History saved from trash

Mounds of photographs of BR's past discovered and cataloged

By ED CULLEN
Assistant People editor

Photographer James Terry was walking his dogs in the Southern Heights subdivision last fall when he happened on four decades of black Baton Rouge life neatly bagged, waiting for garbage collectors.

A former Southern University campus police chief named Willie Harris had lived in the house where the trash bags filled to brimming with photographs lined the curb.

Harris was a commercial photographer when he wasn't investigating campus crime or directing traffic on Southern's campus. Terry had talked to him about shooting pictures for a living when Terry was starting out.

"He was the hardest working photographer I ever knew," Terry said.

Terry attended Harris' funeral in 1992.

"He had Alzheimer's," said Terry.

Three years after Harris' death, his house was being prepared for sale. All of Harris' photographs — an estimated 40,000 prints — showing black Baton Rourges at church, play, in their lodges, clubs, on the job and on the athletic field ended up at the curb.

Walking his dogs along 79th Street, Terry noticed the Kodak boxes among the plastic bags in front of Harris' house.

"The large number of Kodak (photo paper) boxes in front of what I knew was a photographer's house made me want to see what was in the bags."

"I asked the man who was cleaning out the house if I could move the pictures because it was getting ready to rain," he said.

Terry called other photographers who helped him move the pictures to an office at Southern's library where the photographs sat for six months.

Today, students in a photo class at the university are filling albums as the first step in identifying some of the thousands of subjects in Harris' pictures.

The albums go to Liberty Bank at the corner of Harding Boulevard and Scenic Highway where longtime Baton Rourgeans pore over the photos.

"When someone recognizes a person in a picture they stick a Post-It on the plastic sheet covering the pictures," Terry said.

The industrious Harris used a large format camera called a Speed Graphic long after other commercial photographers had gone to 35 mm cameras.

"The Speed Graphic used 4x5 sheet film. It was clumsy and slow compared to 35 mm, but the pictures are sharp. He'd shoot 60 to 120 people in one picture, and you can identify everyone in the picture. His forte was shooting large groups," Terry said.

Not all of Harris' photographs are people border to border. He photographed dancers, athletes, outstanding students, teachers, ministers, church congregations, choirs, families in front of their houses, the...
deceased in their coffins. He took formal and casual studio shots that could hang in an art gallery.

So far, with thousands of pictures to go, Harris' work falls into six categories—church, school, weddings, social groups, portraits and death.

"He'd take a picture of somebody's house so the owner could send it to friends and relatives.

"He'd take pictures of dead people so family that arrived after the funeral could see what he looked like in the coffin," Terry said.

Terry's at a loss to explain the thousands of top quality prints Harris left behind.

"A lot of times, people just didn't come get the pictures or maybe he made duplicates because he didn't like the originals or for historical reasons," he said.

Harris' photos record the visits of the famous to Southern against a backdrop of administration, faculty and students.

He turned out thousands of crisp photographs on a decidedly low-tech, felt, flip dryer.

"You'd put two 8 x 10s on one side, flip it over and put two prints on the other side," Terry said. "He processed everything by hand.

"Most of his work was groups, well-organized, well-lighted," he said. "Looking through the photographs, I'll find a picture that doesn't fit, and I know he just saw something, went over and shot it."

That may explain the utility men, the black cowboy, dairy workers, campus cops on patrol and laboratory workers at Southern.

"Southern Heights was new in the 1950s," Terry said. "People said, 'If Willie Harris is coming to take a picture of the family, get him to take a picture of the house, too.'"

"Photography was a lucrative profession in the black community. There were five photographers in Southern Heights."

"Looking through these photographs, you see people got together to have their pictures made. One of the big events at a church was taking the congregation's picture or the choir or the deacons."

After the exhibit at the bank closes later this month, some of the pictures will go to churches for identification. Eventually, Terry hopes to publish books of Harris' church pictures.

Organizing the exhibit at the bank, Terry faced a bewilderment of images. One of the biggest problems we had was finding a picture of him," Terry said.

"Willie Harris worked out of his garage on 79th Avenue, keeping to himself. He cleaned out his stuff at 2 a.m., the day after he retired as chief of police. He didn't want to interfere with the day's work. He took all the pictures of himself."

"He had to create a campus police force," Terry said. "He directed traffic in front of the lab school himself every day. Someone ran over his foot once. That was about as excited as Capt. Harris got."

An old woman who visited the bank exhibit was thrilled to find a picture of her and her friends in the 1950s.

"She talked to me for an hour and a half," Terry said. "She said it was important to preserve our history."

"I believe as more people see these photographs, we'll inspire people in other fields — history, sociology — to look at the stories these pictures tell."

These are examples of thousands of photographs in the 1950s and 1960s that were taken by Willie Harris. The photographs include a banquet, above, and a dance, below. Harris' collection is on display at Liberty Bank.

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