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Ag & the Arts? Forget Oklahoma! But Check Out New Farming Photo Exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art

Thursday, October 25th, 2018, by [Rex Buchanan](#)

Art and agriculture. Both words start with the letter "A" but that's where the similarities seem to end. Or do they? A new exhibit at the [Spencer Museum of Art](#) features a great deal of farm-related photography. As Commentator Rex Buchanan tells us, the exhibit lies at the very intersection of art and agriculture.

Commentator Rex Buchanan is director emeritus of the [Kansas Geological Survey](#) and a patron of the arts. And while he may not like the musical Oklahoma!, he highly recommends Larry Schwarm's photography exhibit at the [Spencer Museum of Art](#). He lives in Lawrence.

KPR encourages you to see [Larry Schwarm's photos](#) in person at the Spencer. But if that's not possible, you can at least [see some of the photos here](#).

[Learn more about the new photo exhibit by Larry Schwarm - and see some of his photos - on view at the Spencer through January 6, 2019.](#)

(TRANSCRIPT)

I can still remember the first musical theater I ever saw. It was the late 1960s. Oklahoma! I did not react positively. I live on a farm, I remember thinking, I never saw anybody singing and dancing.

With maybe the exception of Stan Herd's crop images, agriculture and art don't often overlap in Kansas. But there's [a new exhibit of photographs of Kansas farmers at the Spencer Museum of Art](#) on the KU campus. The photographs are by [Wichita State](#) professor and long-time Kansas photographer, [Larry Schwarm](#). The exhibit is accompanied by a book of 50 photographs, edited by the Spencer's Kate Meyer.

The book and exhibit capture much about the current state of farming in Kansas. Some photos are from small family farms, depicting the joys and the trials of a way of life that is far less common than it used to be. Some of the photos are from bigger, more industrial farms. The unmistakable contrast shows how farming is changing, from abandoned equipment in one

photograph to a tractor guided by GPS in another. Water, and the role of irrigation in Kansas agriculture, forms something of a subtext of the book.

The book also reveals some of the artistic features of farming. A photo of a grain pile shows the different colors of milo, layered one atop of the other, like an impressionist painting. Other photos capture the geometric patterns on the land made by planting and harvesting, graceful lines and curves created by cultivating the ground.

Larry Schwarm grew up on a farm outside of Greensburg in Kiowa County, in south-central Kansas. He knows some things about farming, so his photos are well-informed, not the result of a short, breathless excursion out west. Schwarm may not be a farmer, but he's kept connections to farming.

One of the book's first photos is his mother and father outside their farmhouse.

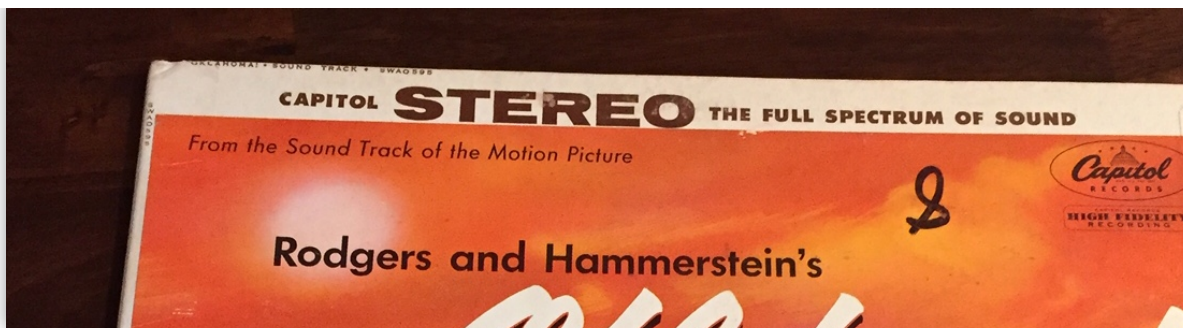
Maybe none of this matters to you. Why do we even need an exhibit and a book about farming photography, you might ask? Here's why. Agriculture is one of the state's dominant enterprises. It has shaped our history and culture. Kansans think of themselves as a rural people. But they're not. More than half of the state's population lives in only five out of 105 counties. We are an urban people.

Kansas may be the wheat state, producing lots of corn, cattle, and soybeans too. But what most of us don't know about farming is a lot. And just about every day, the urban counties grow in population, rural ones shrink. As we get farther removed from the land, we need an informed, unromanticized, understanding of farming and its impact on this the place.

Schwarm does that. He captures the challenges and complexities of a changing way of life. He sees the aesthetic appeal of an occupation that is generally viewed through the lenses of economics. He shows us the sky, the feedlots, the little towns. Maybe most important, he captures the faces of farmers.

They may not be singing or dancing. But sometimes they see the art in what they do. And so does Larry Schwarm.

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