

# The Heart of Alabama



*by Margaret Clevenger*

*Photography by  
Robin McDonald*

Image ©Florida Center for Instructional Technology



*St. Andrew's Episcopal Church (1858) in Prairieville, Alabama*

**O**n a leisurely drive through the Black Belt of Alabama, one can see elegant old houses that have stood for more than 150 years, churches whose steeples have beckoned generations of congregants, and fields of dark, rich soil where cotton once reigned as king. The Black Belt of Alabama stretches from the Mississippi line to a few miles shy of the Georgia border and covers nineteen counties in the middle and southern portions of the state. Once home to some of the wealthiest citizens in Alabama, the area now struggles with high unemployment and an image of poverty and desperation.

With a mission to present the Black Belt in a fair but accurate light, photographer Robin McDonald and Valerie Pope Burnes, assistant profes-

sor of history at the University of West Alabama, have put together a stunning visual account of the region in their new book *Visions of the Black Belt: A Cultural Survey of the Heart of Alabama*. The book (11 inches by 11 inches) was published earlier this year by The University of Alabama Press in cooperation with Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center and includes 378 photographs and two maps. In August, *USA Today* placed ten photographs from the book in the paper's "Best 10" feature.

When Valerie Burnes was director of The Center of the Study of the Black Belt, people often asked her for a recommendation of a book to learn more about the region. "And there wasn't one," Burnes said. "There is an article here and there, a political mention; it's in every Alabama history book, but there is no one, good go-to source. In the introduction, I was



trying to create something that I could tell people to use as a resource.”

Whenever unemployment statistics are announced, the counties in the Black Belt are usually at the top of the list. “The Black Belt is poor and progress has passed it by,” Burnes continues, “but the silver lining to that is there are some things about it that kept it unique because of the way it developed. So this is to show that of course poverty is never good, but good things can come out of it.”

Those good things encompass a wealth of artists including Charlie Lucas (“Tin Man”), Jim Bird, whose pasture art turns the heads of travelers along U.S. Highway 43 between Eutaw and Demopolis, and the quilters of Gee’s Bend.

“The Black Belt is the way it is because the people had this artistic impulse and they used what they had to express it,” Burnes said. “It is not a cultural vacuum, not a cultural void, and we wanted people to see that.”

Burnes said she hopes the book will whet the appetite of tourists to visit the places mentioned and meet the people who call the area home.

Visions of the Black Belt is divided into eight chapters with places covered in the first half and people in the second half. “There are some people and places that didn’t get in there that I wish had,” Burnes said. “That’s always going to be the case because you just don’t have room for everything and everybody.”

*“But what’s fun is when something you didn’t think was going to be interesting turns out to be great. That’s the most fun of all photography.”*

*- Robin McDonald*

*Author Marlin Barton sits on the front steps of the house where he grew up in Forkland, in Greene County, Alabama.*



*Everhope(1853) is a few miles from Eutaw, Alabama.*

Robin McDonald, whose graphic design business is headquartered in Leeds, Alabama, made numerous day trips and a few overnight stays to capture the images he sought. McDonald already had a cache of photographs of the region from his six years of shooting calendars for the Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area. Burnes accompanied McDonald on a few trips and helped set up contacts for him for other forays across the region.

“I’ve hardly met anybody in the Black Belt that didn’t know Valerie,” McDonald said. “So she became my base of knowledge about the history of the Black Belt.”

McDonald also tapped into the resources of Linda Vice whose website is Rural Southwest Alabama. “She took me to a lot of places in Clarke County that I wouldn’t have been able to find on my own,” McDonald said. “She took me to the Mt. Nebo Cemetery (Clarke County) where they have

those wonderful death masks. But they are not true death masks because they were done while the people were alive.”

McDonald designed the book and said “I guess I kind of put it together as we went along. We were still adding pictures up to the end, really. In fact, at the last minute, when I thought the book was as big as it could be, Black Belt Treasures asked if we could include a few more of their artists.”

McDonald once again grabbed his Nikon, a new one he bought halfway through the project, and made one final road trip through Montgomery to Monroeville and back to Marion Junction to shoot the last four people included in the book.

The book covers a wide range of artists who are sons or daughters of the Black Belt. Writers William Cobb and Tom Franklin, photographer Jerry Siegel, woodturner Jerry Davidson, metal artists Mary and Dannie Pettway, and

basket weaver Estelle Jackson are a few of the dozens of artists included.

“One of my very favorite portraits is of Billie Jean Young,” McDonald said when asked to choose a favorite photograph. “She is a writer and does just about everything in the arts.” Young is associate professor of fine and performing arts and artist-in-residence at Judson College. She was inducted into the Black Belt Hall of Fame in 2014.

McDonald met writer Marlin Barton in Forkland (Greene County) where the author of *The Cross Garden* grew up. Barton often uses a fictionalized version of the area as the setting for his novels and short stories. “The picture I took of him is on the steps of the house he grew up in,” McDonald said. That photograph is also one of McDonald’s favorites. “It’s one where everything is just right,” he said. “The lighting was perfect, the setting just right.”





Mary and Dannie Pettway create metal sculptures in their workshop in Montgomery.

The book includes photographs of historic churches such as St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Prairieville (Hale County). Built by slaves in 1858, the impressive Carpenter Gothic style church features an interior stained with juice squeezed from tobacco plants. St. Andrew’s is a National Historic Landmark and opens for one service a year.

McDonald photographed the stately old mansions of Kirkwood (1858) in Greene County, Grey Columns (1857) in Macon County, and Wakefield (1855) in Wilcox County. In sharp contrast to those elegant homes, he also focused his lens on some of the few remaining tin-roofed sharecropper’s cabins that once were common to the area.

Every night as soon as McDonald returned home, he would download the photographs he had taken that day. “I would immediately start to look through them,” he said. “To me, that’s

as much fun as taking the pictures. Sometimes the picture you thought was going to be great didn’t work out for some reason. But what’s fun is when something you didn’t think was going to be interesting turns out to be great.

That’s the most fun of all photography. The chapter in the book titled Food & Farming explains how the Black Belt changed from the King of Cotton to a land of catfish ponds, beef cattle, and timber. Hunting clubs have flourished because of large tracts of land available at low prices. Farmers have long raised their own dairy cows, the milk high in calcium from the rich soil, and pigs.

And the tradition of a big barbeque to feed friends and family lives on here. The Timilichee Barbeque Club near Geiger (Sumter County) was founded in 1927 and is one of the last clubs to cook whole hogs over an

outdoor fire

Another tradition included in the book is that of making cane syrup using a mule-driven mill. On the first Saturday in November, Rickard’s Mill Historic Park near Beatrice (Monroe County) hosts Cane Syrup Makin’ Days. McDonald’s photograph captures the bubbles of boiling syrup as it thickens.

In Marengo County, the Jefferson Country Store offers hoop cheese, boiled peanuts, and souse. Tony Luker and Betsy Compton run the store that Betsy’s grandfather bought in 1967 and that Betsy’s aunt now owns. The store is filled from its wood floors to the ceiling with everything from small candies to cold medicine to beer.

Affordable, well-built homes are always in demand in the Black Belt. In 1993 Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth founded Rural Studio at Auburn University with the aim of building

well-designed, low-cost, simple homes for low-income families. The first homes were built in Hale County and incorporated recycled concrete, walls of hay bales, and a roof designed to catch rainwater (the Butterfly House). English architect Andrew Freear took over as head of the non-profit organization in 2002. Since its founding more than twenty years ago, the students of Rural Studio have built more than 150 projects.

The Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization (HERO), founded by Judge Sonny Ryan, is another group working to improve Hale County. When San Francisco designer Pam Dorr arrived in Greensboro in 2003, she became involved with HERO and created HEROhousing, a group working with others that has built three subdivisions with a combined total of 54 houses. The organization has also helped start several local businesses including HERO bikes, bicycles made of bamboo, and PieLab, a small restaurant on Main Street in Greensboro.

In the future Burnes believes the area will continue to draw more people who are seeking the natural beauty and slower pace of living found here. “Obviously it’s not good to remain static,” said Burnes. “We have to change and grow and there are certainly a lot of problems here, but if you try to fix everything then we will lose what it means to be part of the Black Belt. Every place does not need to be like every other place. Homogenization is a problem.”

The differences here are what attract many people to the area. “The cost of living is very low in the Black Belt and as Baby Boomers retire they want to move to a place that is affordable,” Burnes said. “And they want to get back to the small town they knew as a kid.” ■

Margaret Clevenger’s work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in the anthology Tuskaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.

(Below) The Mathews Cabin was built by Josiah Allen Mathews in Clarke County in 1830. The log cabin can be seen at the Clarke County Historical Museum.

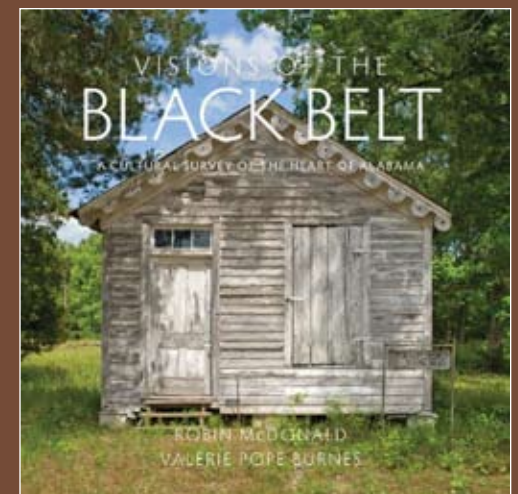


Photo: Kring’s Coffin Shop, Gainesville, Sumter County, Alabama

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