**INTERVIEW**/ J. F. CADO

# FONVILLE WINANS

His photographs of Cajun fishermen, trappers and rural life are being shown as faraway as New York City—a special exhibit has been scheduled in London. His portraits of beauty queens, politicians and prominent locals line the walls of Fonville Winans' studio at 667 Laurel Street where he's worked since 1941.

While long in demand as a portrait photographer (for years he's immortalized the Sweethearts of Sigma Chi and the Darlings of LSU), an older, more revealing dimension of Winans' work is now available in a series of new prints, some made from 50-year-old negatives. They chronicle a lost Louisiana in the faces of its forgotten people. Fonville Winans has not forgotten them, though, as he looks back with Gris Gris on a rambling and storied career of exposing the best of Louisiana.

**How did you come by your first camera?**

It was called a 3-A Kodak which took a picture the size of a postcard. One roll of film had six frames on it. The way I came about the camera is I'd been playing in a dance band and I'd saved my money to buy a wristwatch.

The watch cost $30 and I knew right where to get it and I did go get it. As I walked down the street in Fort Worth admiring my wristwatch I came to a camera store. I never was even remotely interested in photography before. But they had a display. I suddenly got fascinated and decided I'd rather have a camera. I went straight back to the other store and because it was only a few moments later I surprised the owner. He refunded my $30 though and I headed straight back to the man with the camera in the window. He sold me the camera, then asked me if I wanted any film. I didn't have any more money. So he opened a charge account and gave me two rolls of film. I walked out onto the street and up to the top of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank Building and took a picture. That snapshot won first prize in the Star

7th and Main (Fort Worth, Texas, 1930)

Telegram and Palace Theatre promotion. It didn't have any aesthetic appeal so I was surprised when I won $15 and two passes to the picture. That was in 1930.

**What was the first picture you took in Louisiana?**

It was of my father sitting under a pine tree reading a book. I was working with him on a bridge in Leesville and I had just graduated from high school. I had recently driven my Model T from Fort Worth to California—I camped out, came back and joined my father as a beginning carpenter.

Fonville Winans in his Laurel Street studio.

L.L. Winans (Leesville, 1930)

**But you kept taking pictures?**

I kind of took a detour then. I got real interested in motion pictures. I bought a second- hand movie camera and began to make movies. That was 1931 and I was back in Fort Worth working as a meter tester. Well, my daddy got a job in Morgan City and that sounded so romantic—alligators, moss and palmettos—much better than cactus and sagebrush. Like being in Africa. I went and I saw an alligator pretty quick and learned how to hunt them and call them (eeyunh! eeyunh!). I caught four alligators and took them back to Fort Worth in a boat I redesigned and rebuilt myself. My daddy was through with the bridge so I took him with me. We traveled the Intracoastal Waterway over to the Sabine River and on into the Gulf of Mexico and on to Galveston and Houston. Butcher shops gave me raw meat to feed them. We got to Fort Worth and they hibernated—they dug a hole in the back yard. Come spring they came out chipper and only a little bit skinny. I gave the alligators to the zoo and they grew. In 1932-33 I took the movie I'd made about the trip- - called The Cruise of the Pintail—and booked it in the schools in Fort Worth and Dallas. I would use the alligators in publicizing the film. I'd dress like Frank Buck and look very jungley and handle the alligators in front of the students. It cost 10 cents to see the film show but the school got 50 percent. When word got around that kids were spending their lunch money on the film the schools cancelled the shows.

**How did you make your way back to Louisiana?**

I either took a bus or hitchhiked to New Orleans. I had made a friend named Alfred Danziger who owned two- thirds of Grande Isle and I went to stay at his place. He wanted me to set up a darkroom and make pictures. He had two mistresses—they were sisters—and they would fight. Every time they would get into a squabble they'd call me and commiserate. Oh, what adventures I had. That's where I met Dwayne Norman, who became involved in the Reveille mess. That's when Huey Long put Helen Gilkison in charge of the Reveille and fired all of the Reveille staff—they went to Missouri and finished school there. Helen Gilkison became a real good friend of mine. Through her help I started LSU—with $10. I got in a dance band right away—Max Marks—and played at the Westdale Country

Club. I'd play sax and clarinet all night and make two or three dollars. I made movies, too. I started a thing called "Campus Newsreel" where I made plenty of movies that included Huey Long. They used my films to recruit boys for the football and basketball teams. The school subsidized my films and gave me an office in the basement of the Music Building. Those films, by the way, have disappeared. I only have a few cuttings, mostly football games, etc.

**Did you finish LSU?**

No, I only went for two years. I was in journalism. I left in 1936.

**What then?**

Well, while I was at LSU I got acquainted with a woman named Ileen Emory She lined me up with a job with Herbert Benjamin. I came back in 1938 to work for him. But I never did. I'd also gotten acquainted with Francis Pullen—he was the state photographer. I called on him to chitchat and he said, "How would you like to work for the state?" Dick Leche had just fired the outfit from Chicago and put in his own publicity department. Well, I told Pullen that I wanted to go back and see my friend Alfred Danziger first. He was surprised and thought that was like knowing the president. When I did come back he said, "You're late for work!" I was already on the payroll. That job paid $65 a month.

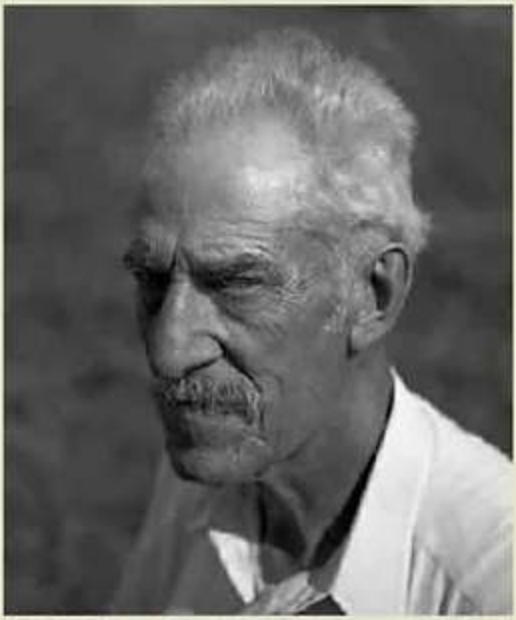
With Governor Dick Leche (left) 1939

The "Pintail" (Bayou Ramos, 1932)

**Is that when you made most of your pictures?**

I started making photos on that first trip to Grande Isle—the first photo I made there was of my boat while in the foreground a fellow is casting a net. Another photo is of the winners of the 1934 Tarpon Rodeo. I took a shot of the Nez Coupe house where Lafitte and his men gathered to divide the spoils. There were others—"Bathing Beauties" I like and the one of Colonel Stevens. Before there were any roads at all on Grand Isle he personally walked the site. One day it rained so hard I just took a photo out of the front door. Other photos—I have several thousand negatives—I just took over the years, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s.

Tarpon Rodeo (Grande Isle, 1934)



Colonel Stevens (Grande Isle, 1934)

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Nez Coupe House (Grande Isle, 1934)

Bathing Beauties (Grande Isle, 1934)

Rain on Grande Isle (1933)

**When did you get your airplane?**

I started flying in 1938. I learned to fly using a rented plane. I finally bought a small plane of my own—a 36-horsepower model which would cruise at 68 mph in still air. No radio. The airports would bring you in. They'd give you a green light and you'd acknowledge by rocking the wings. You navigated by compass and maps—dead reckoning—rivers, railroads, crossroads and checkpoints. Later on, I acquired a better plane and navigated by radio. When you were on the beam you got a steady tone. If you were to the left you got a dot-dash, and if you were to the right a dash-dot.

**When did you leave your job with the state?**

The state relieved me of that job. They don't fire you—they would ask you to resign. So I "resigned" when Sam Jones win the election in 1940.

was kept on long enough to break in the new guy, Hudson Wolfe. I bought all of his equipment from him. That's what I operate my studio with today—camera, lenses, everything.

**What did you do then?**

The first thing I did, I opened my own portrait studio. I went down to visit Dick Leche to see if he could help me. He couldn't, but I did all right, though. I personally think I'm the world's best wedding photographer. I was a pioneer in 35 mm wedding photography. I was so unobtrusive most people didn't even know I was there.

**What are some of the high spots in your life between then and now?**

One time I got into a competition with Tex Beneke, who later became Glenn Miller's saxophonist. I won and that was fun. Another time Paul Newman and I boarded a plane together and he asked to sit with me. We got to Shreveport and for about three hours had the best time drinking scotch and beer at a bar there. I tend to have a good time wherever I go.

But I'd have to say that many of my fondest memories are from when I was state photographer. I made a lot of good acquaintances—Maggie Dixon, Harnett Kane. Dick Leche had what he called a pressroom gang—journalists and photographers like myself and Cleve LeBlanc in the pressroom at the State Capitol. We had wild parties—I got a photo of Maggie Dixon sitting in Dick Leche's lap while he was dressed up as a judge. Fortunately most of those have been destroyed—they should have been destroyed.

**You are an inventor of sorts, aren't you?**

I have four patents. A developing machine I made—I still use it in the studio today. The other inventions serve the purpose of adapting the adult piano to children. It was a music rack and a foot rest to attach to the piano, converting it to child-size.

**Any other memories, like of your travels?**

The main thing I remember that I liked is that I could hitchhike or ride a freight train anywhere I wanted to go. I was a real hobo—I'd hitch a ride with a trucker and maybe wind up helping him unload salt. Or one time I was riding a freight train with a whole bunch of hobos when a cop came and chased us. I hid under the boxcar and when they ran I had the whole car to myself all the way to Houston. Another time I got black, black, black in a coal car going back to Fort Worth. I was a sight when I got back home. Nothing bothered me then and although I didn't panhandle I didn't starve to death. I did yard work for something to eat. That was the Depression.

**What did your parents do?**

My father was a well-to-do contractor until he lost everything in a flash flood. Everything. He was reduced to delivering handbills door-to-door for 50 cents a day. I got the same kind of job and I worked with him. My mother was a professional musician—she played trumpet for the Fort Worth Symphony—and she gave music lessons. That's what kept the wolf from the door.

My dad was a real character, though. He later did a lot of jobs for the government. He built buildings in Trinidad in preparation for World War II. He was the chess champion of the South Pacific—he played by radio and sometimes by mail. He built the naval air station at Manhattan, Kansas, and he rebuilt the island of Guam after the Japanese attack. There's a plaque dedicated to him at the church there.

**You've told me you give them most of the credit for your long and happy life?**

Yes, I'd had a good life, a happy one. I've done everything I wanted to do, except maybe for ambitions I shouldn't have had in the first place. I think I've been happy because I come from a good family—no hassles of any kind. I think that's the secret.

**When was the last time you went to Grande Isle?**

About two months ago.

**Now did it look?**

Strange. It had telephone poles. When I first went there there weren't even any cars—no cars until 1934. I made a lot of pictures, but they were unimportant until now. I recently had a show at the new community building on Grande Isle. I also had a show at the Norman House in Morgan City.

**Does it make you sad to see the landscape changed in Louisiana?**

I wasn't conscious of the change because it was so gradual and because I was here. I think if I had left here in 1934 and come back in 1980 I'd see the changes. But Louisiana is beautiful and that doesn't change!

**You never wanted to go anywhere else?**

I never even thought about going anywhere else.

**Why?**

The people. The Italians and the Czechoslovakians in Morgan City. I especially love the people of French descent. I love the way they think, the way they talk, especially in Maringouin. Louisiana has been special to me since the first moment I arrived, from the time my cousin Arthur Yancy loaned me a book called Lafitte the Pirate by Lyle Saxon. This is the book that led to my going to Grande Isle. I still prefer alligators, moss and palmettos to rattlesnakes, cactus and sagebrush.

**What is the strangest job you ever had?**

I worked in Kansas City as a chicken photographer. I traveled to chicken hatcheries. I learned about chickens, particularly baby chicks. They had a profession called sexing. Particularly Japanese women had a technique—it could kill a chick. If she sexed 98 out of 100 she was a pretty good girl. We look up to certain gods in our profession—one particular guy excelled in photographing chickens. One

Tony Fiorello with Helen (Mrs. Fonville) Winans south of Morgan City in 1938.

day he came to the hatchery and I thought I'd met God himself.

**Other than chickens, who are some of your favorite subjects?**

I've got photos of the likes of Edwin Edwards, Leander Perez, Dudley LeBlanc, Bob Kennon. Gus Weill thought nobody could take a photo but me. I think I like the picture of Leander Perez best.

**But most of the photographs in your studio are photographs you've taken of women?**

Lots of girls, yeah. My very first was Margaret Landry. Through my pictures she became "sweater girl" and made a film, The Leopard Man.

I saw it less than a week ago. It was a horrible, horrible movie. The worst movie I ever saw in my life. Then Elizabeth Ashley—she wanted to go to New York and be a model.

Joanne Woodward I photographed for the Cotton Maid contest. I did all the homecoming queens, all of the Sweethearts of Sigma Chi, all the Darlings of LSU. LSU made them go to the LSU studio. The few who got permission to be photographed off campus came to me. Always, a girl who came to me won. There were no exceptions.

**Your secret?**

I don't know, I just really don't. I get personally interested, maybe that's it. I guess I fall in love with every girl I photograph. Small talk, favorite food, whatever. During the conversation, it just happens. I do know the most flattering lighting is the flat light, to get the butterfly shadow under the nose. I use that quite a bit but I'm not aware of it.

Dudley LeBlanc (1970)

Leander Perez (1968)

LSU Homecoming Queen Debbie Evans (1971

Elizabeth Ashley (1958)

Paul Prudhomme (1988)

**What do you like to photograph today?**

I photographed Paul Prudhomme, that was fun. Patti Roemer booked a sitting. Portraits mostly—I don't take pictures outdoors any more.

**Do you have any advice for young photographers?**

I don't know how they ever become photographers because there are so many experts in the field to tell them what to do. Magazines too. There's too much information, too much. Don't worry about fine grain developer. Find out yourself. Take pictures, get a darkroom and stick with black and white so you can do the processing yourself. Remember that likeness and color don't have anything to do with each other.

**Why have you never taken color photographs?**

Color fades. It rarely lasts more than 25 years. I want my pictures to last.