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Barbed Wire: Poetry and Photography of the West John Sterling
Harris and L. Douglas Hill

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HARRIS, JOHN STERLING AND L. DOUGLAS HILL. *Barbed Wire: Poetry and Photographs of the West*. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974. 73 pp. \$5.95.

Reviewed by Clarice Short, professor of English, emeritus, University of Utah.

The term "barbed wire" has several connotations: impediment to a charging infantry in wartime, the fringe along the top of prison walls, or simply the taut strand marking boundaries and the end of the freedom known to an unfenced world. But the photograph on the dust jacket of the book *Barbed Wire: Poetry and Photographs of the West* with its leaning posts, its tangled strands of barbed wire, and the clutter of what appears to be baling wire around what might have been corner posts or gateposts suggest desolation. Whatever use the fence originally had, it has lost.

This picture, like most of the others in the book, has the paradoxical quality of dealing gently with harsh materials. There is a kind of poignancy about the broken fences, the machines left to rust away, and the iron fences around the graves in the neglected cemetery. For the most part, the pictures are impressions rather than il-

illustrations. The effect produced by the book results from the combining of the two arts. The two reinforce each other. The effect is not earthshaking, but gains strength from the fact that both poetry and pictures are close to the earth.

The poetry gives the impression of being composed by a person who recognizes the limits of his range and stays within them. Mr. Harris almost invariably adopts the right tone and knows when to stop. Some of the poems, such as "Rock Pile," are almost purely descriptive, but the descriptions are accurate and fresh. One sees the lichen creeping toward the top of the newest rock. It would be difficult to find more precise words to describe the death of a cottontail than Harris uses in "Hawk." The poems dealing with the pathos of the human situation avoid sentimentality. "Hay Derrick" describes an accident which takes the life of one who is probably the oldest son and mainstay of a farm family. The poem is carefully constructed in unrhymed quatrains, the first of which ends with the symbolic "low stack/ Of hay against the pale sky." The last stanza is a superb example of understatement:

They left the stack unfinished
To bleach in the summer sun,
And the autumn winds stirred the hay
Like unkempt hair on the head of a boy.

There is enough humor to balance the pathos, and in several poems there is only a delicate line separating the two tones. One of the most memorable passages in the book occurs in the poem called "The Assassination of Emma Gray." Old Jerome, kneeling in the mud to ask forgiveness of Emma, a very fat, very old sow, for butchering her is not ridiculous; he is akin to all the men of the earth who recognize their brotherhood with all living things and ask pardon of the tree that is felled and the deer that is shot.

In a collection of poems almost entirely devoid of classical allusion, the one that is used in "Tag, I. D." is particularly striking and apt. Harris calls the identification tag of the soldier the "Stainless steel coin/ For the boatman."

Pictures and poems taken together, this would be a hard book not to enjoy.