



WOMEN CAUGHT OFF GUARD: A PHOTO ESSAY

PAULA L. MCNEILL

No matter where we lived, I remember that somebody in the family always had a camera and took pictures or home movies of whatever we were doing. Together they created a pictorial diary of our lives. I am still fascinated by the faces of people I see when I thumb through our family photo albums—black and white Kodak snapshots with scalloped edges from the 1940s and '50s, lovingly pinned down with photo corners on black paper by my mother who meticulously wrote captions in white ink (Figure 1). These albums store the images and stories of important people and events in my family's life. They also celebrate ordinary events—birthdays, holidays, going to the beach, new pets, cars, gardens, graduations, and funerals.



Figure 1.

Family Photo Album
circa 1959, 1945-
1959, Arlevia
Lucretia Anderson
McNeill Snyder

When I was a child growing up in the 1950s in Ojus, Florida, my brother, Mac, and I lived a rich fantasy life in the “little house” with our young parents, alongside my transplanted Georgian grandparents who lived in the big house in front of ours. Later, when my sister, Marda, was born, we moved to our own home in Sun Ray, a small, new subdivision a mile away. In the pre-sunscreen era, we got horrific sunburns at the beach where we avoided undertows and jellyfish, ate mangos, avocados, and coconuts from my grandparents’ backyard, played chase in their banyan tree, hung sheets out on the clothes line on Saturday, and went to church every Sunday. When I was five, Daddy was hired as chief chemist for Penn-Dixie Cement Manufacturing Company and we moved to South Pittsburg, Tennessee. I was in the first grade. From South Pittsburg we moved to Florence, Alabama, where I went to second through fifth grades. In Alabama, we explored Indian mounds by the Tennessee River, cut our own Christmas tree and picked muscadines in the woods. We played in the ditch that ran through our yard, built a two-story clubhouse with our own toll bridge, and this was where I had my first doll beauty shop. Later Daddy took a desk job with Tennessee Valley Authority and we moved again, this time to Red Bank, Tennessee, where I lived until moving to Arizona in 1965.

As I was growing up throughout the South, the Civil War was still very much alive, especially for Daddy, an unreconstructed Confederate. He used to take us to Civil War battlefields for fun, and in his big, old, two-toned 1956 green Buick, “Molly,” he drove through the back roads from Chattanooga to Grandma Mac’s house in Pine Level, Alabama. On the way, to fuel our imaginations, he would stop at abandoned, “haunted” Southern mansions and, without fail he would drive by my special gazebo in someone’s unkempt overgrown garden in some small Alabama town.

Easter at Grandma Mac’s, Pine Level, Alabama, ca 1956, is one of my favorite photographs from childhood (Figure 2). It’s Easter Sunday. My brother, Mac, sister, Marda, and I are standing in front of “Molly,” Daddy’s Buick at Grandma Mac’s house. We’re all holding Easter baskets. Mac wears church clothes and a bow tie. Marda and I are wearing dark Sunday shoes with lacey ankle socks and new dresses Mother finished sewing at 2:00 am on Easter morning—pale turquoise

dotted Swiss organza over skirts with cumber bunds. I’m holding my doll, “Poor Baby,” up to the camera. Daddy is taking the picture before Sunday school. Following class was the annual Easter egg hunt at the church where the “city kids” from Chattanooga usually won and bragged about finding the most eggs. “Poor Baby” is also wearing an Easter dress, identical to mine and my sister’s. She’s part of the family. She stares at the camera.



Figure 2. *Easter at Grandma Mac’s, Pine Level, Alabama, 4” x 4”*, black and white photograph, 1956. Photographer, Richard Greene McNeill, Sr.

Because these childhood images made such an impression on me I started taking my own pictures when I was about 12 years old. I used the family cameras, but I don’t remember being taught how to use them. I must have taught myself by watching my family take pictures. I began to take still photographs and home movies of my dolls staged in the imagined lives I created for them—getting their hair done in doll beauty shops, ice skating on a frozen bird bath in our side yard, and one of my favorite dolls, Suzette, visiting Civil War battle fields around Chattanooga, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, and Signal Point on Signal Moun-

tain (see endnote for links to movies).

When Daddy took us to Signal Point, of course I took Suzette with me. Signal Point was named during the Civil War from its use as a signaling point by the Confederate Army, which had been previously used by American Indians for a similar purpose. It was the spring of 1959 when I photographed Suzette as a pony-tailed tourist dressed in a sailor middy blouse, red Capri pants, and high heels signaling herself at the Tennessee River as it passed through what some call Tennessee's Grand Canyon. I distinctly recall meticulously posing Suzette and agonizing over the composition (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Suzette at Signal Point, Signal Mountain, Tennessee*, 4" x 6", black and white photograph, March, 1959. Photographer, Paula McNeill.

As an adult, I turned my attention from my dolls, to making portraits of people doing ordinary things. For example, *Ear Ring*, is a portrait of the back of a recent widow's head, hat and ear ring captured as she quickly turned her head to check on her only companion, her dog (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Ear Ring*, 8" x 10", digital photograph, 2006. Photographer, Paula McNeill.

View from the North Rim is of two young women who resembled the women in the paintings of Navajo artist, R.C. Gorman (Figure 5). I photographed them as they patiently waited for the crowning event of the day—the sunset at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, with the only camera I had in my purse—an inexpensive Fuji disposable camera.



Figure 5. *View from the North Rim*, 8" x 10", color photograph, 2003.
Photographer, Paula McNeill.

For me, their monumental forms rivaled the immense rocks of the canyon below. My photographs continue the visual diary my family started in the 1940s.

It's not surprising that as a graduate student in the early 1970s that I turned to photography. At the University of New Mexico, I studied the history of photography with Beaumont Newhall, recently retired director of the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. From Newhall, I learned about the photography of Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Eugene Atget, and others. I never formally took a course in the techniques of creating photography, but I discussed my work with a neighbor in Albuquerque who was a photographer, and I learned from the photographers I studied, in much the same way I learned from my own

family photographers.

I continue to photograph people whose histories I share as well as those of extraordinary strangers. Ironically, unlike the photographs I saw in the albums of my youth, my recent photographs are for the most part, of women photographed from behind, unrecognizable, without faces, who, I believe, silently scream their ageless humanity. These anonymous people share my life story and the stories of my students.

Photographs as Teaching Springboards

I use my original photos, as springboards for creative writing in my university art education and creativity classes or I have selected the photographs of local photographer, Jamie Harmon (see www.uberphoto.com). I ask students to engage with the photos and to tell stories about the strangers and their lives. These exercises give voice to the pictures and to my students.

My students read their stories to the class and afterwards I tell them the true stories behind the photos or I ask Jamie Harmon to come to class to tell the stories and circumstances of his work. I then exhibit the stories along with the photograph in the Fine Arts Building hallway exhibition cases. I sometimes post a sheet for viewer comments outside the cases. An unforeseen result of this assignment is the depth of concentration and the level of quietness I observe as the students write. The stories are written in class, then typed and handed in for peer editing the next class period. They are revised and handed in again—this time to me for final editing. Sometimes students in the class are brought to tears by the poignancy of some of the stories their classmates read. Sometimes some of the students feel that their writing is too personal to openly share with the rest of the class.

In the following story, one of my former students in my Art for Teachers class at Valdosta State University used my photograph, *Mrs. Miller* (Figure 6)—of a saddened woman who had recently lost her husband, standing fragily in front of her Clearwater, Florida home in 1973, wistfully looking away from the camera—as a catalyst for writing.



Figure 6. *Mrs. Miller*, 8" x 10", black and white photograph, 1973.
Photographer, Paula McNeill.

Timeless
(by a former student, 2005)

It had been five years since Rachel's husband passed away, yet she could still not bear to remove the ring he'd given her so long ago. Her days seemed to creep by slowly, and at night she longed to be with him again. The phone call had come ripping into her perfect world, telling her how the love of her life, her soul mate, was not coming home. He had walked into town to buy her a birthday present. He always picked out the most exquisite gifts for her. On his way home from the small store, there was a quarrel down the street, and being the man he was, he went to help. He never could have known that the bullet would take his life. After his death, her youngest daughter moved closer to ease her mother's loneliness, but that only lasted so long. Eventually her daughter got tied up in her new job, and her grandchildren made friends and did not stop by for cookies anymore. Rachel received occasional invitations to plays or grandparents' day at school, but those days were few and far between. Rachel was, however, able to find serenity in her garden, which she tended every day. She thought he would have loved the pink roses that were now blooming. On days when she missed him most, she would look through photo albums and remember him—their first date, a trip to Coney Island, their first kiss, the day he asked her to be his wife ... a tear rolls down her cheek as she closes her eyes. Suddenly he's there with her. He holds her close as they waltz together in silence. She kisses his neck and breathes in his sweet scent. Time stands still when they're together in these moments. Oh, she knows he's not really there, but he lives on through her, in her heart. They shared something special—a timeless love.

A student in my Stimulating Creative Behavior class used my

photograph, *Lipstick* as a point of departure for writing. Lipstick is of an elderly family member putting on lipstick, getting ready for the camera and the real photo shoot to begin (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Lipstick*, 8x10, digital photograph, 2005. Photographer, Paula McNeill.

Untitled (by a former student, 2005)

She searched frantically through her purse for her Mary Kay signature crème lipstick in Antique rose. She wanted to wear the same color she was wearing the last time she saw him as his ship set sail. That was almost 6 months ago. His ship was to come in and she was going to be there waiting for him. Bridget and James met two years ago in a café in Paris. She was at a table alone and he was at a nearby table reading a French dictionary working on his accent. She was intrigued by this strange man sitting alone. They began to talk about life in Paris and life back home in the states. They realized how much they had in common and began seeing each other every day. Their romance grew and eventually James joined the Navy and was shipped off. He is coming home today and Bridget cannot wait to see him.

She found her lipstick. As she is applying the familiar color to her lips, she sees him, but he is not happy to see her. He has something to tell her. They walk off together and she drops the Antique Rose tube of lipstick in the street.

The stories related to *Lipstick* and *Mrs. Miller* generally fall into two categories: They are either love or stories of loss (loss of love or youth). Women usually choose these photos although several students, both male and female have related *Mrs. Miller* to stories of their own childhood with their grandmothers. These two photos are always chosen by someone in the class. Selection of images is on a first come, first served basis. Twenty stories from twenty different photographs are created in each class. I believe the quality of the stories is greater when the student does not know the person or context but rather what is revealed to them through the image. I use my photographs because I already know the story and I find it interesting to read the imagined lives my students create for the subjects of the photograph versus what I know to be true.

This exercise somehow strikes me as similar to the imagined lives I created in my doll photographs.

Moving around as a child may have some bearing on my choice of anonymous subjects for my own photographs. Because I was constantly reinventing my life after each move that was likely reflected in what and how I photographed. I must have created a reality I could control both as a child and later as an adult. On the one hand, with my dolls I had free rein for creating whatever I wanted them and their lives to be. As an adult, I may have found it safer to capture people I wanted to possess in some way by sneaking up on them. I did this both physically and emotionally without asking permission to take their picture.



Suzette at Jordan Lake, Alabama, still from 8mm movie film, 1959,
Paula L. McNeill

Author Endnote: The movies will play in *Windows Player*®. To download Windows Player go to <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/download/AllDownloads.aspx?displang=en&qstechnology=>

Below are brief descriptions for each movie
with titles linked to the movies.

1. *Suzette and Jan at Jordan Lake, Alabama*, 8mm movie film, 1959, by Paula L. McNeill (movie of two dolls on sand pile).

2. *Suzette and Jan Ice Skating on Frozen Birdbath; Suzette in Nandina Bush; Suzette and Jan at Doll Beauty Shop, Red Bank, Tennessee*, 8mm movie film, 1959, by Paula L. McNeill.

About the Author

Paula L. McNeill, Ph.D., is an associate professor of art at Valdosta State University in Valdosta, Georgia. Correspondence regarding this photo essay should be addressed to the author at pmcneill@valdosta.edu