



Common Bonds

Birmingham Snapshots, 1900-1950



Birmingham Public Library

Common Bonds

An Exhibition of Birmingham Snapshots

Photography was perfected in the mid-1800s, but early photographic equipment was expensive and cumbersome. Cameras could cost as much as two months' pay for the average American worker. In the 1870s portable cameras were "the size of a soap box," and required a tripod, dark room tent, glass plate negatives, and dozens of other pieces of equipment. For more than a half century amateur photography remained a hobby for well-off and dedicated individuals.

After years of experimentation to develop an alternative to bulky photographic equipment, George Eastman, the founder of Eastman Kodak, introduced his Brownie camera in 1900. A small cardboard box with a lens, the Brownie sold for \$1.00 and used rolls of film costing 15 cents. While not the only portable cameras available, Eastman's cameras were well-marketed and wonderfully simple to use. "You press the button," George Eastman promised amateur photographers, "and we'll do the rest."

Within five years amateur photographers in the United States numbered ten million. In Birmingham people wanting to take their own pictures could buy Kodak cameras and supplies from Bromberg's on Twentieth Street and from Gatchel's Photo Stock House on Third Avenue.

The purchase of a \$7.95 Eastman Folding Camera at Lynch Jewelry earned the buyer a free subscription to the "profusely illustrated" amateur photography magazine *Kodakery*. Exposed film could be dropped off for developing at many corner drug stores. In the 1920s the Birmingham Camera Club was formed to offer camaraderie and instruction for serious amateurs. "The Camera Column," appearing in the *Birmingham News* in the 1940s, offered regular advice to "snapshotters" on lighting, composition, and film speed.

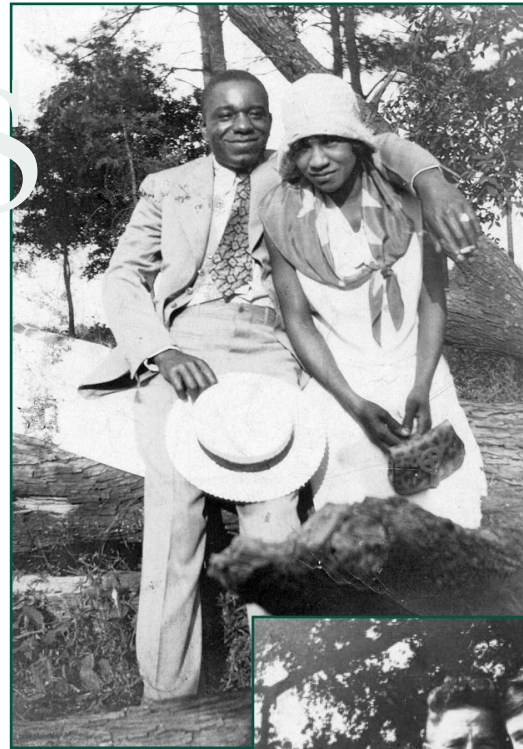
By 1950 amateur photography had devotees in neighborhoods throughout the Birmingham area and across the spectrum of Birmingham society— well off and working class, men and women, young and old, African-American and white. All these people contributed, one shutter click at a time, to the preservation of this community's history.



Snapshots

For more than a century the people of Birmingham, like people throughout the world, have documented their lives with snapshots. Inexpensive portable cameras have made it possible to record family history and the history of daily life. Snapshots preserve a moment, tell a story, and record life's milestones. They illustrate the common bonds of people creating their own visual biographies--mothers chronicling their children's growth, young men and women proudly leaning against automobiles, families playing in snow, friends being goofy.

Rather than focusing on issues that have divided the people of Birmingham, this exhibition crosses boundaries of race, gender, class, geography, and time to highlight the bonds shared by people in these photographs. Visitors to the exhibition will discover that they share many of these same bonds.



1900-1950

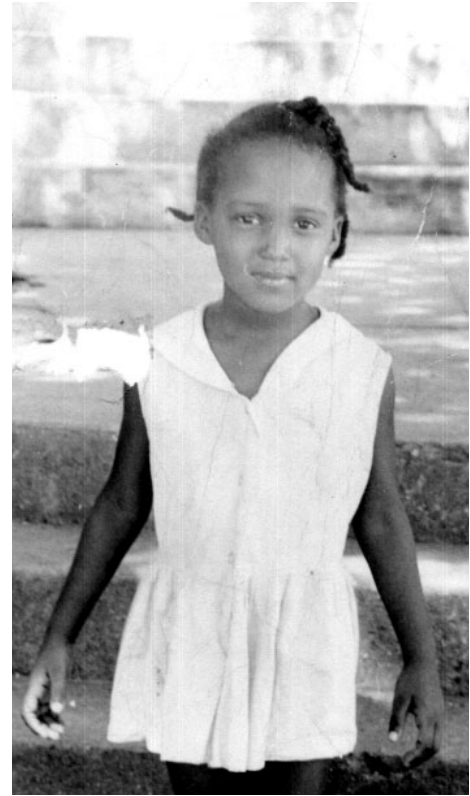
The photographs in this exhibition have been selected from albums shared by Birmingham area families and from more than 400,000 images preserved in the Birmingham Public Library Archives. The richness and variety of these images suggest how many more wait to be discovered in the albums, drawers, and shoeboxes of local families.

This exhibition is not the completion of a project but one step in an ongoing initiative to seek out, collect, and preserve Birmingham snapshots. Anyone with images of the Birmingham area, from any time period, is encouraged to participate. Photographs may be donated to the Archives or loaned for copying.

For more information or to donate photographs please contact:
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