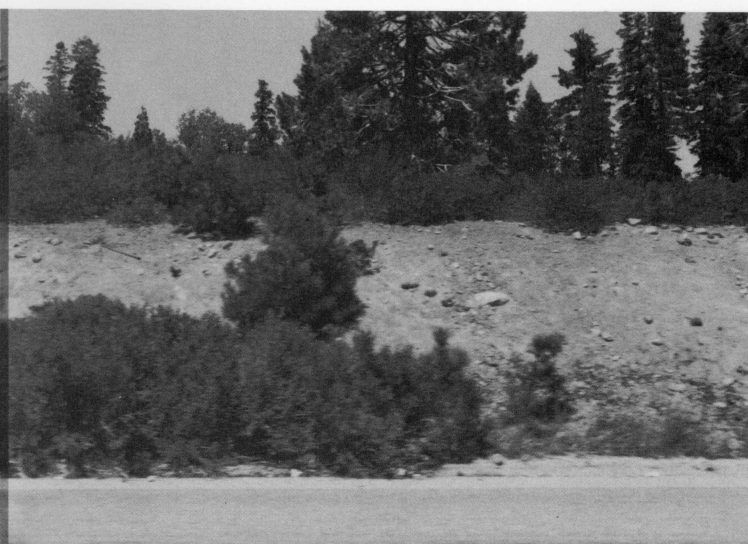
from California (section 11): Donner Summit—distance 30 miles.

lar cultural history. Estabrook's project starts with the assumption that most people make snapshots and have them processed commercially (the familiar "drugstore processing").

Since many of these snapshot photographs are made when people travel on vacation, the fact that his panorama of America is made up, essentially, of a long series of travel photos, made from a car as it passes along one

of the country's most travelled roads, is particularly fortuitous. It provides us with a systematized "control group" of pictures against which we can measure the more deliberately selected and composed picture of the snapshotter. Thus, we are better able to evaluate the snapshotter's pictures in terms of: 1) subject selection (What do people deem important enough to be documented? What are people apt to ignore?), 2) creative





manipulation (Given a choice of ways to frame their subject in a picture, what kinds of choices do people make? Given the option to add elements to a picture — other people, an automobile, etc. — what will the snapshooter add?), 3) point of view (Estabrook shot from the same camera position that would be used by a photographer seated in a car. What other vantage points might we find?). Surely there are other questions one could ask.

This makes Estabrook sound a little like some purist social scientist: sort of the photographer equivalent of a statistician, gathering data for a prosaic (if important) report in an obscure (if influential) journal. But where's the art?

Many people, on first hearing of Estabrook's photograph and its enormous length (the piece qualifies for the *Guinness Book of World Records*), draw a comparison



America / Desmarais



from *Ohio/Penn* (section 69): *Eastern Ohio with Woman in Toll Booth to Middlesex, Pa.*— distance 30 miles.

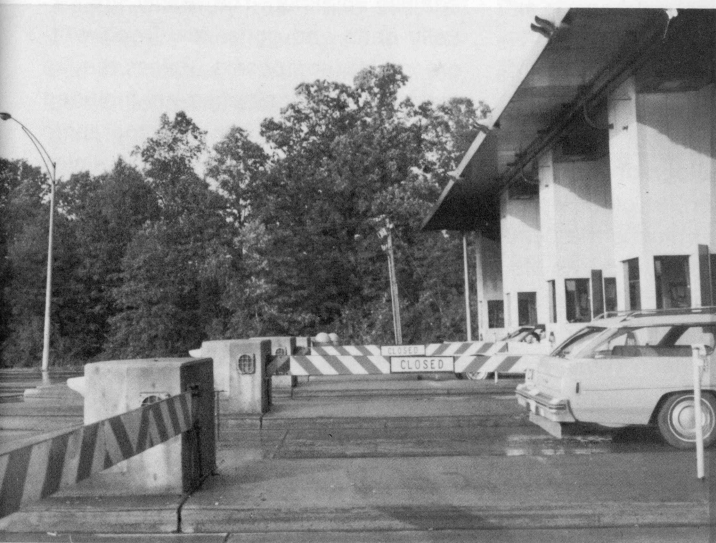
to Christo's famous *Running Fence*. The picture also bears some resemblance to such "systems art" as that for which Sol LeWitt is well known. But such comparisons seem to me superficial.

True, Estabrook faced obstacles nearly as formidable as those Christo had to surmount (Estabrook and his wife, photographer Gwen Widmer, mortgaged their home at one point to keep the project going.) It's also probable

that Estabrook takes the same delight in seeing the "automatic" product of his artistic blueprint that LeWitt must find in his drawings based on mathematical formulas.

But photographs beg us to look *into* them in a way that sculptures and drawings (especially those of the non-referential sort) do not. And when we do suspend our disbelief in the reality of a flattened world stamped in





funny colors on rolls of 7-inch paper, what is there to be seen?

It is the geography and demography of our entire nation, unrolled there on our living floor, or pasted on the wall of a single room. The first people ever to view a daguerreotype, we are told, could think of little better response than to count the bricks in the wall of a building in the picture. We, on viewing Estabrook's photograph, are

reduced to counting hill tops, or telephone poles, in an effort to ingest this unfathomable thing we so easily and offhandedly call "the country."

Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac, Frank's best critic, made a raw, blues-y music of 1950s America. I figure that Estabrook's music is a steady new wave whine of cars and trucks speeding past on I-80, all of them on a trip that starts in the darkness of a tunnel in California and ends in a tunnel in New York.

