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Remote Access: Small Public Libraries in Arkansas

A. Blake Denton

University of Arkansas at Monticello

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tains in the western half of the state – accompany the reader throughout the book and provide a colorful, and nostalgic and/or historic backdrop to his stories. One caveat, however, for those new to North Carolina, a big map or a small one for each of the three geographic regions of the state would be very helpful to have on hand.

This travelogue is recommended for newcomers and visitors, as well as those who have long-called the Old North State their home. It would be an enjoyable addition to public library collections and the leisure section for academic libraries. For those interested in stories of North Carolina, try these books by Bland Simpson: *The Coasts of Carolina: Seaside to Sound Country*, *Ghost Ship of Diamond Shoals: The Mystery of the Carroll A. Deering*, and *The Great Dismal: A Carolinian's Swamp Memoir*.

Linh Uong, University of North Georgia

Remote Access: Small Public Libraries in Arkansas



Sabine Schmidt &
Don House
Fayetteville: University
of Arkansas Press, 2021
ISBN: 9781682261729
352 p. \$45.00 (Hbk)

In this moving work of
photography, artists
Sabine Schmidt and

Don House pay tribute to the vital, yet underappreciated role public libraries perform in rural communities throughout the State of Arkansas. *Remote Access* is the third installment of The Arkansas Character series, following *True Faith*, *True Life* (2015) and *An Arkansas Florilegium* (2017). Schmidt and House's book is a fitting addition to a series that highlights "insufficiently celebrated accomplishment." Published as a coffee table book, this charming volume features 21 of the Natural State's smallest libraries through images and essays.

After consulting the Arkansas State Library's list of smallest libraries in the Natural State, the artists identified, scouted, and photographed libraries over a three-year period that concluded in March 2020. The selection of fea-

tured libraries was primarily determined by community population and geographic diversity. This lineup includes 19 classic examples of municipally-funded, stationary public libraries, a county library system bookmobile, and an independent library solely supported by community donations and volunteer staffers.

Series Editor Robert Cochran provides the introduction to the book, Schmidt the prologue, and House the epilogue. The work is organized into 21 chapters, one per library. Schmidt begins every chapter with an essay and color photographs of the library and the community it serves. House concludes with his own essay and vivid black and white snapshots of the librarians, patrons, and other community stakeholders that support these institutions.

As a work of photography, *Remote Access* skillfully captures the essence of small-town public librarianship in Arkansas through three lenses: place, space, and people. A sense of place is developed on both a macro (state) and micro (community) level. From the lush Ozarks to the silo-studded Delta, the Natural State's diverse landscapes and pastoral beauty are on full display throughout. Scenes of cotton bales, rusty water towers, and deserted downtowns further immerse the reader in the rural environments these libraries operate in. Images of libraries housed in abandoned storefronts and a recycled FEMA trailer are conspicuous reminders of the precarious future these institutions face in towns plagued by chronic depopulation and dwindling tax revenues. Despite these unique challenges, the warm photographs of patrons from various walks of life reaffirm that Arkansas' small public libraries are indispensable pillars of the communities they faithfully serve.

What the authors cannot visually document, they record through essays. Schmidt and House repeatedly underscore how these public libraries are a lifeline for rural Arkansans marginalized by the digital divide. Patrons without reliable internet access depend on these digital oases to stay connected to the outside world, check out DVDs for home entertainment, and obtain their GEDs. *Remote Access* also shines a spotlight on the unfavorable conditions staff often endure at underfunded libraries, such as crammed facilities or no working heat. In short, these essays not only supplement the photography but provide essential commentary about these featured libraries.

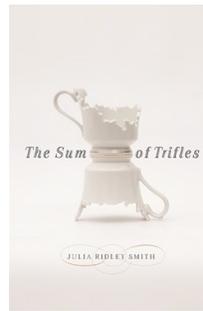
At one point, House astutely observes that a comic moment he photographed would be “published in a book, archived in a museum perhaps, and viewed by researchers and scholars of Arkansas history” (p. 225). As a primary source, *Remote Access* offers unique insights about contemporary rural life and American society. The occasional snapshots of patrons posing with their dogs, for instance, demonstrates the elevated status many pets enjoy compared to those of times past. Likewise, subtle observations concerning small town public services, particularly House’s assertion that police officers serving communities without full-time administrators are often the “most visible and consistent day-to-day face of local government” (p. 40), adds depth to the work. *Remote Access* is no mere picture book; it presents posterity with a cultural snapshot of 21st century life in rural America.

There is one concern worth noting. When discussing historic events, Schmidt and House omit their sources. Readers interested in learning more about Marked Tree’s unique place name, for example, are on their own. Though coffee table books are not academic monographs, the artists’ decision to exclude their sources creates a contrast between their essays and Cochran’s judiciously cited introduction. Citation consistency throughout the book would have prevented this evident demarcation between the introduction and the chapters that follow.

This minor criticism, however, does not detract from the quality of the book. *Remote Access: Small Public Libraries in Arkansas* is a touching testimonial to the significance of small-town public libraries and the dedicated professionals who sustain them. More broadly, this publication raises awareness about the unique challenges that rural America faces in the 21st century. General readers interested in libraries, Arkansas, rural life, or photography will find *Remote Access* a pleasurable read. Above all, librarians and library enthusiasts residing in the Natural State will especially appreciate the work and enjoy displaying this attractive volume in their offices or on their coffee tables.

A. Blake Denton, The University of Arkansas at Monticello

The Sum of Trifles



Julia Ridley Smith
Atlanta: University of Georgia
Press, 2021
ISBN: 9780820360416
256 p. \$22.95 (Pbk)

The Sum of Trifles can best be summarized as a contemplation on the relationship between

things, memory, and the importance of family – all with a Southern twist. The author, Julia Ridley Smith, and her brother, Moreland, were tasked with making decisions about what to keep, sell, give away, or throw away of their parents’ belongings after both parents died. Julia’s mother ran an antiques store in North Carolina, so there was an abundance of antiques, paperwork, quotidian objects, as well as family heirlooms that all demanded final decisions.

The beginning of Smith’s book is quite deliberate regarding questions about physical possessions and memories. As such, it is a meditation on material culture and the various meanings objects convey. Because objects are imbedded or imbued with memories, Julia often finds herself struggling to make the decisions about the things that evoke deep and personal memories. She writes, “... if objects have the power to connect me to people who are no longer here, then maybe they really do possess a kind of magic. And if they are magic, how dare I let them go” (p. 17). And there is the rub. The sheer number of her parents’ possessions creates a dissonance for Smith—the stuff has become a weight that holds her down and while also transporting her to the past.

As Smith begins to go through her parents’ possessions, she begins to seriously consider where the family’s money came from. In Smith’s book, each chapter begins with an object and its outcome. Many of the chapters are happy ones, filled with fond family memories. But the chapter, “The Quilt,” relays how Smith came to terms with her family’s slave-owning past through that object. The reckoning began when Smith donated the 170-year-old “Ridley quilt” to the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. This quilt, cherished by generations of Ridleys, prompted Smith to consider possible scenarios as to who made the quilt, including the enslaved women assisting in the