

# An Eye On The Skies

Mount Marty Professor's Photographic Journeys Are Featured In Hartington Exhibit



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For photographer Rich Lofthus, some of the best landscapes are found off the beaten path. In fact, Lofthus — a history professor at Mount Marty College — follows one cardinal rule.

"I rarely drive the interstate highways," he said. "The best pictures are the ones where very few people outside the immediate area have any idea (the scenes) are there."

Lofthus has spent the last six years searching the nation's backroads and scenic byways, including areas in and around Nebraska Highway 12 in Cedar and Knox counties. He finds the area between U.S. Highway 81 and Ponca, Neb., particularly appealing.

Those photos are among 27 scenes comprising his "Western Landscapes" exhibit at the Wirth Art Gallery on the upper level of the Hartington (Neb.) Public Library. His collection remains on display through the end of the month.

Lofthus' exhibit features a number of Midwest scenes from South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota and his native North Dakota. But he also includes shots from Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming and California that he took on five solo driving trips to the West Coast.

"Western Landscapes" offers a wide range of photos from around the nation, but Lofthus said he chose mostly shots familiar to local audiences.

"I think people enjoy seeing (photos of) the area in which they live," he said. "It reminds people of how scenic the area is. There are a lot of things that people wouldn't think about if they were driving through."

As a college professor, Lofthus acknowledges his summers are free to explore for the ultimate landscape shots.

"I have a lot of opportunity to travel. When I do, I consciously drive on highways where it's a lot easier to stop," he said. "You just need to observe the landscape, especially in the summer. I take different routes, and that is how I discovered a lot of these scenes in the exhibits."

#### ON CLOUD NINE

Cloud formations dominate many of Lofthus' photos, particularly those from northeast Nebraska.

"One of the things that I have discovered is that Midwestern landscapes are much more appealing if you can bring the sky into the photo and make it a major part of the scene," he said.

"In the summer of 2010, I did the 80/20 project where the sky forms 80 percent of the photo and the landscape comprises the other 20 percent. One of the great features of the Midwest is the culmination of cumulus clouds and combining it with a nice, green landscape with (hay) bales or trees."

Lofthus points to the impact found in his August 2006 photo, "Nebraska Pastoral," taken near Hartington along Highway 12.

"I think this was the day that convinced me that cumulus clouds could be linked to these rolling hills to compose a dramatic photograph," he said of the stunning effect.

The fluffy feature shows up in other of his works. An August 2009 photo shot near Menominee, Neb., contained an anvil cloud in the background.

One of his exhibit entries, the August 2006 "Bow Valley Horizon," is featured on the cover of the current edition of MMC's literary journal, *Paddlefish*. The photo was shot along Highway 12 near Bow Valley, Neb.

"On this day, it appeared as though the prairie had

touched the sky," Lofthus said.

Highway 12 also provided the backdrop for the August 2009 "Nebraska Bucolic." The surrounding area provided the setting for an August 2010 shot taken between Menominee and St. Helena, Neb.

Sometimes, Lofthus traveled across the nation and found his desired shot upon returning home with a fresh eye. He pointed to the July 2007 photo of the Nebraska skyline just west of Crofton, Neb., on Highway 12.

"I was driving back from California and took (the skyline shot as) one of my favorite pictures on the last night of the trip," he said.

Not all of the shots are pastoral or summerlike. His February 2009 photo, "February Squall," was taken on Super Bowl Sunday just east of Tyndall.

The true beauty of the local scenery isn't always readily observed or appreciated, particularly by those who are new to the region, Lofthus said.

"The beauty of the Midwest is, it's not like the Grand Tetons, it's not that spectacular," he said. "It's more subtle, and it takes a while to get a sense of it."

Lofthus finds qualities in Midwest scenes unknown in most other parts of the nation.

"When driving to the Gulf Coast and the East Coast, I have always been looking for things to photograph. But I always enjoy returning to the Midwest because of the expanse of our skies," he said. "You get to the more heavily wooded areas (of the nation), and all you see are trees. It's beautiful, but you don't get any vistas. There's not the big picture. Once you live here (in the Midwest) and are used to it, you find it really grows on you."

As a native son, Lofthus said he holds an appreciation for the Midwest's natural beauty.

"It takes a little bit longer to understand the aesthetic sense of the prairie," he said. "It's just something that I discovered being from the Midwest and by living here. But to truly see it, you have to be willing to travel on the back roads."

#### KEEPING THE FAITH

Lofthus' interest is not limited to nature scenes. He enjoys photographing area churches, struck by their architectural as well as spiritual nature.

One exhibit displays Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church at Bow Valley, shot from the back to capture a unique angle as well as the countryside behind the church.

Other times, Lofthus finds himself intrigued by a church's location and building materials, along with the massive labor that went into the construction without the benefit of modern-day tools.

"At Menominee, the church (St. Boniface) is tucked below the hill. You don't see it until you're right on top of it," he said. "It's amazing to see this chalkstone church with all the incredible stained glass windows."

Lofthus finds a strong religious faith sustaining the churches, calling them "sort of the Midwestern equivalent of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe."

"The main feature of this area — it goes for Dimock and places like Menominee and St. Helena and Bow Valley — are churches that are architecturally refined," he said.

"It's a testament to the faith of those who built those churches as well as to the faith of those who have preserved them."

#### A LAND OF CONTRASTS

Not all of Lofthus' exhibit photos come from the Yankton area.

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ABOVE: Mount Marty College history professor Rich Lofthus points out features in a photo from his "Western Landscapes" exhibit. The display runs through the end of the month at the Wirth Art Gallery in the upper level of the Hartington (Neb.) Public Library. LEFT: Lofthus holds a love for outdoor scenes, particularly the Midwest and the prairie, as seen in this shot. His Hartington exhibit includes 27 images taken across the nation over a six-year period. Lofthus will also have an exhibit at MMC's Bede Art Gallery this winter. (Randy Dockendorf/P&D)



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ATHENA	ELIJAH	KENSLEY	MYAN	SKYLER
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