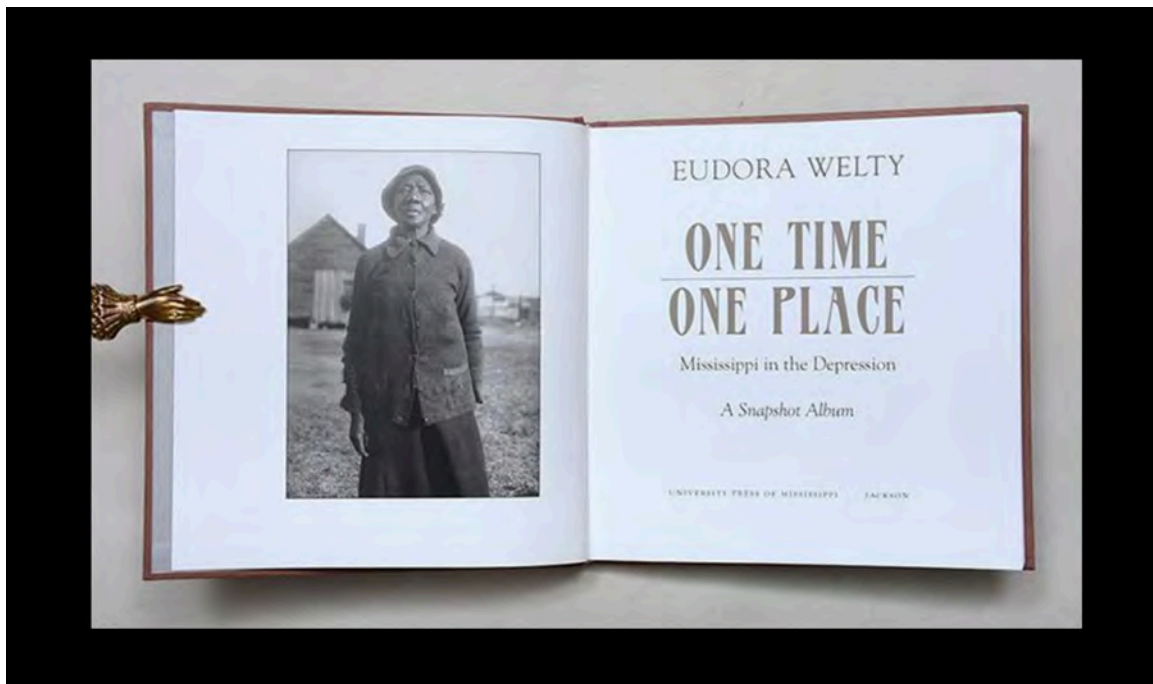


One Time, Once Place
by Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty is among the very few authors who are acclaimed for their work in both literature and photography. In 1971 she surprised her readers with this important book, for in *One Time, One Place* many of them discerned for the first time that this revered writer was also a gifted photographer. Throughout her writing career, Welty's camera was a close companion. The one hundred pictures included here are her selections from many she took during the Great Depression as she traveled in her home state of Mississippi. These pictures are poignant images of human endurance. For her, looking back, they showed a record of a time and a place, an impoverished world that against great odds sustained a sense of community. Both black and white, the men, women, and children she photographed, unaware that they are coping with dire conditions, press onward with their lives. "The Depression, in fact," Welty says in her introduction, "was not a noticeable phenomenon in the poorest state in the Union." In the foreword to this Silver Anniversary edition of *One Time, One Place*, William Maxwell, Eudora Welty's dear friend and esteemed colleague in literature, offers an appreciation of this photographer's special genius and a loving glimpse into her artistic world.



addiction and ambivalence towards change. In awkward proximity to its militants, it preserved the humanist ideal of woman as natural mother. Presentations thus unwittingly revealed a fissure between change and its instrument. And in this overlapping, it made present an untenable simultaneity of femininities.

Photographed for strike sheets and trade union journals, women appeared in check lines either alongside men, or in poses ritually struck by men before their presence as women went almost without notice; but not because militancy has assuaged the division of the sexes and forged a unique gynyny. Visually, and therefore politically, they were subsumed within conventions which had marked militancy as a male preserve. To become visible militant, women were effectively made masculine. In this, their transformation was given articulate space and simultaneously rendered silent.

Alongside the militancy of the unions and of the organized unemployed, groupings attempted social change on the cultural rather than economic. Through work in the theater, in music, literature and the visual arts, they attempted to forge a fighting proletarian culture. Amongst those devoted specifically to a politics in culture, women were again formally accepted as artists. But in the emergent medium of photomontage, they appear, again acceptably, amongst the embattled crowds; and where an individual is staged as exemplary leader of that action, it is *he* who invariably vaunts his clean brawn.⁹ Cameos of both men and women, injured in the course of struggle, are inset alongside the crowds. But where the man is displayed as heant, ragged, bandaged and bloody, the woman appears in untouched portrait—still somehow the unruffled object of a gaze.¹⁰ Where individual women are given the breadth of a full page image, it is amongst their children as martyred mothers, wives of imprisoned 'class warriors.'

The need to continually re-place the feminine belies a confusion and a tension surrounding sexual difference. The need to masculinize the woman is constant, and yet to preserve her difference as mother and as seen; the need to idealize and perfectly perfect an icon of rural motherhood before an audience in the city is intriguingly at slippages away from the place of the feminine. Far from correcting women's social position, they endlessly return us to a crisis in the truth of gender.

Eudora Welty

One Time, One Place

Eudora Welty is a Southern writer in the Gothic tradition, her novels and short stories distinguished by their strong sense of place. She was born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi. Her first job on completing her university studies was as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration during the Depression, but the photographs she took in this period were published only in 1971, as the book *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: a Snapshot Album* (Random House, New York). This preface to the book was reprinted in *The Eye of the Story* (Virago, 1979), one of several collections of Welty's essays and reviews.

THESE PHOTOGRAPHS are my present choices from several hundred I made in Mississippi when I had just come home from college and into the Depression. There were many of us, and of those, I was also among the many who found their first full-time jobs with the Works Progress Administration. As publicity agent, junior grade, for the State office, I was sent about over the eighty-two counties of Mississippi, visiting the newly opened farm-to-market roads or the new airfields hacked out of old cow pastures, interviewing a judge in some new juvenile court, riding along on a Bookmobile route and distributing books into open hands like the treasures they were, helping to put up booths in county fairs, and at night, in some country-town hotel room under a loud electric fan, writing the Projects up for the county weeklies to print if they found the space. In no time, I was taking a camera with me.

In snapping these pictures I was acting completely on my own, though I'm afraid it was on their time; they have nothing to do with the WPA. But the WPA gave me the chance to travel, to see widely and at close hand and really for the first time the nature of the place I'd been born into. And it gave me the blessing of showing me the real State of Mississippi, not the abstract state of the Depression.

The Depression, in fact, was not a noticeable phenomenon in the poorest state in the Union. In New York there had been the faceless breadlines; on Farish Street in my hometown of Jackson, the proprietor of the My Blue Heaven Café had written on the glass of the front door with his own finger dipped in window polish:

At 4:30 A.M.
We open our doors.
We have no certain
time to close

The cook will be
glad to serve U
with a 5 & 10 ¢
stew.

The message was personal and particular. More than what is phenomenal, that strikes home. It happened to me everywhere I went, and I took these pictures.

Mine was a popular Kodak model one step more advanced than the Brownie. (Later on, I promoted myself to something better, but most of the pictures here were made with the first camera.) The local Standard Photo Company of Jackson developed my rolls of film, and I made myself a contact-print frame and printed at night in the kitchen when I was home. With good fortune, I secured an enlarger at secondhand from the State Highway Department, which went on the kitchen table. It had a single shutter-opening, and I timed exposures by a trial-and-error system of countdown.

This is not to apologize for these crudities, because I think what merit the pictures do have has nothing to do with how they were made: their merit lies entirely in their subject matter. I presume to put them into a book now because I feel that, taken all together, they cannot help but amount to a record of a kind – a record of fact, putting together some of the elements of one time and one place. A better and less ignorant photographer would certainly have come up with better pictures, but not these pictures; for he could hardly have been as well positioned as I was, moving through the scene openly and yet invisibly because I was part of it, born into it, taken for granted.

Neither would a social-worker photographer have taken these same pictures. The book is offered, I should explain, not as a social document but as a family album – which is something both less and more, but unadorned. The pictures now seem to me to fall most naturally into the simple and self-evident categories about which I couldn't even at this distance make a mistake – the days of the week: workday; Saturday, for staying home and for excursions too; and Sunday.

The book is like an album as well in that the pictures all are snapshots. It will be evident that the majority of them were snapped without the awareness of the subjects or with only their peripheral awareness. These ought to be the best, but I'm not sure that they are. The snapshots made with people's awareness are, for the most part, just as unposed: I simply asked people if they would mind going on with what they were doing and letting me take a picture. I can't remember ever being met with a demurrer stronger than amusement. (The lady bootlegger, the one in the fedora with the drawn-back icepick, was only pretending to drive me away – it was a joke; she knew I hadn't come to turn her in.)

I asked for and received permission to attend the Holiness Church and take pictures during the service; they seated me on the front row of the congregation and forgot me; once the tambourines were sounded and the singing and dancing began, they wouldn't have noticed the unqualified presence of the

Angel Gabriel. My ignorance about interior exposures under weak, naked light bulbs is to blame for the poor results, but I offer them anyway in the hope that a poor picture of Speaking in the Unknown Tongue is better than none at all. The pictures of the Bird Pageant – this was Baptist – were made at the invitation, and under the direction, of its originator, Maude Thompson; I would not have dared to interfere with the poses, and my regret is that I could not, without worse interfering with what was beautiful and original, have taken pictures during the Pageant itself.

Lastly, and for me they come first, I have included some snapshots that resulted in portraits: here the subjects were altogether knowing and they look back at the camera. The only one I knew beforehand was Ida M'Toy, a wonderful eccentric who for all her early and middle years had practiced as a midwife. She wanted and expected her picture to be taken in the one and only pose that would let the world know that the leading citizens of Jackson had been 'born in this hand.'

It was with great dignity that many other portrait sitters agreed to be photographed, for the reason, they explained, that this would be the first picture taken of them in their lives. So I was able to give them something back, and though it might be that the picture would be to these poverty-marked men and women and children a sad souvenir, I am almost sure that it wasn't all sad to them, wasn't necessarily sad at all. Whatever you might think of those lives as symbols of a bad time, the human beings who were living them thought a good deal more of them than that. If I took picture after picture out of simple high spirits and the joy of being alive, the way I began, I can add that in my subjects I met often with the same high spirits, the same joy. Trouble, even to the point of disaster, has its pale, and these defiant things of the spirit repeatedly go beyond it, joy the same as courage.

In taking all these pictures, I was attended, I now know, by an angel – a presence of trust. In particular, the photographs of black persons by a white person may not testify soon again to such intimacy. It is trust that dates the pictures now, more than the vanished years.

And had I no shame as a white person for what message might lie in my pictures of black persons? No, I was too busy imagining myself into their lives to be open to any generalities. I wished no more to indict anybody, to prove or disprove anything by my pictures, than I would have wished to do harm to the people in them, or have expected any harm from them to come to me.

Perhaps I should openly admit here to an ironic fact. While I was very well positioned for taking these pictures, I was rather oddly equipped for doing it. I came from a stable, sheltered, relatively happy home that up to the time of the Depression and the early death of my father (which happened to us in the same year) had become comfortably enough off by small-town Southern standards and according to our own quiet way of life. (One tragic thing about the poor in Mississippi is how little money it did take here to gain the things that mattered.) I was equipped with a good liberal arts education (in Mississippi, Wisconsin, and New York) for which my parents had sacrificed. I was bright in my studies, and when at the age of twenty-one I returned home from the

Columbia Graduate School of Business – prepared, I thought, to earn my living – of the ways of life in the world I knew absolutely nothing at all. I didn't even know this. My complete innocence was the last thing I would have suspected of myself. Anyway, I was fit to be amazed.

The camera I focused in front of me may have been a shy person's protection, in which I see no harm. It was an eye, though – not quite mine, but a quicker and an unblinking one – and it couldn't see pain where it looked, or give any, though neither could it catch effervescence, color, transience, kindness, or what was not there. It was what I used, at any rate, and like any tool, it used me.

It was after I got home, had made my prints in the kitchen and dried them overnight and looked at them in the morning by myself, that I began to see objectively what I had there.

When a heroic face like that of the woman in the buttoned sweater – who I think must come first in this book – looks back at me from her picture, what I respond to now, just as I did the first time, is not the Depression, not the Black, not the South, not even the perennially sorry state of the whole world, but the story of her life in her face. And though I did not take these pictures to prove anything, I think they most assuredly do show something – which is to make a far better claim for them. Her face to me is full of meaning more truthful and more terrible and, I think, more noble than any generalization about people could have prepared me for or could describe for me now. I learned from my own pictures, one by one, and had to; for I think we are the breakers of our own hearts.

I learned quickly enough when to click the shutter, but what I was becoming aware of more slowly was a story-writer's truth: the thing to wait on, to reach there in time for, is the moment in which people reveal themselves. You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment when you see it. The human face and the human body are eloquent in themselves, and a snapshot is a moment's glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling. Every feeling waits upon its gesture. Then when it does come, how unpredictable it turns out to be, after all.

We come to terms as well as we can with our lifelong exposure to the world, and we use whatever devices we may need to survive. But eventually, of course, our knowledge depends upon the living relationship between what we see going on and ourselves. If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn't happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly and from nowhere but within. The sharpest recognition is surely that which is charged with sympathy as well as with shock – it is a form of human vision. And that is of course a gift. We struggle through any pain or darkness in nothing but the hope that we may receive it, and through any term of work in the prayer to keep it.

In my own case, a fuller awareness of what I needed to find out about people and their lives had to be sought for through another way, through

writing stories. But away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this, anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight.

Anne Tucker

The Photo League

(First published in *Creative Camera*, July/August 1983)

For fifteen years the Photo League was a New York-based forum for exhibition, debate and education. It began at the height of the Depression, an initiative born in an atmosphere of left-wing populism fostered by the New Deal. The Works Progress Administration, set up in 1935, was the largest New Deal agency, and although the bulk of its funds was ploughed into a programme of public building – roads, hospitals, schools, libraries and sanitation – what it is most remembered for is its creation of cultural projects involving many branches of the arts. Their task was to 'document America'.

By 1951, when the Photo League was eradicated by McCarthyism, it had already moved some distance away from the socially conscious impulse of its genesis, towards an emphasis on art photography. Anne Tucker's brief history of the League highlights its importance as a long-standing focus for the photographic community.

'In dreams begin responsibilities'

– Delmore Schwartz

IN 1947, its new name was *The Photo League, Inc.* but the last three letters spoke more of the institutional status it hoped to obtain, than what it had already established. For eleven years its name had been just the *Photo League* and while its photographic programme had achieved national recognition, it was still basically a local membership organisation working out of a rented loft in lower Manhattan. Now incorporation seemed appropriate because the League was in the midst of a capital campaign and a national membership drive. Its goal was to become a 'Center for American Photography' and it needed more money and a larger membership than it had ever previously achieved. Pushing itself out of wartime dormancy, it was striving to regain and then surpass its pre-war vitality.