

Portrait of the artist

By Ruth Laney

Stepping into Fonville Winans' photography studio on the corner of Laurel and Seventh streets is like entering a time warp. He has occupied the unmarked, 100-year-old building since the mid-1940s, and he wryly refers to it as "an architect and interior decorator's dream." Photographs of local politicians, the social elite, the famous, the talented, the beautiful and the not so beautiful

— line the yellowing walls.

Portraits of former Louisiana governors hang cheek-by-jowl with such national celebrities of

yore as baseball coach Connie Mack. Resting atop an ancient couch is a battered composite photo of the 18-year-old Elizabeth Cole, just before she left Baton Rouge for New York and stardom as actress Elizabeth Ashley.

Tacked up in the odd free space are crumbling newspaper clippings. Fonville has been covered in print from many angles — as the wedding photographer who conducted national seminars featuring a bride in a bathing suit and transparent dress (to demonstrate proper placement of knees and feet), as a gourmet cook of such delicacies as Chicken-To-Hell-and-Back and Leg-in-a-Cast Flan; as a collector of edible mushrooms; as Baton Rouge's premier bicyclist (a hit-and-run accident

awhile back left one hand slightly impaired); and as local eccentric.

The eccentricity is readily apparent. There is his costume, which seldom varies from day to day. He dresses, essentially, for the bicycle trip from his home in Goodwood to his studio. Bright orange windbreaker, white short-sleeved shirt (often stained with chemicals), khaki Bermuda shorts, black or white socks pulled halfway up to his knees, track shoes of the K-Mart variety. Inevitably, there is the white Schwinn bicycling cap pulled tightly down on his head, the brim turned up at a jaunty angle.

The face is a strong one, with beetling gray brows over piercing hazel eyes, an imposing nose and a mouth often in motion. As Fonville putters from darkroom to portrait studio, one notices that the legs which descend from the cycling shorts are surprisingly spindly considering the miles they've pedaled. Yet Fonville Winans has an appeal that transcends beauty — or the lack of it. At the age of 69, he is walking proof that the trick is not to be in style, but to have a style.

And that he has in spades. Following his own bent in everything from outer wear to inner thoughts, he is a man who was "doing his own thing" as unquestioningly as a child long before it became fashionable. He eschews the usual polite small talk which PR-minded businessmen indulge in, replete with polite questions to indicate interest in you.

Fixing his eyes on a visitor, Fonville cocks his head and talks. A lot. About himself, but a listener feels charmed and included by his willingness to share his thoughts so openly. He talks about his early Depression days when he displayed an ingenious knack for making a buck at everything from saxophone-playing — "I once beat Tex Beneke in a saxophone contest." — to filming LSU campus newsreels and even photographing chickens and turkeys — "The trick is to make a loud sound so all their heads come up at once."

He talks about the women he has photographed, confiding that "this young woman wanted to be a Dallas Cowgirl and she was qualified." He tells you "this old gal had quite a mustache" before he retouched her and that a well-known former government official was "the biggest prima donna I ever knew." He talks about the wealthy, somewhat snobbish woman whose photo, in which she was flanked by two Dalmatians, ran in a long-ago



Self-portrait — Taken at Grand Isle in 1935

society section with the caption, "Mrs. John Smith, center ..." His observations — delivered in the rasping voice of a heavy smoker (which he is not) — are pithy, raucous, irreverent, often bawdy and punctuated by such epithets as "Lord-amighty" and "Wh000-eee."

Fonville is married to the former Helen Collins. Helen works in the studio doing oil coloring of portraits (a technique used before color film),

which is enjoying a resurgence in popularity. Married for 44 years, the couple has three children; Bob, who is an engineer at the shipyards in Pascagoula, Miss. (and who also has a portrait studio there); Walker, an electronics technician for the Wetlands Research Institute at LSU; and daughter Meriget, who is working in her father's studio until she rejoins her husband James Turner, currently in Jordan

on a Fulbright professorship.

Fonville's eccentricity extends into his business practices. He has never advertised extensively — there's not even a sign on the door to notify a customer that she has finally found the studio. Starting out in the 40s photographing local society beauties, he benefited from the society editors' habit of running large photos with accompanying

stories giving details of, for example, a young lady visiting relatives in Florida before returning to Baton Rouge to attend secretarial school.

Times were slower then, the women perhaps more beautiful because of the slowness, and Fonville had a knack for bringing out that beauty — or character. In his expert hands, even mundane society photos became works of art, exquisitely lit studies of faces in repose. With nothing in the way of advertisement save his credit line on the newspaper photos, he soon found himself with a waiting room full of customers.

Weddings became his specialty, and an infinite amount of care went into this easily clichéd commercial venture. He became an expert on nuptial etiquette and with experience learned to carry an emergency wedding kit containing such amenities as an extra garter for the bride who

"This one's called Ten Cents a Dozen because of the sign painted on the window. The guy on the left is Tony Kristovich and the fellows on the right were the Fiorella boys from New Orleans. I took this in: Morgan City in 1938, on the waterfront. Nothing was planned I had no flash, so I used a tripod and took a slight time exposure. This was shot with a 4x5 Speed Graphic."

forgot, bags of rice with his name printed on them (a concession to the ad world), spirits of ammonia for the faint of heart, liquor (purpose not specified) and the never-when-you-need-them safety pins. He was a pioneer of bounce lighting, resulting in a softer quality to the bridal portrait.

So renowned was Fonville at the wedding portfolio that photographer Olan Mills had him flown to Chattanooga when Mills' own daughter was married. Fonville now turns down more weddings than he shoots and refuses to work in color, noting that "the black and white photographer is almost being forced out of business. The color photographer does no lab work — he's a cameraman only, and that's what I call a half-assed photographer. I don't have much enthusiasm for color, because I have such complete control in black and white. If you do color work, you're at the mercy of the lab, and they just grind it out."

Fonville's darkroom is another trip back in time, a setting straight out of Rube Goldberg, with chemicals decanted in whiskey bottles, antiquated clothespins tacked to a shelf to hold drying negatives, 40-year-old instruction sheets pinned above the enlarger. Amid a welter of yellow Kodak boxes, machine parts and general bric-a-brac, the chemical trays

are spotless, and the care he lavishes on a print is evident.

It is in this mad-scientist darkroom, he maintains, that he does his most important work. "The art is in the darkroom," he says, adding that there is no such thing as a negative too bad to print from. An anteroom houses his patented film-processing machine, which he invented in the late '40s. It can handle 24 rolls of film at a time in a five-quart tank and is, he says, the reason he can continue to run a one-man studio. "I don't have to spend any time developing film, just about five minutes to load it into the machine."

A long, dimly lit, narrow hallway serves as a negative file, with more of the ubiquitous yellow boxes stacked to the ceiling on makeshift shelves. An archivist might get weak in the knees contemplating this filing system, but Fonville seems to know exactly where to find the item he wants.

A back room contains a narrow day bed and a desk which doubles as a table. This is where Fonville and Meriget eat lunch — bowls of soup cooked up on the stove in the machine shop, cracker with butter. The butter is kept on a spare chunk of wood in the machine-shop refrigerator, and the crackers can be found just above the table, on a shelf helpfully labeled "crackers." And here, lining the walls above stacks of old copies of National Geographic and Popular Mechanics, is Fonville's private photo collection, a series shot in



south Louisiana during the '30s and '40s, commonly referred to by admirers as his "art" photographs.

This evidence of another side of Fonville's talent goes largely unrecognized locally, although the photos are rich in nostalgic value, depicting a way of life that is dying fast. Oyster bars along the Morgan City waterfront. Young cottonpickers dressed in Sunday finery for an afternoon of shopping. Two black kids, aged about ten, tapdancing in broken shoes on a Bourbon Street sidewalk. Earl Long working a crowd at a political rally in Natchitoches. Ice floes on the Mississippi,

Ice in river, Feb. 1940.



Chopperettes — "This was taken in 1938 up at Angola when they still had women prisoners, before they were put in St. Gabriel. The guy on the horse had a big gun on his other side."





Menget: "Dad calls this his 'token magnolia.'"

Shrimpman: "This fellow was in a bar in Grand Isle. He was pretty tight and was smoking one of those roll-your-own cigarettes. When he saw me take his picture, he wanted a copy of it right away. I guess he didn't know he was 25 years ahead of his time. When I couldn't give him a picture, he wanted to fight me, so I got out of there pretty fast."

Elizabeth Cole (Ashley) at age 18 (part of composite) — These pictures landed Elizabeth her first job up in New York on TV, doing a Coke commercial. I took them over at the old arsenal. It was a jungle then, a good place to take pictures. But then they renovated it and ruined it."

Fonville

taken from Port Allen, with the Capitol looming in the background. The Port Allen ferry landing, with dark, boxy cars of the late '30s lining the riverbank.

These photographs — in exquisite gradations of black, white and gray — are works of art and have been recognized as such and reprinted in such publications as the *New York Times*, *Life* and several books: Hammett Kane's *Bayous of Louisiana*, Myron Tassin's *Nous Sommes Acediens*, and William Faulkner Rushton's *The Cajuns*.

Most remarkable, the photographs were made "in the field" with large, unwieldy cameras, sometimes under hectic conditions — and often processed there as well. Fonville says he "didn't start out to make a collection," but he kept shooting and now had a group of over 100 photographs which has recently been in demand for exhibits.

Gallery South exhibited Fonville's photos last year, and he hung a show in the Centroplex Theatre in October to highlight the opening of the Baton Rouge Symphony season. Meriget is currently organizing some of her father's photographs into an exhibit called "Louisiana Look-See"

which has been requested by the American ambassador to Jordan as part of a cultural exchange. The embassy in Syria has also expressed interest in the exhibit.

This photographer-artist-musician-inventor, who apparently has never learned the word *jaded*, appears genuinely delighted by each new wave of recognition and cooperates willingly with the many demands for his time. At the drop of a bicycle cap he'll relate the story behind each photograph, relishing details as much on the hundredth telling as on the first. At nearly 70, he is clearly the possessor of a major secret — the richest man is he who can do what he loves and be lucky enough to make a living from it. Fonville had the good fortune to discover photography as a youngster — and was smart enough to realize that he had found his *metier*.

The rest is history; if you have a while, just clear the pile of clippings off that couch, sit yourself down, and he'll tell you all about it.

Ruth Laney is a local free-lance writer. A former award-winning sports reporter for the Alexandria Daily Town Talk, she is also in charge of public relations for the Baton Rouge Symphony.

