

PROFILE

Fonville Winans

By Sarah Sue Goldsmith

"I'm a bionic man," Fonville Winans quipped as he adjusted his hearing aid. "I've got eye implants and earphones. That makes me a bionic man."

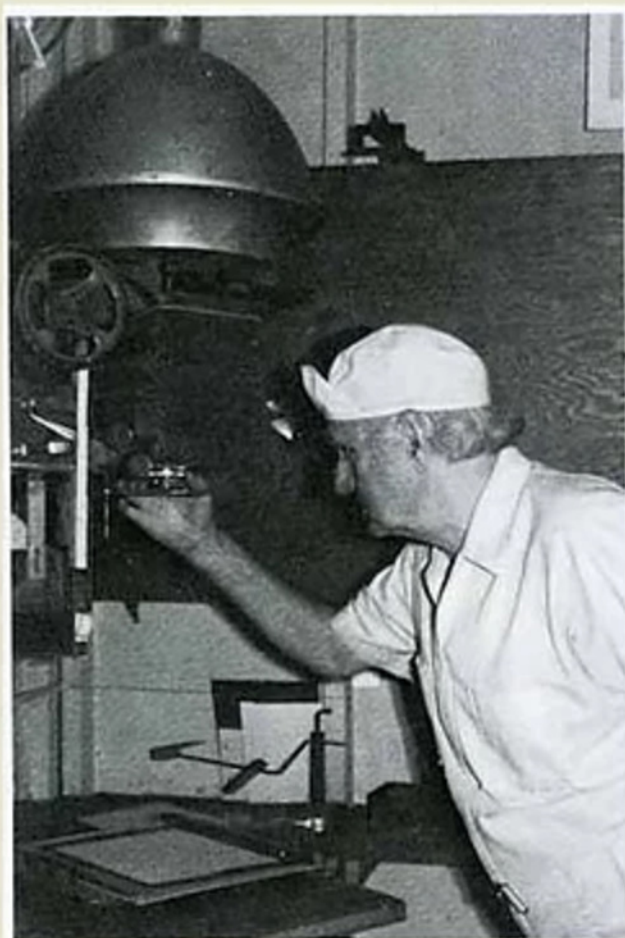
The man whose name is synonymous with photographic portraits is totally unpretentious. He usually wears a white jumpsuit and a white bicycle cap pushed down over his white hair. Bushy white eyebrows top piercing hazel eyes that dance with mirth when he's telling his anecdotes.

Fonville's name (everybody calls him Fonville) has been a household word for several decades; and during the 44 years since he opened his studio at

667 Laurel, he has posed and snapped black and white portraits of politicians and celebrities, beauty queens and children.

He's 75 now, and a stroke two years ago has slowed him down. He now walks carefully, a little stiffly, and wishes he could ride his bicycle as he used to. The body may not be agile, but the mind is as quick as any young whippersnapper's, and Fonville loves to tell a good story.

"I came here, to Grand Isle, with \$10 in my



pocket," he said, "and wanted to go to LSU. A student could work his way through LSU then, waiting tables and so on. I had a pair of seersucker pants I could wash out myself. Mrs. Gianelloni gave me a job at her boarding house waiting tables. I got jobs right away with local dance bands. I really liked playing but can't play since I had this stroke.

"I got myself into music at LSU. I played the saxophone in the LSU band, then quit the LSU band and joined the Louisiana Kings. When I graduated from high school, there was no thought of going to college. There wasn't any money".

That didn't bother him, though. After high school he worked as a meter reader, a carpenter's helper, played in dance bands (his mother was a trumpet player in the Fort Worth Symphony) and then went adventuring. "I was the poor boy's Frank Buck," he said with a chuckle. "See that picture?" and he pointed to a photo of a boat. "That's the Pintail, my boat. I had a 16mm hand-cranked camera on the front of the boat." He made two motion pictures with his boat - "The Cruise of the Pintail" and "Pintail Adventure."



PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

"LADY IN THE LANE"



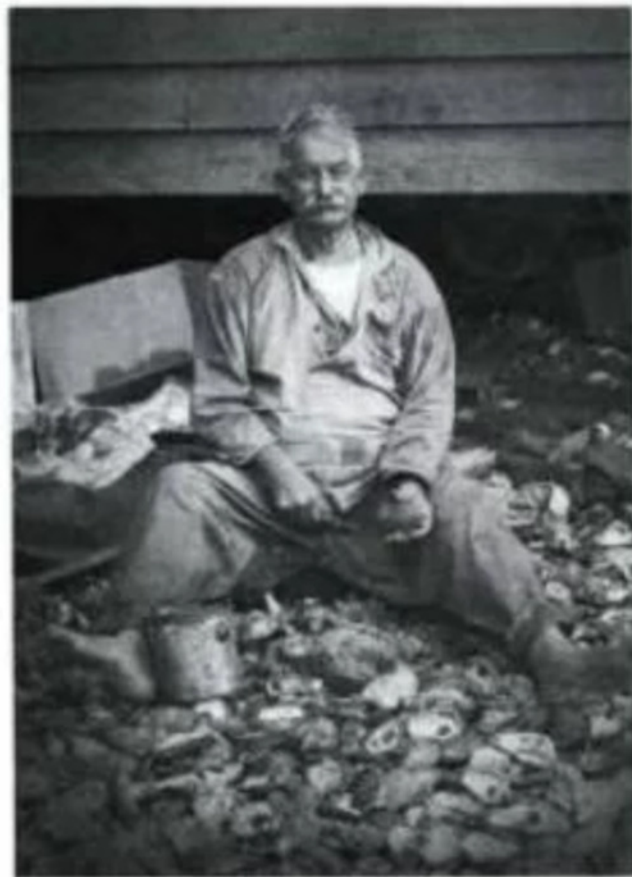
PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

"JIG DANCERS"



PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

"SHRIMP MAN"



"OYSTER MAN"



"BEFORE THE BLOW"

His interest in photography began when he was a teenager. Back in 1930, he had saved \$30 "which was like \$5,000 now") to buy a wrist watch. But his feet led him to a camera display and he became entranced with a camera. He bought the watch, then took it back and got the camera instead. "It was a 3A Kodak," Fonville said, "with three exposures per roll. The salesman said, 'Don't you want some film?' I hadn't even thought about needing film. I didn't have any more money to buy film, so the salesman opened an account for me and loaded one roll of film in the camera."

He went to the top of a bank building at the intersection of 7th and Main in Fort Worth and shot a picture of the street scene below. "There was a street scene photo contest in Fort Worth, and I entered my snapshot -the very first snapshot I ever took -and won first place! The prize was two passes to the picture show and \$15. I thought, 'Damn, this is easy money!' and I've been at it ever since!"

He took pictures during his adventuring days of

everything from swamp scenes to interesting characters. It's people he likes best to photograph.

Grand Isle crops up regularly in conversation. Fonville is quite fond of it. "I read Lafitte, the Pirate, by Lyle Saxon. I had never heard of Grand Isle and was fascinated by it. I went there and loved it. I shrimped in the Gulf, caught oysters in the bay, had a wonderful time. It was all wonderful adventure." That was in the years between high school and college; in fact, it was during a visit to friends in Grand Isle that someone suggested he go to LSU despite having no money.

"I went to LSU and got married. I started this studio, got an airplane, had an exhibit in Jordan." And met people like Stuyvesant Peabody, president of Peabody Coal Company of America, and photographed Ellen Girlinghouse, "one of the great beauties at LSU. She became a Powers model in New York."

"To qualify as a real artist, you have to do two things," Fonville said, "a magnolia and a nude."

Here is my nude - I took this of my wife -and in here is my magnolia. There has never been an art exhibit in the South without a magnolia," he said, leading the way to his studio. The walls of the studio are covered with framed photographs shot between 1931 and 1950. An exhibit of photographs from this era hung in Taylor Clark Galleries in May.

Every picture has a story. Fonville's eyes light up as a picture is pointed out, and he launches into the story behind the shot. Frequently his sense of humor surfaces. "This is a picture I like very much," he said. "These are women convicts, hoeing. I call it 'Hoers'...This is the cemetery at Fleming Plantation, 20 miles south of New Orleans, 8,000 acres. It was sitting on top of a big oilfield... This fellow celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary the day before, at the same time his granddaughter got married... That's my grandfather, W.D. Fonville, founder of the Missouri Military Academy in Mexico, Missouri. I was born there."

He photographed Baton Rougean Liz Cole, later to be Elizabeth Ashley, at the Old Arsenal because she needed some photos for modeling, but he refuses to take any credit for her meteoric rise to fame. "She was real easy to work with because she was a dancer. She had a driving, driving ambition. She got there on her own. But she told me my pictures got her her first TV spot in New York - a Coca Cola commercial."

Fonville is still actively involved in work at his studio, going to work every day, though son Bobby has shouldered most of the heavy workload. Fonville does sittings by special request for \$166, plus \$35 for an 8x10 print.

Portraits must capture the personality of the subject, and Fonville joked about methods used to get a subject to relax. These tactics range from chatting a while to setting another appointment for a sitting, or finding out what kind of drinks the person likes and serving those drinks during the sitting.

"I once had a beautiful girl come in to have her portrait made, but she was a complete dud. I gave her a snootful and got some beautiful pictures of her with her inhibitions gone."

Center stage in the studio is the Graphlex camera that has served Fonville so well since he bought it in the early forties. "It was built around 1924 -25," he said, "and was designed to use 8x10 film, but I modified it by adding the back of a Speed Graphic. I use 4x5 sheet film."

Among his many accomplishments, Fonville is an inventor, holding patents on an automatic film processing machine which he said is the secret to his being able to remain a one-man operation. The developing tanks are lined up with an arm above them which dunks the film into each tank for the pre-set length of time. "I can put the film in and go home," he said, "and it will be ready to print when I need it."

He never succumbed to the lure of color photography, though he has done some color by special request. Why does he adamantly stick with black and white? "One main reason I don't go for color is they fade. They'll wind up looking mostly blue. There are plenty of photographers who do color. Most of my portraits are done for posterity... If you want color pictures, keep them in the deep freeze, and when you want to look at them, take a match and light it, open the deep freeze and look at your pictures, then put them back and close the deep freeze."

"I can't think of half the things I've done," he mused. "They come as natural as breathing. I didn't go to school for half these things. I went to school for journalism but don't write, though I kept extensive diaries during all of my travels in the swamp and my stays in Grand Isle."

Sarah Sue Goldsmith is associate editor of the Magazine section of the Sunday Advocate.