

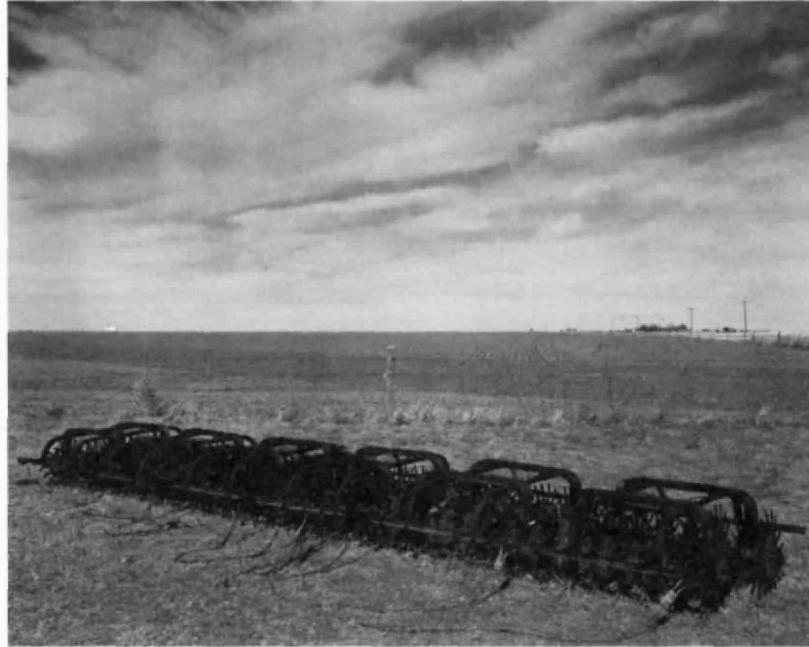


High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

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*"The High Plains of the Texas Panhandle  
have lured many, but only the hardy have stayed.  
The winds can be fierce and unrelenting,  
the winters bitter, the rainfall scant,  
and neighbors are often few and far between.  
The region attracts those  
who have a craving for self-sufficiency,  
love a challenge, or  
are just plain stubborn."*

*"Being always at the mercy of the weather, my father had many years in which he made virtually nothing, when hail, high winds, drought, or blight stunted the income along with the flowering heads of wheat."*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

# H I G H P L A I N S F A R M

Paula Chamlee

After having spent 32 years in other places, I returned to my home place on the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle to begin photographing and writing about my family's farm — 1,100 acres that my parents, now in their mid and late eighties, still work all by themselves. Upon arriving on December 5, 1994, I wrote in my journal:

"The weather is changing, as is common here on the High Plains, with quickness and drama — and as we reached the home place, I stepped out of the car, taking in the air that is overwhelmingly sweet, fresh, energizing. The smell of the air is more than a treat for me; it is a treasure from the past that renews itself each time I return. I stood exalted, breathing deeply and listening to the persistent yet melodic roar of the Panhandle winds that sweep the atmosphere clean. And tonight, those winds are bringing tiny bits of moisture, foretelling a possible snowfall. I am welcomed by the smell of the soil from the plowed fields and the smells of the house that seem exactly the same — somehow a comforting reassurance — the odors of a place that describe it beyond vision, describe and recall the

past days of past years, olfactory senses flooding the mind."

The High Plains are geographically different from the rest of Texas. Originally a treeless plain, the western side of the Panhandle is flat, semi-arid, and sparsely populated. The large open spaces are now accented by clumps of trees marking the farms and ranches and few towns dotted about the region. My parents' farm is near the western edge of the Panhandle in Oldham County, only 23 miles from the New Mexico border. The boundaries of Oldham County include 956,160 acres and a population of 2,278. Where my parents' dry-land wheat farm is located, the water table is too low to make irrigation economically feasible, and the oil and gas wells in the Panhandle, with their attendant prosperity, are farther to the north and east. My paternal grandparents, who arrived on an immigrant train from Iowa in 1910, were among the first permanent settlers of this area. My parents, like my grandparents, have called this "God's country" for as long as I can remember.

For many years I gave little thought to the significance of having come from a

small farming and ranching community. It never occurred to me that there was anything out of the ordinary about my life there until much later, after I had traveled extensively in this country and abroad and lived in several large cities. It always surprised me when someone thought that the way I grew up was unusual. I learned that some of those people had never been in a place where they could see an unobstructed horizon for 360 degrees, or in a place where folks seldom, if ever, locked their doors, or in a place where folks brought gifts of food to your house when they heard you were having family or friends come to visit. And they'd never built a hideout in the top of a hay barn or examined the parched, rain-starved earth for the sprouts of a newly planted crop. Almost none had driven a tractor or a wheat truck, heard coyotes howling in the night, or been covered from head to toe in wheat chaff during summer's harvest. They didn't call the midday meal dinner, or believe that a high school graduating class could be as small as mine — there were nine of us.

In this place, we hardly ever saw a

movie (the nearest one being 50 miles away); for entertainment, the community as well as the school put on plays throughout the year. Neighbors spent time, and still spend time, talking to each other and helping each other regardless of age, religion, or other differences. And I don't recall a crime of violence during all of my years growing up there.

Each time I go back, I have that same feeling of being deeply connected to this land, feeling at home in a landscape that appears stark, unforgiving, and inhospitable. Growing up in a sparsely populated rural area, I experienced the joys of a quietness punctuated only by the sounds of nature. Absorbing the sights, sounds, and smells of the High Plains and blending them into a feeling for the life and the land that has formed me has led me to my way of viewing the world through the lens of my camera. ■

*Editor's note: These photographs and writings appeared in Chamlee's book, High Plains Farm published by Lodima Press (Revere, Pennsylvania) in 1996.*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

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*“Vehicles from seven different decades  
— the 1920s through the 1980s —  
are still in use on the farm.”*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

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*"For a seat, there's a piece of plywood on top of the bare metal springs and a tarp for upholstery. Last spring, a litter of kittens was born on the passenger side."*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

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*"My dad built all the barns, outbuildings, corrals, and fences."*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Chamlee, 1994

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*"Everything has changed, yet everything is the same. Superficial things change — a different wallpaper and some new upholstery, a dead tree removed, a fence taken down. Yet these changes have little to do with the enduring spirit of the place."*



High Plains Farm. Photo © Paula Charles, 1994

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*"I've always had a distinct memory of my father  
sitting at his desk, quietly reading or doing his accounting by hand.  
He still doesn't own a calculator."*