

Spotlight: Sharon Joines

By Peter Brown

Originally published in SPOT, Spring 2010

Sharon Joines has lived in the small town of Wharton, Texas for the past thirty-six years and has photographed Wharton and its surrounding county for the last five. Her work is wide ranging and her photographs are revealing, truthful and speak to this small community's breadth. They open the land and its people to the viewer in subtle and sympathetic ways and they are lyrically beautiful and often gently funny. According to Joines, photographing Wharton County is a lifetime project, and given the considerable access and trust that she has developed over the years, an archive of depth has already begun to emerge. Wharton was home to the playwright Horton Foote, who once advised Sharon in relation to her work: "Be sure to avoid theatrics." Horton Foote avoided theatricality in his plays, which are transparent descriptions of life in Wharton, and Sharon Joines I think has done the same with her photographs. They show quite simply, life as it is lived in this small but resonant part of our world.

This from Sharon Joines:

Wharton County, 60 mi. SW of Houston, pop. 41,000, 1090 sq. mi.

When I first came to Wharton I was referred to as "that girl from Houston" and it fit, because I really was a city girl with a slightly superior attitude. After I married a native Whartonian I was called "Tom's wife". A few years later when our children were born I was identified as their mother, and shortly after this, people began to call me Sharon, which I considered progress. Today I know most of the people in and around Wharton and I have developed a deep respect and love for this place, its history, and its people.

A place's true character does not fully reveal itself until a relationship is built. It is also true that a relationship built on trust is not gained easily or quickly. The images I am making are a testimony to what I have come to believe make life in a small town unique. The experience has proven to be both liberating and full of lessons.

Since 2004 I have photographed the towns of Wharton, El Campo, Pierce, East Bernard, Boling, Iago, Glen Flora, Egypt, Bonus, Burr and Hungerford, to name a few. My purpose is to document Wharton County, recording the way the passage of time affects the place I call home.