

Fonville



Fonville Winans

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Reception, exhibit to honor famed photographer

By ANNE PRICE
Newsfeatures writer

Most of the pictures I made were not made for any reason at all," mused photographer Fonville Winans, eyeing a print of a scene at Grand Isle, circa 1938. To artists, historians and Fonville fans, however, those casual photographs are a priceless record of Louisiana life, unequalled in artistic sensitivity and technical skill. "I usually just made one shot because I didn't have very much film," the tall, lanky photographer added. "That was during the Great Depression."

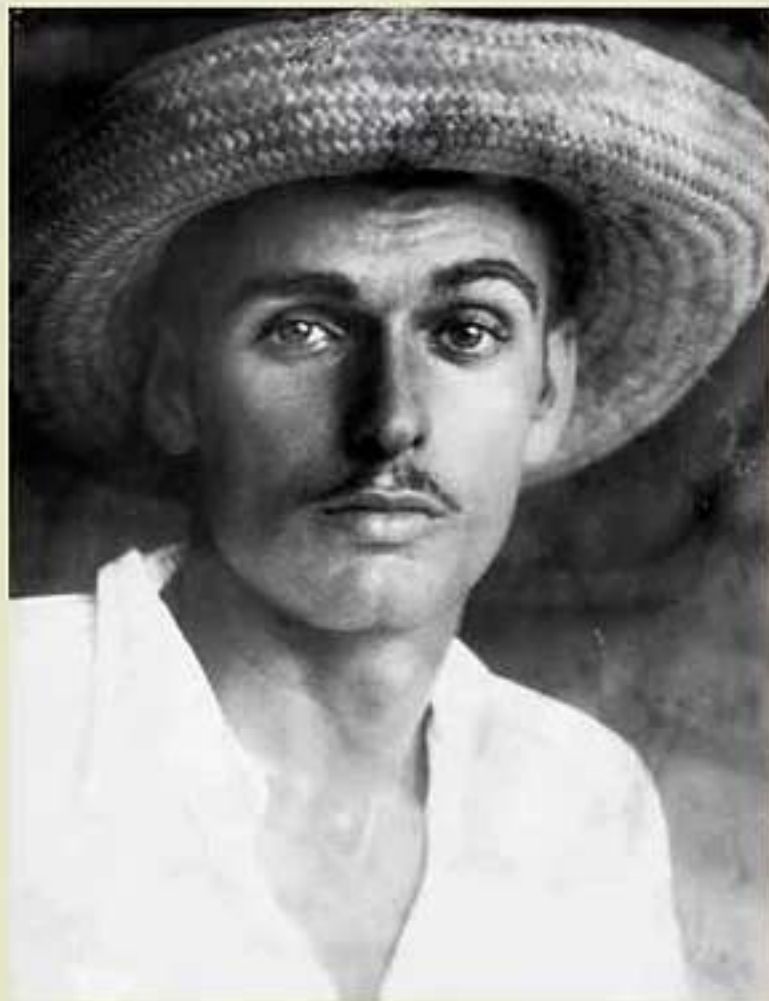
His incomparable black-and-white photographs remain the standard by which many photographers judge their work, and his early photographs are a priceless historical record. In the 1930s and 1940s, he captured the geography and inhabitants of South Louisiana, the industry and occupations of the people, and the political figures and social life of the state. The walls of his studio on Laurel Street are lined with portraits of governors, judges, debutantes and brides of the past 50 years, all bearing the now-famous signature, "Fonville."

Winans has a retrospective exhibition at the Louisiana State Archives throughout the month of March and will be honored at a reception there Wednesday. His colleague, A.E. Woolley, will give a talk on "Fonville, The Man and His Work," and the Foundation for Historical Louisiana will honor him with its prestigious Preservation Award, the first time this award has been presented at a time other than the organization's annual banquet. A reception is scheduled at 7 p.m., and the lecture begins at 7:30. The event is open to the public.

"He's been an inspiration to me throughout my adult life," said Woolley. "When I came back here from the military, he had already established himself as the No. 1 photographer in the community. I set being his equal as one of my major goals in life." Although Winans' studio and wedding portraits are legendary, Woolley confesses to some regret about this phase of the Winans career.

"I've been a little angry with him because he didn't continue his pre-studio photographs," he said. "All the years he was doing portraits, he also sacrificed doing something he did so well."

Woolley is looking forward to paying



Fonville Winans self portrait, 1934.

tribute to Winans.

"He set the stage for uncounted hundreds of people who felt his work was the spogee of success," he said. "As a colleague, I feel anyone who even comes close to him as a photographer has reached goals far above most people. He's one of the top men in the country."

Winans, a native of Mexico, Mo., where his grandfather owned a military academy, began his love affair with Louisiana in the early 1930s, coming here from Fort Worth, Texas, where he spent most of his boyhood. "My father was in construction, and each of his four children was born in a

different state," he said. "I came to Morgan City to work with my daddy as a carpenter on a bridge construction project in 1931. "I got interested in boats and Cajuns," recalled Winans. "I fell in love with moss in trees, palmettos and alligators. The whole place was adventurous to me. I can call alligators, but you have to watch and not go it near the water or they will come after you."

A man of boundless energy and enthusiasm and a ready sense of humor, Winans only recently agreed to retire from his photography studio on Laurel Street. His son, Robert, known as Bobby, will take over management of the business. He has been working with his

father since childhood, but says there is still one basic style, and that is Fonville's.

"The big thing is that when I started working with him he was very difficult to work with. He had his ideas set down exactly his way. I don't imagine anyone could work with him, you had to work for him.

"I started working in the office when I was old enough, and like any kid I had to try other things. I had to fight for my own identity. The reason it worked out is that in most cases, his way was the best way."

Fonville Winans is a man of many talents and interests. A musician, he played saxophone and clarinet in dance bands in Fort Worth and recalls that he once played with Tex Benke.

"I beat him in a sax solo contest," he chortled. "At the time I was older than he and had more experience."

Photography won out, however, and has been his passion for most of his life.

"I've been messing with photography since 1927. In Morgan City, I made 16mm movies in the swamps. I had a boat I built myself, and I photographed oysters and shrimp, people and alligators. I was a poor man's Frank Buck, and I did catch some alligators. All this was a young man's adventure, because I had wanderlust."

He said he showed some of the films in schools in Fort Worth and Dallas but school officials decided the 10-cent admission charge was not appropriate during the Depression. Some of the swamp films have been shown on public television. While he was at LSU, he filmed the "Campus Newswreel," but when he left the campus the films were retained as property of the university and later lost. He had many pictures of Huey Long on campus, he said.

"I still have some of the swamp movies, but some are a little the worse for age, like the photographer who made the pictures," he laughed.

he young photographer was attracted to Grand Isle by Lyle Saxon's book, Lafitte the Pirate, and it was at Grand Isle that he made contacts that led to his involvement in politics.

"The people you meet are the turning points in your life," he said. "On Grand Isle I met Alfred Danziger, who had a relationship with Huey Long. He owned two-thirds of Grand Isle, and I became really crazy about the island. I went on a trip on Danziger's boat, Pintail. I had two boys with me who paid \$50 to go with me on my travels. We went to Texas on



Above, 'Mardi Gras Revelers,' 1938.
At right, Huey Long
and Pres. Smith, 1935.

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the Intracoastal Waterway. I would catch crabs and make a gravy with them, and we called it Pintail stew."

Through Danziger, he met Huey Long and began photographing politicians. In 1938 he went to work for the state as a photographer for the Highway Commission, traveling all over the state to photograph various road and bridge projects, as well as occasional hospitals and other buildings.

"Once I was taking pictures of new babies in a hospital and (Gov. Richard) Leche said we are raising our own voters, I chuckled.

Winans has photographed every governor since Huey Long except David Fenn and Buddy Roemer. He has, however, made a photograph of first lady Patti Roemer. Prints of many of the governors and other officials, inauguration scenes and informal crowd shots decorate some of the studio walls. Of all the governors whose pictures he made, he says Leche was his favorite to photograph.

"I liked him very much," he said. "Although I made a lot of pictures of Earl Long, I had a closer relationship with Blanche. She hired me to photograph his inauguration.

"I photographed anything in the state that was going to bring us publicity," he continued. "I did a big cane factory, the oil, shrimp and oyster business. I went to Avery Island and shot the interior of the salt mines."

He became a pilot in 1938 and began taking aerial photographs for the Highway Commission. He owned two airplanes, and often would fly to Grand Isle after he moved permanently to Baton Rouge.

"I'd be out raking leaves and would say to Helen (his wife), gee, it's hot. Let's go to Grand Isle for a swim, and we'd fly down and back the same day.

"He lost his state job when the reform administration of Gov. Sam Jones took office.

"They let me go because they had to put the Jones people in," he said without rancor. "The man who replaced me was a photographer who had filled in the business and I bought his equipment. I'm still using it. It's professional equipment but he wasn't experienced in professional photography."

Winans attended LSU from 1934 to 1936, and had a darkroom in the basement of the Music & Dramatic Arts Building. He worked with the opera department, photographing cast members and developing the pictures in his underground darkroom. Opera stars such as Rose Bampton appeared at LSU in those days and became Winans' photographic subjects, as did the faculty and student casts.

"I hitchhiked to LSU with \$10, which I had made at Grand Isle," he laughed. Winans began his studio operation on a shoestring, working in a small house in North Baton Rouge and using the bathroom and a side porch for darkrooms. Again, he credits meeting the right people with his success.

"I met a girl at Stroube's Drug Store, and took her photograph. I told Mary Champagne (society editor of the State-Times) that I had taken a picture of Frances Dougherty, and she asked to run it and gave me a credit line. People had never heard of F'onville, but through this



'Angola Hoers,' 1938.

"I love weddings. I can't do them anymore because I'm crippled, but I've had a lot of adventures photographing weddings."

people called me, and it was like a snowball rolling downhill. All of a sudden I had a business."

Winans reminisced about his close friendship with a man some might think would be a bitter rival, Olan Mills, owner of the national chain of photography studios.

"He was the world's biggest photographer and I was the world's smallest, and we hit it off," grinned Winans. "I used to send people who couldn't afford to pay me to the Olan Mills studio, and the manager got so many referrals he came to see me. When Mills came to town he came by and got acquainted."

Mills then asked Winans to photograph his daughter's wedding in Chattanooga, Tenn., but he had a Baton Rouge wedding scheduled the next day. Mills sent his plane to fly Winans to Tennessee and back to Baton Rouge just in time for his assignment here

"I went on to the wedding in Baton Rouge in the same suit I wore in Chattanooga. That was playing it close," he laughed.

"I love weddings," he added. "I can't do them any more because I'm crippled, but I've had a lot of adventures photographing weddings."

Winans now walks with a cane, but his lively spirit and sense of humor remain intact. Robert Winans says he is just now ready to be "only 90 percent" in charge of the studio.

He was devoted to his wife, who died two years ago, and his son says growing up in the Winans household was great. His other son, Walker, is with the Coastal Studies Institute at LSU, and his daughter, Marjorie Turner, lives in Austin, Texas, where her husband is a landscape architect.

Winans was a bicycle fan before anyone else in the area considered commuting on a two-wheeled vehicle. For years

he rode to his downtown studio daily from his home some miles away and suffered some injuries in confrontations with autos.

"Schwinn sent me about a dozen caps, saying it was the least they could do for a fellow who started bicycling in the South," said Winans. "I've been hit seven times. I run an account at Baton Rouge General."

Many of the well-known people he has photographed over the years have sent him signed tributes, including one man who autographed his photograph by world-renowned photographer Karsh, saying that since he couldn't come to Ponville he settled for second best.

Fonville's trademark black and-white photographs are a part of the economic and social history of South Louisiana. He remains adamant that black-and-white is the best.

"I take color pictures only by prearrangement."