

Not Forgotten

Leavin' a Testimony: Portraits from Rural Texas by Patsy Cravens. Published by the University of Texas Press, 2006. 303 pp. \$34.95.

Reviewed by Anna Mod

"You're not a photographer. You are an artist with a camera," Patsy Cravens recalls being told by a professional photographer friend. It is this creative approach that comes across again and again in her book *Leavin' a Testimony: Portraits from Rural Texas*, a collection of portraits and stories of Colorado County citizens. At first glance, this book could easily pass as another glamorous coffee table volume. Yet the pages inside reveal stories and photographs of such straightforward honesty they can bring a reader to tears. The tales Cravens has gathered give us insight into the lives of ranchers, farmers, sharecroppers, the local butcher, rodeo stars, artists, a naturalist, cowboys, domestics, blue-collar workers, blacks, whites, and Hispanics. They are both joyful and tragic, and speak of hard work, hard times, the love of God, the land, and family, and the realities of life in a rural county.

The stories are engaging and at times painful. They speak of prison and of backbreaking work in cotton fields. At the same time there exists an undying hope and a proud satisfaction of lives well lived. The foreword by historian John Boles sets the stage for the stories. The importance of the book, notes Boles, is the preservation of stories that are now "a permanent part of our state's history." In his afterword, Bob Patten, Rice University's Lynette S. Autrey Professor in Humanities, weaves the words "black" and "white" through the 19th-century history of photography, engraving, and etching, then interlaces the two words into the 20th-century human condition: "Nuancing the binaries of race, these pictures tell us about colorful lives—lives of hardship and humor, field work and singing, flirting and families, religion and lynching."

Patsy Cravens has been visiting Colorado County, located a short distance west of Houston, since the 1950s, when her parents bought a farm near Weimar. The book project started innocently



enough some 20 years ago when she visited neighbor Ivory Steward armed with a camera and a tape recorder. Steward, nicknamed "Pie" (his older brother's nickname was "Sweetie," so "Pie" seemed only natural), provided the initiation that led Cravens to record the stories of more than 100 of the county's citizens. Some of the portraits and stories she collected were shown in the traveling exhibition *Colorado County Memories: Everybody Has a Story to Tell*. Others were recorded for the 1995 oral-history documentary *Coming Through Hard Times*.

The book is a continuation of the exhibition and video. A black and white photograph of the narrator in his or her element—on the porch, near the river, with horses, in the butcher shop—accompanies each story. Cravens gives everyone his or her own voice, using their original words, dialect left intact. The result is fun, straightforward, and never condescending. "We knewed as soon as we seen you, you'd wanta take our pictur," remarked the dashing sisters Ethel and Hattie Lee Wilson. We meet Charles Trefny, who grew up around the Colorado River and knows all of its sandbanks, submerged tree trunks, and the changes to the river brought by upriver dams. And there is Eva Mae Glover, who speaks of the lynching of two black boys, wrongfully accused of rape in 1935, one of the county's darker secrets. Pearl Ray Bremby tells a story of being ignored by a white sales clerk. After feeling the burn of racism, she offers this wisdom: "That's my prayer—every day I say my prayers—let me treat people and love people like I want them to love me, and I don't have no hatred in my heart against nobody, nobody."

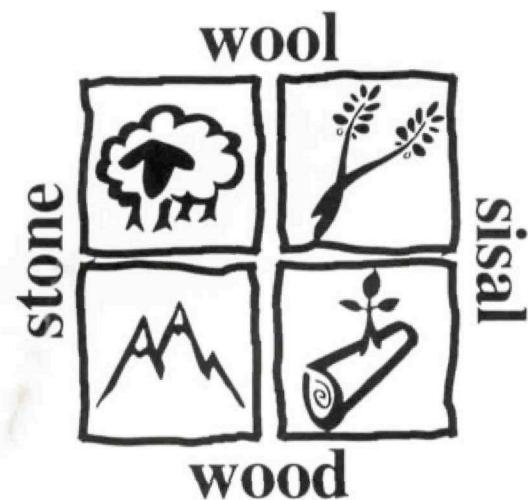
Some photographers catch glimpses or moments in the lives of their subjects. Patsy Cravens has no subjects. The success of the book is her artistic sensibility and awareness to echo the lives and memories of friends she came to know. Of the more than 100 people interviewed during the project, less than a dozen are still living. But thanks to Cravens, their testimonies are now a powerful and moving piece of Texas history. ■

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