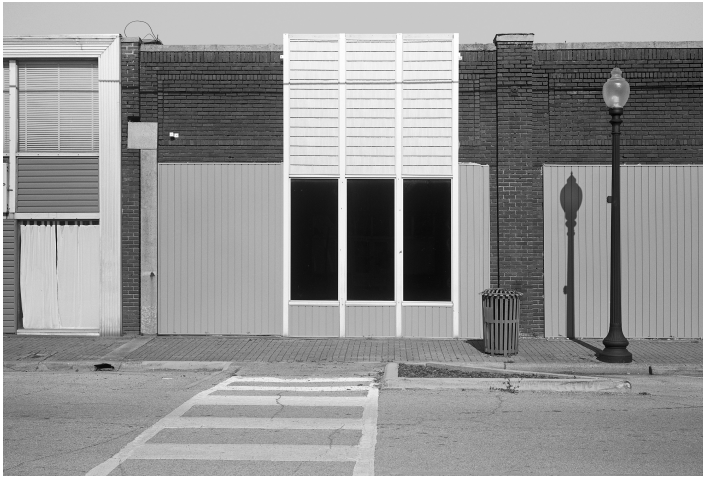# Why I Photograph (Mostly) in Black-and-White

by David Wharton

Moundville, Alabama

People sometimes ask, "Why do you photograph in black-and-white instead of color?" I have several answers to that question, ranging from flip to serious. On the flip end of the spectrum is the smart-ass response: "Because I put black-and-white film in my camera." That sometimes gets a laugh. Closer to the truth is that black-and-white is my habit, the way I've learned to see, my "default" setting. I'm not completely satisfied with that answer either, because, although there's a good deal of truth to that, it makes me sound like too old a dog to be interested in learning new tricks, which isn't entirely true.

The serious answer, which I've thought about quite a bit, has to do with the nature of photography, especially its shortcomings. To my mind, the medium's greatest weakness is its tendency toward superficiality, its lack of depth. I mean that quite literally. Think about it: no matter where you encounter a photograph—on a printed page, on a gallery wall, on a roadside billboard, on your computer screen—you're always looking at a two-dimensional rendition of what was originally a three-dimensional scene. In other words, you're only being presented with the skin of things, the world's outward appearance; and it's very difficult to get past that photographic surface to whatever reality lies behind it. Photography is

Yazoo City, Mississippi

inherently a superficial, two-dimensional medium. It has no depth. And this is its greatest limitation.

The best documentary-style photographers—among them Henri Cartier Bresson, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank—attempt to overcome this by providing their pictures with depth. Now, of course, I'm no longer speaking physically but metaphorically. No one is somehow attaching a literal, physical third dimension to their photographs. Instead, these photographers try to create depth (an illusion,

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perhaps) by connecting the superficial, visual nature of their pictures back (in a metaphoric third dimension) to their images' source-realities in ways that carry additional content, meaning, and/or emotion, thus deepening a viewer's experience of the photograph as well as the real-world intersection of place, time, and photographer that, collectively, produced it.

What does this have to do with choosing to photograph in black-and-white instead of color? For me, black-and-white images serve as reminders of photography's superficiality. They do this by stripping away the "outer" layer of the physical world's surface—the color of things—and emphasizing form and function. I sometimes condense this for students by telling them that (for me) color pictures are primarily about the world's surface, while black-and-white photographs are about the way the world is put together, its structure.

All of this, of course, is arguable. But it is my (serious) answer to why I photograph primarily in black-and-white.