

BERKLEY HUDSON

Emeritus Associate Professor
University of Missouri

A VISCOM SUCCESS STORY:

PRUITT'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF TROUBLE & RESILIENCE IN POSSUM TOWN

In 2001 at Viscom's Yamhill, Oregon conference, a late-bloomed Ph.D. presented developing work on a project that had begun in the 1980s—focused on the Jim Crow photographs from Mississippi and made by one white photographer, O.N. Pruitt. This presentation, including two short videos of 4 minutes and 3 minutes, will detail the evolution of that work, one nurtured by Viscom's founders Herb Zettl and Bob Tiemens, and shepherded by Viscom attendees over the last two decades.

Now, that project has blossomed into a traveling exhibit, twice awarded grants from the National Endowment for Humanities. The exhibit is designed by internationally known Curatorial of Pasadena, CA. UNC Press and Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies published this year a 272-page book with more than 190 photographs, including two panoramic gatefolds, and explanatory essays. The images were drawn from the remaining 88,000 negatives that were preserved from history's dustbin in 1987 and now archived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Photographer O. N. Pruitt (1891–1967) was for some forty years the de facto documentarian of Lowndes County, Mississippi, and its county seat, Columbus--known to locals as "Possum Town." His body of work recalls many FSA photographers, but Pruitt was not an outsider with an agenda; he was a community member with intimate knowledge of the town and its residents. He photographed his fellow white citizens and Black ones as well, in circumstances ranging from the mundane to the horrific: family picnics, parades, river baptisms, carnivals, fires, funerals, two of Mississippi's last public and legal executions by hanging, and a lynching. From formal portraits to candid images of events in the moment, Pruitt's documentary of a specific yet representative southern town offers viewers today an invitation to meditate on the interrelations of photography, community, race, and historical memory.

The book and exhibit have been heralded locally and nationally: in *Garden & Gun* magazine, *Smithsonian.com* and the NEH's *Humanities* magazine. The *New York Times* Sunday Book Review wrote: O.N. Pruitt's *Possum Town* captures the soul—and soullessness—of a Mississippi town in the first half of the 20th century...With ethnographic rigor and the intimacy of a local, Pruitt's eye roves matter-of-factly between scenes of gilded refinement

—the crafted splendor of privilege—and the gruesome violence that makes that privilege possible.”

Dorothea Lange’s granddaughter, Emmy-winning filmmaker Dyanna Taylor wrote: "These images must be seen. An incredibly focused body of work—potent and illuminating. My grandmother Dorothea Lange photographed in the South. These images encompass even more than she captured during her multiple trips to the southern states."

Photo historian Deborah Willis, author of *The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship*, and who mentored the Pruitt book, describes it as “a captivating visual narrative blending the use of photography and memory...[that] creates an insightful vision of the South moving from disenfranchisement to empowerment.”

Another project mentor William Ferris, former NEH chairman, describes the Pruitt collection as “a national treasure.”