


Pockets of Time Travel:

Four Generations of Photographers Chronicle America

by Heather DARROW

A photograph of a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a denim shirt, smiling and holding a vintage Graflex camera. He is in a studio setting with colorful backdrops and studio lights.

An exceptional photograph of children playing by the sea has the power to take you back in time to a carefree summer vacation. You smell the ocean, hear seagulls, taste salt air and feel the warm sand under your feet, while the cool breeze grazes your skin before it gently rustles the sea grass beside you. All your senses come alive, and for a precious moment you are there again, a child reliving a long-lost moment in time. Photographs are whispers of the past.

Perhaps Byrd Williams I realized this potency and chose to wield his own time machine in the form of a camera. Regardless of the reason, just as a fine musician passes on his craft, so it was with Byrd Williams I who passed on his love of photography to his son and namesake who, in turn, passed it on until there were four generations of Byrd Williams who could capture nuances like a careless grin, the slight tilt of a body or the dappling effect of the sun and elicit mental time travel.

"Really there's only the present moment. Photography

is the only mechanism to capture that. As soon as photographs are taken, the moment is over," said Byrd Williams IV, Collin College photography professor.

However, for the Williams family, the effect of photographs is sure to last for generations to come because Byrd Williams IV's book, *Proof: Photographs from Four Generations of a Texas Family*, published by the University of North Texas Press, is slated to emerge late this year.

"There is no history of Texas for photography. This book covers 1839 through the present day," said Williams IV.

The book is a treasure trove of images such as "Prohibition in Gainsville" (Byrd I), a photo of a woman in a floor-length frock with long gloves poised to pour illicit liquid into the mouth of a man eagerly awaiting its arrival. The details bring this image to life—it is the mirth bubbling up in the casual observer who grins under his brimmed hat, long coat, vest and bow tie that capture the dichotomy of the time.

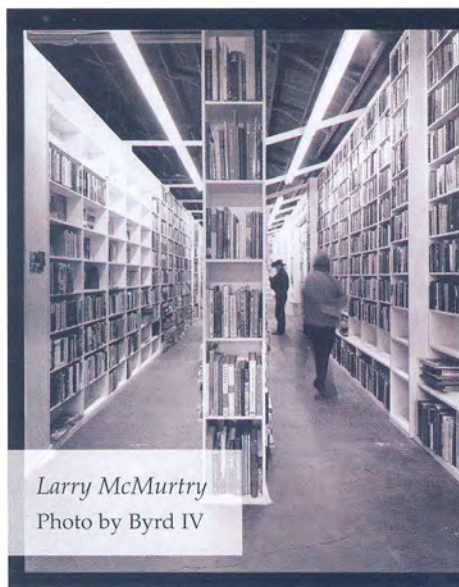
Even better, in true historical form, this book leaves no holds barred. Williams shares his family's history through images and words—the good, bad, ugly and the criminal. Skeletons buried in letters and diaries are out of the closet. Consumption, murders, suicides, slavery, Poncho Villa, the Confederate Army—it is all there.

"Even though it was 1870, these people were alive and breathing like you and me now. The letters put flesh on their bones. Their marital problems were the same as ours. It is poignant to say the least," Williams said.

According to Williams, the four Byrds were art, commercial and hobby photographers. In addition, Williams I was a hardware store owner, Williams II



Prohibition
Photo by Byrd I



Larry McMurtry
Photo by Byrd IV





Cab Calloway
Photo by Byrd III

was an engineer, Williams III was a lens maker in a factory that later made gun sights in WWII, and Williams IV is a professor whose photographs range from the Queen of England to crime scenes.

Much like his predecessors, Williams IV passes on his heritage to his students and empowers them to take their role as photographers seriously.

"This is their chance to speak to posterity, to capture their family's history. I explain, 'You are saying here's a letter from me to you. I am your genome. Show your great grandkids what it is like to be alive in that time.' All of my students become family historians. I base

the whole class around this concept, and I urge them to make prints because they can be saved."

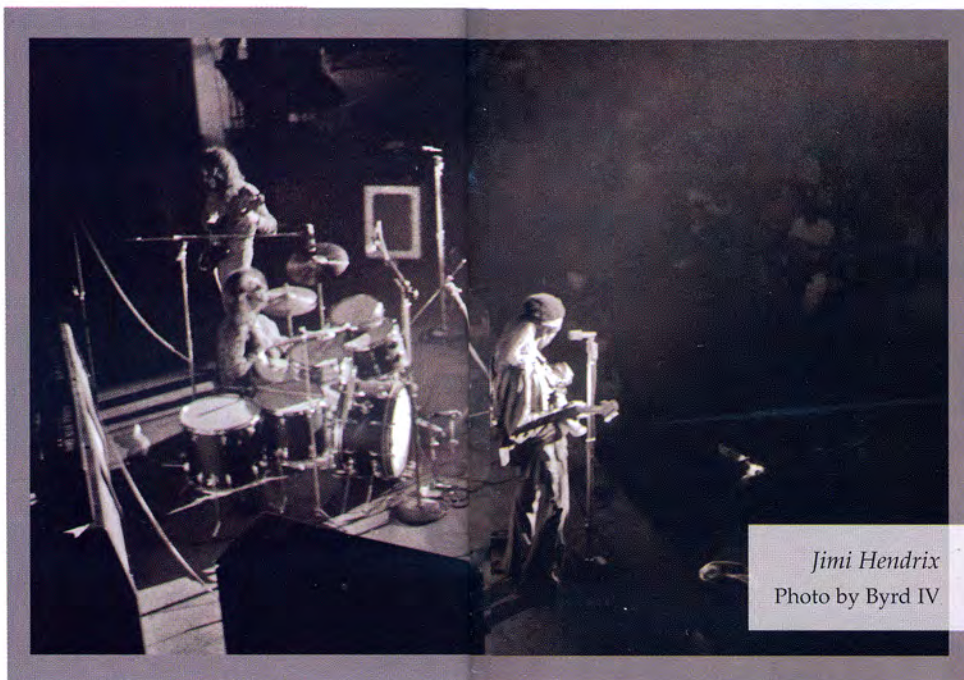
According to Williams, today more pictures are taken every five minutes than in the whole of the 19th century. He teaches his students to differentiate their work by careful editing.

"Photography is the most democratic of all art mediums; it is available to anybody, to everybody. I teach students to take pictures with intention and thought, not glib selfies. In my classes the photographs mean something to each individual."

Williams' upcoming book is the



*Pancho Villa soldiers crossing
the border into Texas.*
Photo by Byrd II



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culmination of 12 decades of photographing people and their environments. In unison, the book's images are a symphonic wave of the past that gently enfolds the present as it steadily jettisons toward the future.

Perhaps Williams sums up his innate drive to click the shutter best when he speaks about the near three decades he worked alongside his father.

"Dad and I made photographs of people, personal work. Poaching faces was what we called it. Saying it was art became the trendy reference after the MFA tsunami of the 1970s, but it was just what we did almost every day. We saved all those faces because it gave our lives purpose."

For more information about photography classes at Collin College, visit Collin.edu. For more information about Byrd Williams IV's book, visit <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/BYRDW/>. ❖

Heather Darrow is a public relations writer at Collin College.

Photo of Byrd Williams IV by Nick Young, Collin College photographer.

Additional photos by Byrd Williams I, II, III and IV courtesy of University of North Texas Special Collections.