

LEGACIES

A History Journal for Dallas and North Central Texas

Fall, 1994

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A History Journal for Dallas and North Central Texas

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TEXAS through the LENS



"The Chuck Wagon"

A familiar scene on the Texas plains during spring roundup time

Polly Smith and the Texas Centennial

By Gaylon Polatti and Evelyn Barker



Polly Smith (left) and her sister Flo in Mexico.

Until recently, "Polly Smith" was just a name stamped on the back of some photographs in the archives of the Dallas Historical Society. The photographs, however, are remarkable for their unique blend of the realistic and artistic. Polly Smith let color and human interest dominate her work. Described by her sister, Gail Northe Muskavitch, as "one of the most truly spiritual persons I have ever known," Polly took pictures that "reflected the beauty of her own soul. They seemed to have a mystical quality that most people saw but could not explain."¹

The photographs depict Texas in 1936, when the state celebrated its one hundredth anniversary of independence from Mexico. Throughout the year cities across the state held festivals, ceremonies, and memorial services. Several cities hosted large festivals that ran for many weeks. The most important celebration, combining education, veneration, and lots of entertainment in a six-month run, was the Texas Centennial Central Exposition, held at Fair Park in Dallas.

The Exposition in Dallas was remarkable in many ways. In less than a year, more than 8,000 laborers, architects, and artists built museums, exhibit buildings, gardens, and walkways decorated with sculptures, murals, and other artwork. Visitors found art exhibits and Old West shootouts. They watched Ida Chitwood prepare food in the Old Mill and observed Treasury workers print \$100 bills in the Federal building. They attended concerts given by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Duke Ellington, and Jose Manzanera. Popular and successful, the

Exposition ultimately drew over six million visitors. Much of that popularity derived from the publicity campaign conducted by the Exposition Corporation.

The Exposition Corporation had two publicity offices—in Dallas and New York City—from which it sent out hundreds of announcements and articles about the Centennial. The publicity department, directed by W. H. Kittrell, Jr., saturated the print media. Articles describing the Exposition or its specific attractions were written for publications as



"Ferry Machinery"
Shipping scene at the Houston harbor

diverse as *Vogue*, *House Beautiful*, *Traction News*, and the *Angora Goat Raiser*, and with every article went photographs.

Some photographs used by the publicity department were independently submitted by individuals or organizations. Others were requested by the department in order to illustrate some particular article. Most of the photographs, however, were provided by photographers employed by the department. The Dallas Historical Society possesses about 800 photographs from the Exposition's publicity

department. Among these are 200 prints stamped with the name "Polly Smith."

In the 1980s the Historical Society tried to find information about her for an exhibition on Fair Park's artwork, but researchers located nothing. Then, in 1991, Gene Allen, one of the Society's volunteers, began an index of the Society's Centennial materials. While examining the archives, he found more of Smith's photographs, as well as several files relating to her work with the Centennial, but no biographical information.



"Baling Cotton"

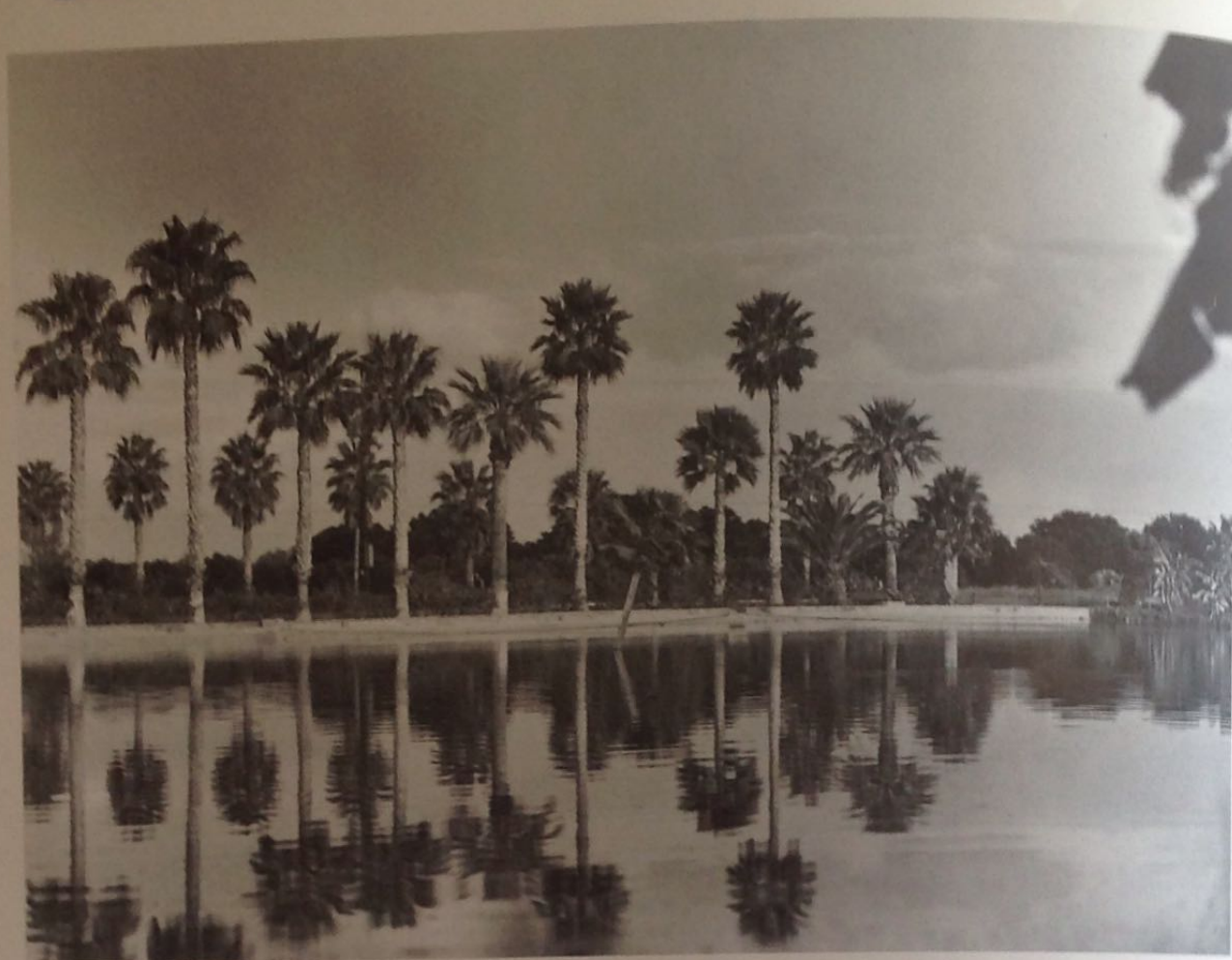
Farm scene in North Central Texas



"Brands—Old Saddle"

*Old Texan stock saddle and
branding irons*

Titles are those assigned by Polly Smith to her photographs.



"A Mirror for Palms"

Palms on the grounds of the John Sherry home in the Rio Grande Valley

Finally, in 1994, Hortense Sanger, a member of the Historical Society's Board of Trustees, learned of the library staff's interest in Smith. She knew the name and address of Smith's sister, Gail Muskavitch. The information generously provided by Muskavitch in a series of letters and telephone conversations yields a good view of the woman who was for so many years just a name on the back of some photographs.

Polly Smith was born December 29, 1908, in Ruston, Louisiana, to Roy and Marion (Minnie) Smith. Her given name was Frances Sutah Smith, but from an early age everyone called her Polly, because her mother "sang a little lullaby to her called 'Miss Polly Hopkins' which seemed to have delighted her."² There were seven children in the Smith family: Gail, C.R., Bill, Flo, Burck, Polly, and Dorothy. Roy worked in the newspaper business and moved his family around a great deal. After Polly's birth, the family moved to Blum, Texas, then

to Amarillo. At their next home, Whitney, Roy left the family. Minnie and the children moved to Hillsboro and finally, in 1921, to Austin, where Minnie was active in Texas politics.³

Art always interested Polly. She had a talent for photography and studied in New York with Edward Steichen.⁴ In the summer of 1935, she met someone from the Exposition's publicity department, possibly Kittrell himself, who liked her work and invited her to take photographs for the Centennial.⁵ Smith formally became a freelance photographer for the Exposition in early October⁶ and, armed with a letter of introduction and her camera equipment, set out to create an "adequate and complete file of representative Texas photos."⁷

From the beginning, members of the publicity department were enthusiastic about her work, although occasionally her artistic approach earned cautions from her editors: "I was very well pleased with the subjects chosen and the way they were



"Water Lilies"
Lily pond near Austin

handled. [However], *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue* would be very likely to accept an angle shot such as the circular staircase, but it would be a total loss with *Cappers Farmer* or the *Angora Goat Raiser*.⁸ From October through December, she traveled through central and eastern Texas,⁹ after which she traveled to San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley and West Texas.¹⁰

From October to February, Smith stayed in hotels along her routes, accumulating negatives and periodically stopping to develop them.¹¹ In March a friend who was "a fine cabinet maker and photographer"¹² built a dark room for her on the "back end of a fine Ford truck."¹³ From that point, she drove around the state at will, "developing [her work] under the first shady tree along the road."¹⁴

Her work was not easy. In response to a question about how many hours per week she worked, Smith wrote, "I work as it is from sun up to sun down and far into the nite developing."¹⁵ She spent "three days . . . in [San Antonio] battling with the police, trying to get shots planned."¹⁶ In one curious letter to Jacque Lansdale, she cryptically mentioned losing her camera equipment, describing it as "my great loss," and said that she had "wired for all new equipment."¹⁷ Finally, like all photographers, she depended on good weather, which often failed her. Houston was "cold, dark and dreary,"¹⁸ and San Antonio was "foggy."¹⁹

Her photographs appeared along with articles in magazines like *House Beautiful*, *Pictorial Review*, *Furniture Age*, *Architectural Forum*, and many others. A group of them were mounted on the walls of the East and North Texas rooms in the State of Texas Building (now known as the Hall of State) at Fair Park, where they remain. After her work for the Exposition, she contracted with several large companies to shoot series of pictures on specific subjects, including cotton, cowboys, and oil. Her brother C.R., who ran what was then American Airways, commissioned her to do a series on airplanes.²⁰

In 1940 she joined her sister Flo to work on publicity for the Dallas Aviation School, "Polly doing the photographs and layouts, Flo the copy."²¹ During the war, they worked in Hollywood with columnist Louella Parsons. Polly returned to Austin in 1944 to study sculpture and painting at the University of Texas, where "painting became her most absorbing interest."²² She moved to California in 1969 and died there on June 18, 1980.

The photographs in the Society's archives are only a small sampling of her work, but they provide an excellent and beautiful view of Texas during its Centennial year.

¹Letter from Gail Northe Muskavitch to Evelyn Barker, June 18, 1994.

²Gail Muskavitch, telephone interview by Evelyn Barker, July 1994.

³Letter from Gail Muskavitch to Evelyn Barker, July 24, 1994.

⁴Letter from Gail Muskavitch to Evelyn Barker, June 18, 1994.

⁵Letter from W.H. Kittrell, Jr., to Polly Smith, July 15, 1935; letter from Joan Goodnight Joyce to Polly Smith, August 22, 1935. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

⁶Copy of contract; letter from Polly Smith to Frank N. Watson, October 5, 1935. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

⁷Letter of introduction from Frank N. Watson to Whom It May Concern, October 23, 1935. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

⁸Letter from Clyde M. Vandenburg to Polly Smith, October 15, 1935.

⁹Invoices for photographs, October 18, 1935, November 21, 1935, and December 11, 1935. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 104, Folder: Miss Polly Smith.

¹⁰Letter from Alberta Crow to Polly Smith, March 11, 1936. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly. Invoice for photographs, May 6, 1936. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 104, Folder: Miss Polly Smith.

¹¹Letter from Polly Smith to Frank Watson, March 13, 1936. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

¹²Letter from Gail Muskavitch to Evelyn Barker, June 18, 1994.

¹³Letter from Polly Smith to Jacque Lansdale, undated. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

¹⁴Letter from Polly Smith to Frank Watson, March 13, 1936. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

¹⁵Letter from Polly Smith to Alberta Crow, undated (stamped March 19, 1936). Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 79, Folder: Smith, Polly-Miss.

¹⁶Letter from Polly Smith to Alberta Crow, undated (stamped March 19, 1936). Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 79, Folder: Smith, Polly-Miss.

¹⁷Letter from Polly Smith to Jacque Lansdale, undated. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

¹⁸Letter from Marion B. Smith to Clyde Vandenburg, December 18, 1935. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

¹⁹Letter from Polly Smith to Alberta Crow, undated. Dallas Historical Society, A38.3, Box 23, Folder: Smith, Polly.

²⁰Letter from Gail Muskavitch to Evelyn Barker, June 18, 1994.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.