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Southern Exposures

By KRISTINE McKENNA

An exhibit by photographer Fonville Winans shows a Louisiana that's now almost lost

"When I was a young man I wanted to have an adventure and since Africa was too far away. Louisiana served that purpose." says 79-year-old photographer Fonville Winans of the years during the early '30s he spent wandering the Gulf Coast. "Louisiana has alligators, moss palmettos—in fact. when I first went to Grand Isle (small island off the Louisiana coast that was once a haven for pirates]. there were wild horses running around and people were living in thatch roofed huts. Yeah. I was looking for something exotic and I found it out there in the swamps."

If that reminiscence whets your appetite for something picturesque. Winans photographs. which go on view this Friday at the Gallery at 817. won't disappoint—his work is as romantic as his rap. Idyllic views of the Cajun South that take us into a world of shotgun shacks and steamboats. magnolias and fish fries. glad-handing politicians and barTe-foot brown-skinned people in faded cotton clothing. Winans' work pays homage to a Southern rural existence that's pretty much gone for good.

"Rice Harvest," above left, (1940) and "Dancers" (1930), both from Fonville Winans' Camp Series. Left, the photographer. in his Baton Rouge studio, holds a Speed Graphic like one he used for many pictures.

Though Winans continues to go out on shoots and has worked steadily for the past 50 years. the photographs on view will focus on his work dating from 1939 through 1943—a period during which Winans created a portrait of Huck Finn's South. This is the South as we like to believe it once e-dsted. and the bigotry, ignorance, racism and violence attributed to the region by writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Conner have no place in Winans sunny realm.

Though Winans' pictures have a gritty realism that's almost unavoidable when chronicling a life style largely defined by poverty, his pictures are subtly composed in that there's not a trace of anything harsh, unpleasant or ironic about them. Rather, his work is essentially a young boy's fantasy of the world as a place of mystery and limitless possibility.

Talking with the artist by phone from his studio in Baton Rouge. one realizes Winans never consciously whitewashed the world when he made his photographs—this is truly the way this relentlessly optimistic man sees the world. His upbeat view of things is in fact the dominant note in his sense of aesthetics. Graced with solid technical skills, a pleasant if not deeply original sense of composition. and a rich milieu to work in. it is finally the ease and amiability with which he views life that lends his work its distinctive voice.

"I must have a guardian angel because I've been taken care of." he cheerfully points out. "I never planned anything in my life and everything came my way by chance. I've been like a leaf that drifted off a tree—and for some reason I always drifted in an interesting direction."

Though relatively unknown at this point. Winans looks as though he's about to drift into the limelight. Two years ago. :.A. photographer James Fee (who's also with the Gallery at 817) was walking down a street in Baton Rouge and noticed Winans studio. He subsequently stuck up a friendship with Winans and brought him to the attention of the local gallery, which is hosting Winans' debut L.A. exhibition.

Though Winans doesnt seem particularly concerned about his place in history, a lot of other people seem to be.

Two books about him are in the works; one is a survey of his photographs to be published next year in France. the other an autobiography written with writer Mark Ballard that combines Winans' pictures with journals he kept while traveling through the swamps during the '30s. Exhibitions of his work are scheduled for next year in Paris and London. as is a New York show that will take place in conjunction with the opening of his pal Paul Prudhomme's new restaurant.

Moreover, his work, which is priced at $300 to $1,700 is selling at an increasingly brisk pace. Winans' most popular pictures are his images of hard-core Cajuns. and Huey Long and his family's political dynasty. However. he's photographed everything from the oil and fishing industries of the South to college beauty queens. and interest in his more obscure images is growing—much to his surprise.

"I don't understand all the attention people are paying to my work because I never considered my pictures anything great," he confesses. "In fact, it shocks me what photographs sell for these days. The other day I sold a print to Bruce Springsteen—a picture of several people sitting around a table eating oysters in an oyster camp—and he paid me $1.000. That seems like a fortune to me: I don't know exactly how he came to appreciate my work, but he bought two prints."

Winans' blase attitude toward his own work may be attributable to the fact that his pictures are but one chapter in a very full life.

A gifted musician who claims he once beat Tex Beneke in a saxophone playing contest, Winans is also a licensed airplane pilot, an amateur inventor who patented an automatic film processing machine, an authority on mushrooms, and a skilled carpenter. A lifelong athlete and bicyclist, he founded a biking club in 1961 and the bike was his primary mode of transportation until a stroke slowed him down two years ago. He's a frequent guest on televised cooking shows in Louisiana where he demonstrates his specialty—Cajun cooking. On his journey through the swamps in the '30s he made a 90-minute film titled "The Cruise of the Pintail" that was shown throughout schools in the South for several years, and he knows how to call alligators. "You have to be careful not to do it near the water," he cautions, "or they'll come after you."

Born in Mexico, Mo. in 1911, Winans was the eldest in a family of four children, and his father was a civil engineer. When Winans was still quite young, his family moved to Ft. Worth, Tex., where Fonville's mother played piano and tumpet with the Ft. Worth Symphony.

"The slogan of Ft. Worth was 'Where the West Begins,' but there wasn't anything rough about that town in the '20s," Winans recalls. "I guess I've always been restless,so it was fortunate for me that my father liked to travel—he took me and my three sisters to Yellowstone and Mesa Verde National Park, and I took pictures there with a box camera. Those were some of my earliest pictures—I still have those films too."

Winans first visited Louisiana in 1929 when he accompanied his father to help build a bridge in Morgan City. He was immediately smitten with the place, so in 1931 he returned and bought a beat-up little boat for $25, which he outfitted with an automobile engine. He spent the next three years exploring the Intracoastal Waterway, the Sabine and Neches rivers, and the Gulf of Mexico, shooting film and photographs.

"Life in the South during the '30s was great—in fact, I had the most adventurous times of my life during the Depression," he recalls. "I rode freight trains and enjoyed that very much. I also acquired my boat during the Depression and when I got into the swamps I was a happy man. That little boat was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I thought the Depression.
was very interesting, and the only people who were miserable during that period were people who cared a lot about keeping up with the Joneses. I didn't suffer then because I had nothing to begin with."

Inspired by Lyle Saxon's book "Lafitte, the Pirate," Winans traveled to Grand Isle in 1934, where he found lodgings in the home of prominent New Orleans businessman Alfred Danziger. Danziger allowed Winans to set up a darkroom in his house and he spent several months on the island shooting photographs, many of which were published in the New York Times.

His Grand Isle adventure ended later that year when he enrolled at Louisiana State University as a journalism major. While at school he played saxophone in various university bands, shot photographs for the school yearbook and made 16-millimeter films (several of them of Huey Long) for the university archives. Not long after arriving at LSU, Winans met Helen Collins whom he married in 1936. (After three children and 52 years of marriage, Winans' wife died in 1988.) In 1938 the couple settled in Baton Rouge, where Winans worked for the state photographing elected officials during Earl Long's first reign as governor. That same year he was hired as photographer for the state highway commission, and also documented the sugar, oil, shrimp and oyster industries for the state.

In 1940 Winans went into business for himself and opened a photography studio, which he relocated in 1943 to the shop on Laurel Street where he remains to this day. In those early years Winans earned a reputation as being particularly skilled at shooting beautiful women and all the local vamps made their way to his door. Called on to record every manner of auspicious occasion in Baton Bouge, Winans has had more business than he could handle since the day he set up shop, yet he remains unimpressed by his own work.

"Photography is definitely an art form and I really admire Ansel Adams, Edward Steichen and all the old fellows who used to make their own materials, but I don't consider myself an artist," he says.

"As to what my 'style' is—I'm sort of unconscious when I make pictures and all I can say is that I don't like anything contrived. I prefer black and white because it's easier to create a mood in black and white, and as far as technique, I just try to make photographing a fun thing. I talk to people and find out about them, then I encourage them to be themselves. Establishing a rapport with your customer is a very important part of photography, so I try to make people feel important. We don't talk about me, we talk about them.

'People around here do a lot of drinkin' anyway, so if I have to take a picture of somebody I don't like I use whiskey," he continues. "One time I had a girl come into the studio who was the most beautiful thing I ever saw and I just couldn't wait to get her into the camera room. But she was the worst subject I ever had in my life because of her head—her mental attitude was really poor. Her boyfriend had booked this sitting, so I asked him, 'Does your girlfriend drink?' He said, 'Yes, she does,' and I said, 'Good, I'm gonna' lay in a supply of her favorite beverage and we'll try and get the picture again.' Well, the girl came back and she enjoyed getting a little bit tight, and I made magnificent portraits of her as a result.

"The easiest thing to photograph is a beautiful woman," he adds. "I just love Beautiful women. All you have to do is make sure her hair is correct—and then, of course, I need some time to get acquainted with a girl in order to get a good portrait of her. The hardest thing to photograph is a politician who's a prima donna. I love politicians because they're big shots and I like big shots, but they can be difficult."

Though Winans continues to work every day, he's lightened his work load considerably from the days when he did several sittings a day.

"I have to turn work down now and had to raise my sitting fee to keep down the traffic," he says. "I charge $500 for a sitting now, and I think that's a very stiff fee. I'd rather be charging $50—and I did charge $52 for a long time—but I had more work than I could handle."

Oddly enough, Winans expresses no nostalgia for the lost way of living depicted in his early work. He, in fact, seems immune to the bittersweet melancholy his pictures inspire in others. A big part of the appeal of these pictures is that they represent a time when a young man could strike out on his own and truly have an adventure. There were still frontiers to be conquered, man was yet to commit his grave sins against nature, and the vagabond life of homelessness was a choice rather than a sentence. This of course is no longer the case, but Winans nonetheless feels that the world around him hasn't changed significantly. He still finds the South to be a place of warmth and sensuality, he still finds people fascinating and basically good, and his old river just keeps rolling along.

"That world I discovered as a young man still exists in little spots, but it's mostly pretty well faded," he says. "But generally speaking, I don't see any great change in the South. The Southern philosophy is Take it easy.

"'No need to rush is the policy down here and that's the same as It's ever been. And that suits me

Kristine McKenna is a regular contributor to The Times.