

# Pioneering photographer Fonville Winans of Baton Rouge shares memories and images of the Depression-era swamplands

TEXT BY DALT WONK

## Fonville's Louisiana



YES, I LOVED THE SWAMPS. You know what, I caught four alligators and took them back to Texas with me. Here's how I caught em.' Fonville Winans, the grand old man of Louisiana photography, interrupts his narrative to do his version of an alligator mating call—a sort of mixture of a snort and giggle: "Hiii-eh. Hiii-eh."

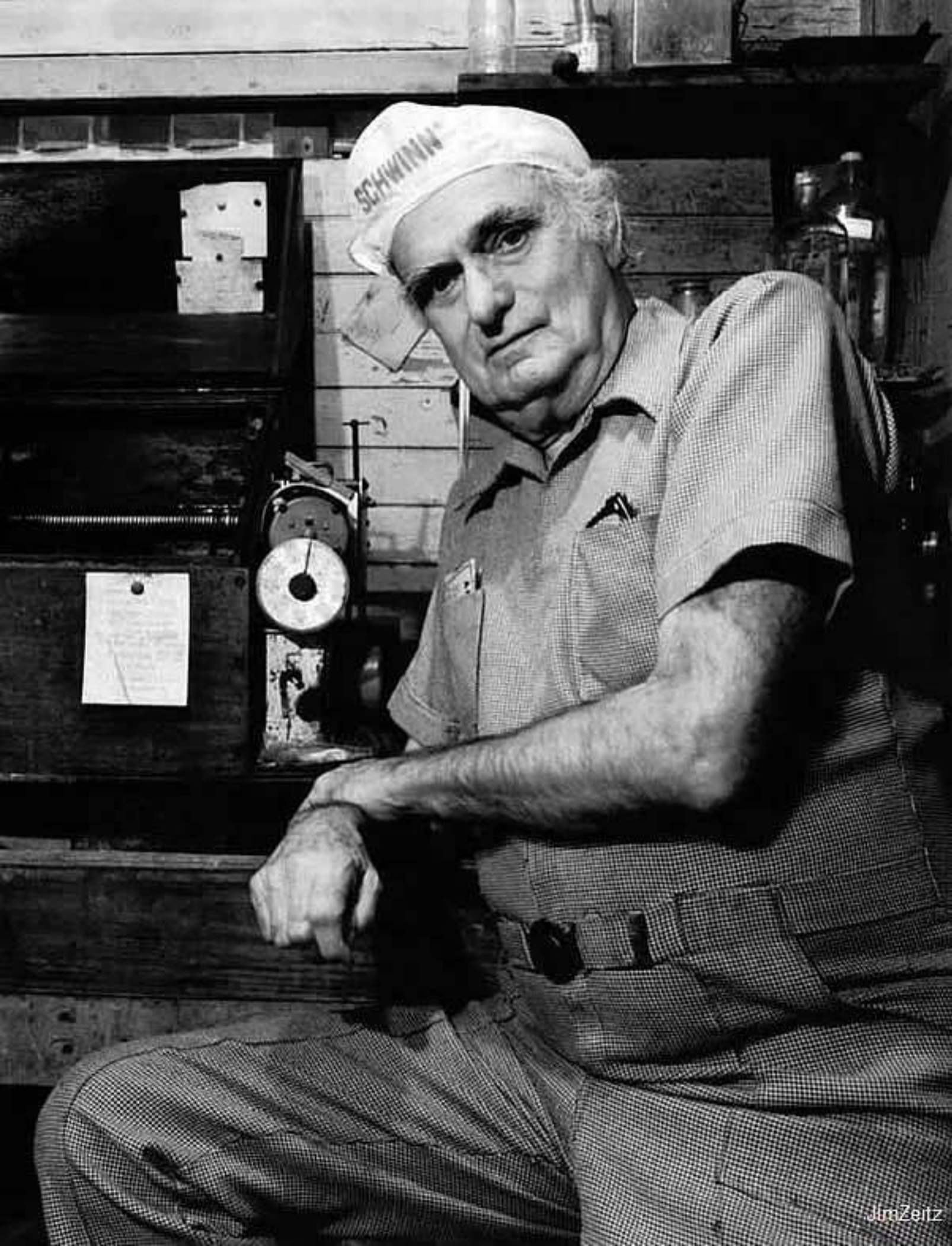
Fonville (no one ever seems to call him anything else) has started out to tell what brought him first from Texas, where he grew up, to Louisiana which soon was to become his adopted home. But as usual, the tale has turned into a series of byzantine marvels.

"That was in the early '30s. I had come to Morgan City with my father who was a contractor—building bridges and paving roads for Huey Long. I was only 21. The bayou country fascinated me. It was like Africa or some other exotic place: palmettos, moss, alligators!

"So to get back to those alligators. I bought an old tub of a boat for \$25 and fitted it with the motor of a

*Fonville Winans' career began with a movie camera in the early '30s, as shown in his self-portrait above, and led to the studio in Baton Rouge (below) where he has reigned as portrait-photographer supreme for 50 years.*







Artists often are neglected in their lifetimes, a sad fate which has not befallen Fonville.



Tonging Oysters, 1938

*Fonville's classic photograph of Yugoslav oystermen (perhaps his most famous) depicts youth and old age, student and teacher, the straight-backed and the stooped, each presenting a countenance of uncertain emotion that invites the viewer's interpretation.*

wrecked car. I christened it the Pintail. I sailed around the bayous with a 16-millimeter movie camera, shooting footage that I edited into a film I called *The Voyage of the Pintail*.

"When I got back to Fort Worth, I started showing the movie in schools: 10 cents a ticket, half for me, half for the school. I packed 'em in because of the alligators—the live alligators I brought to the showings as publicity.

"When I wasn't using my alligators, I stored 'em at the zoo. I could always get them back when I needed 'em, though. I'd walk into the reptile enclosure and give my call. They'd come running."

Fonville repeats the irresistible call—a saurian Lorelei

then pauses with a satisfied, amused glance to gauge his effect.

Fonville is now 79 years old—tall, thin, alert and affable. He has bushy gray eyebrows and gray hair that is thin on top, but gathers to a patriarchal fringe on his neck—a fashion statement he picked up recently when he attended the opening of his retrospective show in Los Angeles, where he noticed "men wear all kind of dos"

Sitting in the kitchen of his gallery and studio on Laurel Street in Baton Rouge, where he has worked for more than half a century, he greets the steady stream of visitors—many drawn from distant parts of the world by his sudden

spate of critical acclaim and media attention.

It has become a cliché that artists are neglected in their lifetimes. That sad fate would have befallen Fonville—except for his longevity. Were it not, in fact, for America's recent realization of the artistic contributions of the Depression era's pioneering photographers, Fonville's dramatic black-and-white scenes of Cajun, Slav and Oriental fishermen and trappers dredging their livelihoods from Louisiana's swamps, marshlands and Gulf might have remained available only to those who still venture through the pages of books such as Harnett Kane's *The Bayous of Louisiana* (Morrow, 1943), William





Oysterman, 1934





**Native Shrimpman, 1934**

*Fonville Winans' camera, like his own life, never strayed, very far or for very long, from Louisiana waters, whether the subject of the moment be a weathered shrimp at 1930s-era Grand Isle (left) or the Baton Rouge-Port Allen ferry crossing (below)*

Faulkner Rushton's *The Cajuns* (Farrah, Straus, Giroux, 1979), Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant's WPA-sponsored *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (Houghton Mifflin, 1945) and Fonville's own (with Myron Tassin) *We Are Acadians* (Pelican, 1976). Frank de Caro's *Folklife in Louisiana Photography* (LSU Press, 1990) is the most recent venue for Fonville's images, and the text provides extensive biographical notes on major figures like Fonville and Elemore Morgan Sr.

Fonville always had a local reputation. In his "rogues gallery" of V.I.P. portraits, the faces of governors, senators, judges and assorted celebrities from five decades cover every inch of wall space. But it is only in the last few years that Fonville has been noticed nationally and internationally. Exhibitions of his work are planned in Paris, London and New York. A prestigious French publishing

house is bringing out a coffee-table book of his photographs. The Public Broadcasting Network is shooting a documentary.

And his prints are bringing prices as high as \$1,700.

Fonville is pleased but hardly rhapsodic about this burst of glamorous attention. And in fact, throughout his life, his love of photography—as intense as it has been—has always been balanced by other interests and enthusiasms. "I didn't start out as a photographer. I started out as a musician," recalls Fonville. "My mother was musical. She played and taught. So I came by it naturally. In high school and later on in college, I earned money by playing clarinet and saxophone in dance bands.

"I had a box camera when I was little and I would take pictures of anything that interested me. But it wasn't until after high school that I got my first real camera.

"It was the deep Depression. I had been performing with a dance band in the Winter Garden in Fort Worth, where I grew up. Now, I don't know why, but I was obsessed with buying a wristwatch. I saved up \$30 and I went to the jewelry store



**Ferry Landing, 1932**



He wandered the bayous...a penurious young adventurer,  
making friends with the. . . swamp dwellers.



Before the Blow, 1941

*Along the Atchafalaya River in Morgan City, perilously close to the Gulf of Mexico, Fonville captured this moment of eerie calm and uneasy contemplation before a hurricane in 1941.*

and I bought a watch. But as I walked up the street, I passed a photo store. All of a sudden, I realized I didn't want a watch, I wanted a camera. I took the watch back, the man gave me my money, and I bought a 3-A folding Kodak. It broke me, but the man gave me three rolls of film on credit.

"Later on, I rode the elevator up to the roof of the bank building and snapped a picture of a downtown intersection. The Palace Theater was having a contest to publicize a new movie called Street Scene. Well, my picture won first prize: two tickets to the show and \$15. It was a bonanza to me! Well, that sure got me excited about photography!" Fonville took his camera

with him back to Grand Isle, which had fired his imagination on the earlier stay while he was working for his father. For several years, he wandered the bayous in the Pintail—a penurious young adventurer, making friends with the oyster fishermen and swamp dwellers. A self-portrait from that time shows an intense, rather dashing youth with a pencil mustache in a broad-brimmed straw hat. Much of his current reputation rests on the remarkable series of images he captured in those years of wanderlust.

While on Grand Isle, Fonville learned that Huey Long had established generous scholarship programs at LSU. The Kingfish, it seemed, was intent on bolstering the

university's musical program, and once again Fonville's musical talents came to his rescue. Between classes he played in a variety of concert and dance bands, including the "cafeteria orchestra" which serenaded the students at dinner and was recompensed with free meals.

With characteristic energy, he also started taking photographic portraits which he printed in a darkroom he set up in the basement of the Music and Dramatic Arts building. At one point, he even convinced the university president to fund a "Campus News Reel" that documented LSU activities on 16mm movie clips.

"One day, a girl came up to me and said, 'Excuse me, but





Lady in the Lane, 1933

aren't you from Fort Worth? We were in high school together.' Her name was Helen Collins. In 1936 we got married, and we stayed married 52 years"

Even with financial help, Fonville couldn't remain in school, so he and Helen went back to Fort Worth where Fonville set up a portrait studio in his parents' house. But it didn't pay enough.

They moved to Kansas City, where Fonville became, in his own words, "a chicken photographer." His uncle edited a catalog for a chick hatchery there, and it was Fonville's

*Fonville's people are frequently seen as an integral part of, and a natural extension of, their surroundings, be it a scene of leisure and freedom on a footpath on old Grand Isle (above) or a labor gang in the fields surrounding the State Penitentiary (right).*

task to provide visuals of the flocks.

"The problem is chickens all have their heads down, pecking at corn, so I took to carrying a cap gun," he says with a sly grin. "I would get my camera all set up and then—blam! Up come the heads, and I shoot the picture"

While in Kansas City, Fonville discovered a new vocation. He became an inventor. "The same company that published the chicken catalog also published musical scores," he explains. A lady had invented a new type of music rack and I was supposed to photograph it for sale. Now, I am mechanically minded and always have been—ever since I worked as a carpenter for my father—but even I had trouble with this music rack of hers. So I invented a better one. The company wanted mine, so they bought it for \$125. They liked it so much, in fact, that they asked me to invent a new kind of foot rest for them,



Angola Hoers, 1938



Fonville "started getting real interested in inventing"... and patented an automated photo processing machine.

which I did, and they paid me another \$125.

"Then, I started getting real interested in making and inventing. Later on, I acquired a whole machine shop—lathe, drill press, all the other appurtenances. I got so involved, I almost lost interest in photography—almost, but not quite."

At the high point of Fonville's career as an inventor, his two interests came together. In 1940, he invented and patented a fully automatic photographic processing machine, and for over 50 years this homemade robot has been doing Fonville's drudge-work. It still sits, fully operational, on his darkroom shelf—a Rube Goldberg-like contraption of wormscrews, gears, cams and rachets that dips a mechanical arm holding 24 negatives into a series of vats, then washes and dries them.

The pursuit of photography led to another side interest that was to become a great enthusiasm: airplanes. In order to take aerial photographs, Fonville bought a small plane. "It only had 36 horsepower, if you can believe it," he recounts. "In a stiff breeze, it could hardly get aloft. Then I bought a three-seater with 90 horsepower. I used to take my wife to visit her parents in South Texas. I would land on a little empty field, taxi up the highway to their house and park the plane in their yard. To go home, I'd take off right from the highway." In 1938, after his brief stint as a "chicken photographer," Fonville moved to Baton Rouge. For two years, he worked for the State, taking pictures of bridges, buildings



and elected officials around Louisiana. When he lost that job, due to a change in administrations, Fonville opened his own portrait studio in the two-story stucco building on

Laurel Street where he has worked ever since. Two years ago, Helen died, and Fonville had a stroke that affected his equilibrium. He has fallen down several times,

*Fonville trained his camera not on New Orleans' landmarks, but on the insides and backsides of the city.*



*Fascination with his camera, perhaps, explains why Fonville's subjects were ever eager to pose, like the children (right) and bus driver of Grand Isle, and even Nature seems to have cooperated to the fullest, as in this rare scene of Yankee ice floating past the Southern city of Baton Rouge.*



**Native Children, 1938**

once breaking his hip. Now, he moves about cautiously with the aid of an aluminum cane. He still takes the occasional portrait, but he is content to let his son Bob and daughter-in-law Natalia take care of handling most of the business. His wit and lucidity, however, are very much intact.

Standing in the small studio where he has taken so many portraits over the years, he points at the large, wooden camera dating from the '20s that he has always used. On it, as on all of Fonville's equipment, is a variety of gadgets and customized parts he has added. A toy muskrat to get the attention of children is stuffed under the black head cloth.

"You know something," muses Fonville, propped on his cane in the semi-darkness, "people used to pay \$5 to sit in front of that camera. Now they come and pay \$500 to have their picture taken.

\$500! Surprises the hell out of me, a person will pay that much for a photograph!" ^



**Grand Isle, 1934**



**Ice on the Mississippi, 1940**