

The Legacy of the West Virginia Photographs

The legacy of the West Virginia photographs has three primary components:

1)documenting the memories and stories of West Virginians about earlier times;
2)demonstrating and contributing to the rich artistic culture of the state; and 3)inspiring current and future artists to look closely at their surroundings in creating fine art in all media.

Memories, Stories, and Perceptions

With relationship to the first component, many West Virginians grew up among images of poverty that did not represent what they heard from their parents and grandparents nor reflect what they saw around them. Deprivation and suffering have always affected some citizens and have often been hidden from those who lived under better circumstances even in the same county. As President Roosevelt recognized in his speeches, stranded industrial communities existed not only in West Virginia but also in urban and rural areas throughout the country.

It is beyond the scope of this book to explore why, especially in the past fifty years, the state became a poster child for a culture of poverty. Unfortunately, the media have focused on poverty and exaggerated backwoods-type images as representative of West Virginia. These images have left terrible scars on a number of people who have grown up in the state. They also continue to bring harm through the perceptions that some outsiders have formed of the state and its citizens.

Yet, how many longtime residents of the state have warm and positive feelings about their upbringings? One of the phrases most commonly heard by the author when the state's elders talk about the Great Depression is: "We didn't know that we were poor, because everyone around us lived just like we did."

These elders also remember – through stories or family albums, or firsthand – how hardworking men and women dressed up to go to church or to the store, even if they were walking along unpaved rural roads. They remember growing or hunting for or preserving almost all of their own food, making what they needed, and creating their own entertainment. The photographs in this book offer professional fine art photographs in support of these memories, snapshots, and stories.

From essay by Betty Rivard in "New Deal Photographs of West Virginia – 1934-1943," published by WVU Press, 2012