

POLLY SMITH PHOTOGRAPHER



“You know,
I’ve been happy all
my life.”

TELLING THE STORY OF TEXAS

BY EVELYN BARKER

Polly Smith, 27, held her Graflex 5x7 camera against her chest and pulled out the dark slide that covered the film in the holder. She looked down the focusing hood and adjusted the image of the young man holding his guitar and wearing a broad sombrero. She gently thumbed the shutter release lever,¹ then replaced the dark slide and flipped the film holder over,² readying the camera for the next shot. She asked the man to move near a rose window and strike a similar pose.

It was 1935 in San Antonio and this was one stop among many Polly would make as she traveled across Texas photographing the beauty that she saw in everyday life. She was a photographer for the Texas Centennial and her job was to “tell the story of Texas”³ through photographs. Texas in the 1930s had quite a story to tell, too. It suffered like the rest of the country from the Great Depression, but the people of Texas were proud and looking forward to better days. Their pride and assurance were manifested in their efforts to realize the Texas Centennial.



Mexican señor with guitar, San Antonio

The 1936 Texas Centennial commemorated the state's independence from Mexico. Cities across the state competed fiercely for the honor of being the main site for the festivities, but on September 9, 1934, Dallas earned the nod from the Texas Centennial Commission. Plans for the Centennial celebration were as big as the state itself. The Dallas Morning News editorialized, "It is the best opportunity that Texas ever had to put itself on the map as an important and integral part of the great Southwest. . . ."⁴

To promote the event and the state, the Commission organized a massive publicity program in conjunction with the State of Texas. The Centennial's promotion department prepared copy for daily and weekly newspapers; submitted stories and articles to hundreds of magazines across the country; worked with railroads, airlines, and steamship lines to promote travel to the Centennial; organized radio promotions and special events; and paid photographers to capture images of both the state and the exposition.⁵

The Camera Becomes Indispensable

Photography was the key to selling Texas and the Centennial. By the 1930s, photography's prominence was well established in the commercial realm. As early as 1916 a writer remarked, "Like the telephone, the camera has become indispensable . . . There is scarcely an article in use to-day which is not advertised with the aid of the camera."⁶

Developments in photographic equipment and processing made cameras more popular and more accessible to the public. Concurrently, social developments were changing the country. Women's rights were in the forefront and the middle class was growing. These elements came together in the early part of the twentieth century to allow women like Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, and Laura Gilpin a share in the profession of photography. Put simply, Polly Smith was in the right place at the right time to make her mark.

The Centennial Agreement

Polly was born December 29, 1907, in Ruston, Louisiana, and graduated from Austin's Austin High School in 1925. In 1933, she enrolled in a photography class at the University of Texas,⁷ but she left before the semester was complete to study at the Clarence H. White School of Photography in New York.⁸ Clarence H. White (1871-1925) was a noted American photographer whose school promoted photography not only as fine art, but as a profession. Besides learning the mechanical techniques of photography, students studied design and art history and honed their skills through practical exercises in photographic composition and design. Former students of White's included the photographers mentioned above (Bourke-White, Lange, and Gilpin) and other notable photographers like Karl Struss, Paul Outerbridge Jr., and Anton Bruehl.⁹

In 1935, Polly returned to Texas and started making inquiries about selling some of her existing photographs of Texas to the Centennial. Judging by the informal tone of letters to Polly from W. H. Kittrell, assistant general manager of the Centennial, it's reasonable to suppose that Polly had some connection to him. A likely possibility is Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie. In the 1930s, the Dobies were Austin neighbors of Polly's mother, Marion (Minnie) Burck Smith, and enjoyed a close relationship with her. J. Frank Dobie was also a great friend of Kittrell, and he might have arranged an introduction between Kittrell and Polly.

In mid-October 1935, Polly and the Centennial came to an agreement: Polly would be paid \$35 a week plus traveling expenses to photograph items requested by the Centennial or scenes she thought were worthwhile. The Centennial agreed to buy \$500 worth of negatives or prints a month from her.

Clyde Vandeburg, chief of the Centennial's magazine division, gave Polly a photographic assignment sheet packed with requests ranging from university scenes to "hillbilly shots" and



Cow chewing cud, Austin



Refueling of a Pan-American Douglas plane, Brownsville

desert scenes to East Texas lumbering.¹⁰ With his accompanying note, Vandeburg reassured her, "Don't let it alarm you."¹¹

Keep Her Under Contract

Armed with her assignments and a letter of introduction, Polly "started on her long and exciting trip, alone, to photograph all parts of Texas."¹² It was supposed to take four to six weeks.¹³ Instead, covering such a large and diverse state and supplying photos for the constant demands of the Centennial's promotion department took eight months. She started around her home turf of Austin then traveled south to San Antonio. In December, she continued south to the Rio Grande Valley then made her way up to Houston before heading back toward San Antonio.

Her artistic sensibility, while considered "swell"¹⁴ by the Centennial promotion department, earned her some cautionary words. Clyde Vandeburg wrote to her, "You want to keep in mind that the majority of the magazines that we must cover are purely trade publications. . . . I think it would be well to hold the symbolic type of photograph to a minimum."¹⁵

Indeed, the Centennial promotion department pushed its message to every conceivable outlet. To *Woodworker* magazine it sent Polly's photo of lumbering in the Piney Woods.¹⁶ To *Holstein-Friesian World*, it sent her photos of modern milking machines and contented Texas cows.¹⁷ To the in-house publication of the Illinois Central Railroad, the promotion department sent Polly's photos displaying the scenic beauty of Texas.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Polly's "symbolic type" of photograph was well suited to publications like *Vogue*, *House Beautiful*, and *Town & Country*. Clyde Vandeburg recognized their worth when he sent a telegram to Frank Watson, director of publicity, stating, "Smith pictures clicking with class magazines. Be sure and keep her under contract."¹⁹ Polly's photos were also used in Dallas's class establishments to promote the Centennial.

Neiman Marcus used some in its store displays,²⁰ and the Adolphus Hotel bar created a large photo mural from her work.²¹ Stanley Marcus used her photos to decorate his St. Regis Hotel penthouse in New York where he threw a Centennial-themed cocktail party for that city's fashion elite.²²

My Great Loss

By the beginning of 1936, the promotion department decided it would be easier to put Polly on the Centennial payroll at \$500 per month than to contract her services. Having completed a circuit around the state, Polly returned to San Antonio in February 1936 to photograph local missions and notable homes when misfortune struck. Her camera and film were stolen from her vehicle. "She used to get so excited about what she was doing that she often didn't lock it," Polly's sister Gail Northe Muskavitch recalled.²³

Polly referred to the disaster as "my great loss"²⁴ and clearly felt pressured by the expectations of the Centennial regarding her salary and agreed-upon output. She wrote to Frank Watson, "I also understand your position in allowing me so many advances without having any return but I sincerely hope that within the next week I shall be up with the books and several ahead."²⁵ The promotion department, while sympathetic, made it clear that "we *do* need your pictures right now."²⁶ Polly took pains to convey that she would try to make up the loss to the Centennial by shooting "everything that gets in my path when I get the new camera."²⁷

She would have to travel fast to make up the lost time and wrote that "I work as it is from sun up to sun down and far into the nite (sic) developing."²⁸ However, she would be aided in her travels by a new Ford truck which she had equipped with air conditioning and a darkroom on the back.²⁹ Polly wrote to the promotion department, "Since acquiring my fine truck, I have forsaken the hotels and may start developing under the first shady tree along the road."³⁰



Tigua Indian woman, Rio Grande Valley



Workmen at oil derrick, East Texas

More than two weeks after the theft, new equipment in hand, Polly traveled to East Texas and the Dallas area before heading west to Alpine and Fort Davis.

I Have Never Been Sold on a Career

At long last the Centennial Exposition opened on June 6, 1936, and Polly's contract ran out.³¹ Since the promotion department turned its efforts to the ongoing Dallas festivities, Polly freelanced for some of the Centennial exhibitors, including Chrysler.³² But Polly had retained the rights to most of her Centennial photographs and continued to make good use of her work. *Texas Parade* often used her photos, and Polly herself and her Centennial photos were discussed in the 1936 book *You and Your Camera* by Eleanor King and Wellmer Pessels. In 1939, *The Dallas Morning News* noted that she had recently sold the 1000th print of the Kokernot Ranch near Alpine, Texas,³³ taken during her Centennial travels.

After the Centennial, Polly worked as a commercial photographer for several companies. In the summer of 1938, she went to Houston which, she wrote, "is a wonderful place for an industrial photographer who is willing to climb on top of cotton compresses with 5 or 6 big lights, cameras and tripod."³⁴ She spent 1939 to 1941 at the Dallas Aviation School taking photographs for their recruitment catalogs. By 1943, Polly was in California but had difficulty finding a job in photography. She worked as a carpenter's helper for Douglas Aircraft until she got a job doing publicity, which she didn't like.³⁵

In the spring of 1945, *The Dallas Morning News* reported that Polly was headed to New York to work as a freelance photographer for *Vogue* magazine,³⁶ but the assignment was apparently short-lived.³⁷ While in New York, Polly did some photography work for American Airlines, of which her brother, C.R. Smith, was president.

By 1948, Polly's career as a photographer was ending. As Polly wrote to her sister Dorothy Smith Walton, "You know I have never been sold

on a career as such. I'd much rather plant little seeds and flip pancakes for some deserving man!"³⁸ In the spring of 1948, she took classes in painting and sculpting at the University of Texas.³⁹ These artistic pursuits became her life-long passions, replacing photography.

Happy All My Life

For the last thirty years of her life, Polly focused exclusively on painting and sculpture, only publicly showing her work once.⁴⁰ Polly lived quietly until her death in Auburn, California, on June 18, 1980. Her sister recalled Polly saying, "You know, I've been happy all my life."⁴¹

But the Texas Centennial was surely the high point of Polly's career. Her actions—traveling alone to strange locations, befriending strangers, and working under challenging conditions—still inspire audiences and her photos still affect viewers. Seventy years have passed since the Texas Centennial, but the story of Texas endures through her work.★

NOTES

¹ Willard D. Morgan and Henry M. Lester, *Graphic Gaflex Photography: The Master Book for the Larger Camera* (New York: Morgan & Lester, 1950).

² Rene West, "RE: Polly Smith research." Email to the author, December 14, 2006.

³ Gail N. Muskavitch, Letter to the author, June 18, 1994.

⁴ "Texas Wants to Celebrate," Editorial, *The Dallas Morning News*, January 31, 1934, sec. II: 2.

⁵ Frank N. Watson, Letter to Walter D. Cline, August 17, 1935, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 201.

⁶ Francis A. Collins, *The Camera Man: His Adventures in Many Fields* (New York: Century, 1916), 121-122.

⁷ University of Texas, "Official Transcript." January 20, 2007.

⁸ Maja Keech, Library of Congress, "Library Question - Answer [Question #1651485]." Email to author, June 15, 2006.

⁹ Marianne Fulton, ed., Bonnie Yochelson, and Kathleen A. Erwin, *Pictorialism Into Modernism: The Clarence H. White School of Photography* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 154.



Between classes on the terrace of the Students' Union building at the University of Texas, Austin



Cotton harvest time

¹⁰ "Photographic Assignment Sheet for Polly Smith," Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 151.

¹¹ Clyde Vandenburg, Letter to Polly Smith, October 8, 1935, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹² Gail N. Muskavitch, Letter to author, June 18, 1994.

¹³ Frank N. Watson, Letter to Mr. Herzog, October 16, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹⁴ C. M. Vandenburg, Letter to Polly Smith, October 15, 1935, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Texas Centennial Central Exposition Promotion Department, "Receipt for photographs," March 30, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹⁷ Texas Centennial Central Exposition Promotion Department, "Receipt for photographs," April 7, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹⁸ Texas Centennial Central Exposition Promotion Department, "Receipt for photographs," n.d. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

¹⁹ Clyde Vandenburg, Telegram to Frank Watson, n.d. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²⁰ Texas Centennial Central Exposition Promotion Department, "Receipt for photographs," April 10, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²¹ Texas Centennial Central Exposition Promotion Department, "Receipt for photographs," April 7, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²² Irvin S. Taubkin, "Bluebonnet Seen as Fashion Rage for this Season," *The Dallas Morning News*, March 20, 1936, sec. I: 4.

²³ Gail N. Muskavitch, Letter to author, November 24, 1997.

²⁴ Polly Smith, Letter to Jacque Lansdale, n.d. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²⁵ Polly Smith, Letter to Frank Watson, March 13, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²⁶ A. R. Crow, Letter to Polly Smith, March 4, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²⁷ Polly Smith, Letter to A.R. Crow, n.d. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

²⁸ Polly Smith, Letter to A.R. Crow, March 19, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 79.

²⁹ Polly Smith, Letter to Jacque Lansdale, n.d. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

³⁰ Polly Smith, Letter to Frank Watson, March 13, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23.

³¹ C. M. Vandenburg, Letter to Doug Silver, June 25, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 113.

³² C. M. Vandenburg, Letter to Doug Silver, June 25, 1936, Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 113.

³³ *The Dallas Morning News*, April 9, 1939, Picture Section: 6.



Polly Smith walking in the Big Pine District, East Texas

³⁴ Polly Smith, Letter to Dorothy Walton, n.d. Private collection.

³⁵ Flo Smith Prichard, Letter to Carruth Smith, September 29, 1943. Private collection.

³⁶ Ann Hornaday, "Washington Social Notes," *The Dallas Morning News*, February 18, 1945, sec. III: 12.

³⁷ *Vogue* Reader Services, telephone interview by the author, November 8, 2006. The archivist of artwork and photography said there was no work listed or in a card file index. This doesn't mean that Polly didn't work there, it just means that if she did, she didn't do that much.

³⁸ Polly Smith, Letter to Dorothy Walton, n.d. Private collection.

³⁹ University of Texas, "Official Transcript." January 20, 2007.

⁴⁰ Gail N. Muskavitch, Letter to author, July 27, 1997.

⁴¹ Gail N. Muskavitch, Letter to author, October 26, 1997.

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