



Allée, Morning Fog, near Edgard, LA

Return to Heartwood

A Search for the Heart of Live Oak Country



Photographs and essays

William Guion

NEW LIGHT ON OLD OAKS

One dazzling summer morning in 1986, along the Big Sur Coast of California, far away from my home in south Louisiana, I was photographing on a grassy promontory overlooking the Pacific Ocean. My companion was Morley Baer, a well-known architectural and landscape photographer and instructor with the Friends of Photography workshop I was attending in Carmel. He set up his huge Ansco 8x10-inch view camera and ducked under his dark cloth to focus the camera's lens on a scene of churning surf and rocks below him.

Morley was in his mid-seventies and well-respected among his photography peers in and around the Monterey Peninsula. I was thirty-five, a corporate writer and editor in New Orleans, with a growing interest in black-and-white photography.

I politely waited until he finished making the exposure, then asked him a question that had been eating at me for awhile—how a young photographer like myself might make stronger, more meaningful photographs. He looked at me over the top of his view camera, raised his bristly white eyebrows, thought a moment, then said, “*Pick something you love and photograph it over and over again. In time, if you're lucky, the depth of your feelings will show through.*”

Returning to Louisiana after the four-day workshop, I took Morley's advice. I soon began pointing my camera at the live oak trees that distinguish the landscape of my home state.

Four decades later, I'm still photographing Louisiana's live oaks and feeling very lucky for the experience of following my heart and spending quality time with the old oaks.

In 1998, my first book, *Heartwood – Meditations on Southern Oaks*, was published by Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company. It contained a selection of my black-and-white photographs of live oaks paired with short poems by the thirteenth-century mystic poet, Jalaluddin Rumi. In the intervening years, I've created and self-published five more books featuring oaks and landscapes of Louisiana and California.

Return to Heartwood is a journey back to my photographic roots. It's a selection of black-and-white live oak “portraits” created since the first *Heartwood* in 1998. Paired with these photographs, I've penned essays—part autobiography, part history, part prayer—recounting stories from my long and sometimes strange journey in search of the remarkable and iconic elder live oak trees of Louisiana.

In 2007, while working on an *American Forests* magazine article about the original forty-three member trees of the Live Oak Society, I was alarmed to discover that fourteen of those centuries-old oaks had gone missing. In just seventy-three years, they were lost and forgotten, due to changing land-owners, development, violent storms, or increasing pollution. Moved by this knowledge, I launched the *100 Oaks Project Blog*, in which I

began to document the oldest remaining live oaks that I could find in Louisiana.

Whenever someone asks about my fascination with oaks, I say, “I make tree portraits.” To explain more just gets too confusing. People are usually familiar with the long tradition of creating human portraits. Most understand how a well-seen and well-rendered portrait might reveal something insightful about the personality of the subject. A portrait may even hint at a subject's *inner* life—how their life experiences have shaped their outward countenance.

Like people, live oaks have an endless variety of forms and sizes, fashioned and sculpted by circumstances and decades of time. No two are exactly alike. With my oak portraits, I translate the form and personality of each tree or group of trees into a photograph, a slice of time. It is an impression of what I saw and felt about the oak, the place where it grows, and the light that illuminated and revealed its essence.

In the South, live oaks are heritage, heirlooms, and history rolled into one. A single member of the species can live a half-dozen human generations or more. Their looming presence in a community makes them an integral part of the character and *spirit* of that place—of each city, town, or rural community.

The oldest oaks are landmarks and monuments. They are familiar friends, living shelters, ecosystems, and shady spots

where neighbors might enjoy a glass of sweet tea and pass the hottest hours of a blazing summer afternoon.

Each of these elder oaks has a story to tell—a record of the people and events it has witnessed in its long life. My goal has been to combine these oak portraits and stories to focus public attention on the importance of these old trees to the culture, history, and ecology of the South. Each one that dies is a story lost—human stories, history, and cultural roots of the communities where they've grown for centuries. It feels important that their lives should be documented and remembered.

In 2015, I left my last corporate editorial job and returned to my hometown in Louisiana to focus full-time on locating and photographing the state's oldest live oaks. That's where the idea for *Return to Heartwood* began. In its creation, it's become a retrospective in black-and-white of my life and times with the oaks.

In the many years that I have contemplated their peaceful lives, sat on their roots, walked under their arched limbs, and recorded their many moods on film, the oaks have taught me how to listen—not with my physical ears, but with my *third ear*—the heart.

This has been the gift of the oaks to me. My gift to them and to you is these images and words on paper—these reflections on the magical light around the oaks. 🌳

– William Guion / 9/2022



Jefferson Island Oak #2 (one of the original 43 members of the Live Oak Society)

SEARCH FOR THE 43

In April of 1934, Dr. Edwin Lewis Stephens, the first president of the Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), published an article in the *Louisiana Conservation Review* titled, “I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak Growing.”

In his article, Stephens proposed creating an organization whose goal would be to “preserve and promote interest in the senior members of this oak species,” those “whose age is not less than a hundred years.” He wrote, “I, at present, number among my personal acquaintance forty-three such live oaks in Louisiana eligible for charter membership.” These forty-three oaks, with a girth of at least seventeen feet and an estimated age of one hundred years or more, comprised his original list of inductees into what is known today as the Live Oak Society.

In 2006, I created an article for *American Forests* magazine in which I proposed to locate and photograph these original forty-three member trees. Using Dr. Stephens’ seventy-two-year-old article as a guide, I retraced his travels on south Louisiana’s back roads, along bayous with names like Teche, Maringouin, Lafourche, and Grosse Tete, and along the banks of the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain.

Dr. Stephens listed the oaks in order of size, from largest to less large, noting their girth, their given name (usually that

of a sponsor or other well-known individual), and the tree’s general location—and I do mean *general*! Many of the places he specified were simply near an existing town or area of a parish.

I quickly realized how naïve I was about the degree of change that can occur in a landscape over seventy-two years. The land had changed owners, family properties had been parceled off and subdivided, and subsequent generations of heirs had died or moved away. Even trees as large and magnificent as the Jamison Oak near my hometown of Thibodaux were lost and forgotten with the passing years.

Some oaks were known to a few locals and were not particularly difficult to find. Others sent me on searches through land records, family obituaries, websites, and local history books. After several months of searching, I concluded that of the forty-three original member oaks, fourteen were lost to weather, old age, and unchecked development.

During the four decades that I’ve photographed live oaks, I’ve witnessed the passing of many old trees. Each is a painful experience, even though I realize it is an inevitable reality of time’s passage. Still, it is one reason I continue this search for Louisiana’s oldest remaining oaks—to create a record of their lives, in words and pictures, in the hope that others might recognize the importance of remembering old oaks. 🌳

REQUIEM

A Voodoo priestess friend in New Orleans told me, “Once you drink the water here, you can never truly leave. If you do, you’re destined to return.” I’ve lived in New Orleans twice for a total of twenty years, but I know I’ll see her again. It’s not the water but the oaks and the memories associated with them that tether me like a spiritual umbilical.

Some people identify songs with periods in their lives and friends they knew then. Each time I visit New Orleans and its familiar oaks, they remind me of people from my past—people I knew and loved, people who are the roots and limbs of my best memories. Many of the old oaks remain, hardly changed, while others are gone. And the people I knew—some remain, maneuvering life’s many changes. Others, their paths have led elsewhere. I wonder what side roads they may have travelled?

I’ve lost some of my once favorite oaks around the city. Fortunately, I have their portraits and remember their stories. My photographs of them are *requiems*, songs to beloved and departed friends.

The oak on the facing page was removed when Audubon Park’s golf course was expanded in 2001. She was more than a hundred years old when she fell. I remember the morning that I made this portrait. It was an hour or so after dawn. I was following the rough edge of the old golf links. Mist cloaked

the landscape in a dense, moist silence. Sounds fell mute in the thick, wet air. In the diffused dawn light, alone with my camera and thoughts, this oak emerged from the fog, a ghostly silhouette, greeting me on this chilled winter’s morning.

From the vantage point in this image, the old oak exhibits a flattened shape, its limbs spread wide in graceful winged curves to form a classic live oak profile. On other days, from other angles, its shape was not so perfect. The foliage was heavier on one side and a long limb stuck out from its crown, like a giant cowlick. Another angle showed gaps in its branches, like a bald spot midway up its dome.

I clearly recall the moment when the oak seemed to decide it was ready to be photographed. The rising light revealed the curves and clefts of limbs and leaves in a way that read like a signature, like a scribbled autograph from a celebrity to a fascinated fan. In the split second that my shutter clicked, the oak imprinted its image on my sheet of film in hues of light and shadow, securing its memory—as if it knew somehow that its life would be cut short.

No matter how many imperfections in an oak or the memory of a friend, there is always a perspective that reveals their beauty. To find this perspective just takes the willingness to see and imagine without judgment. 🌳



Flat-Top Oak in Fog, Audubon Park, New Orleans



Farm Road Oak Allée, Mississippi River Road

TRUE NORTH

Most of us are on a journey. We're looking for something, some meaning to our lives beyond a career, though we're not exactly sure what it is. Somehow, a part of us knows—our soul, our spirit, our subconscious—some part remembers that our lives have a higher purpose. And won't let us forget.

Our direction is unclear much of the time. Some will tell us we should follow a path that the masses before us have cleared, the well-worn ways. Others say it's more important to strike out on our own.

It's my experience that every road, every path—even the strange and dark ones—move us slowly toward a greater understanding of who we are and why we're here. Whether we recognize it or not, we each have an internal compass that steers us toward our personal True North. That compass is our heart. The things we love, the things to which we're naturally attracted, are what our internal compass is pointing toward. Though we may not know immediately what our journey's goal may be, when we follow our heart's urgings, our internal compass, we can be certain we're on course.

If we're puzzled, confused, or feeling lost, it's a sign to slow down and consider this: does the path we're on bring us joy? If

not, take time to explore some of the side roads that call to us from out of the shadows. If that side road feels like it might be interesting, then take it. No matter how crooked or narrow it may seem, no matter if it separates you from the multitudes, if you can walk that path with love and reverence, then it is right for you.

It took me years before I realized there was a deeper purpose to what I was doing. I started photographing because I was fascinated with the process—exposing film, developing and printing in a darkroom. There was a strange alchemy and sorcery to it all. After my first book was published, I realized I had stumbled onto a path I enjoyed and was growing a deep relationship with the oaks.

Slowly, with each passing year, with each new series of photographs and each new intuitive insight, it became clear I would be on this path for the rest of my time on the planet.

That's been the side road that appeared from the shadows for me, and I took it. Not because it was profitable or popular, but because it felt interesting and joyful. It's been a path I can walk with reverence and love. And in the walking, it's become my True North. 🌳



Oak in Winter Fog, Hwy. 308 near Raceland

GHOSTS

Growing up in south Louisiana's Cajun country, I've come to know many of the old live oaks located within sight of state Highways 1 and 308 as they follow Bayou Lafourche's course from Donaldsonville to Golden Meadow.

Solitary oaks, standing like sentinels in open fields, have always held a fascination for me. They call to me as I drive by on whatever rural route I happen to travel.

This particular oak has become an old friend—I've watched him grow and weather the seasons for almost 50 years along this stretch of Hwy. 308 near Raceland. He has survived far more storms than I have, as well as the seasonal exposure to sugarcane-growing chemistry in his location on the edge of a sugarcane field.

I've studied his form from different perspectives until I arrived at this image—what I feel is my favorite of the many photographs I've made. Still, each time I pass him, I take a slow glance to see how he's changed and if the light and weather on this day might reveal something new about his character and story.

We've had long conversations during our portrait sessions about how the years and the seasons have shaped our lives. The sugarcane rows have slowly encroached on his canopy and root space. Several hackberry trees stand to his immediate left. The

branches of one crowd into the edge of my camera's viewfinder. If I move my tripod a few feet to the right you would see the outer reach of the hackberry's limbs. A few steps to my left, and the visual balance of the oak's limb spread on either side of its trunk is lost.

During spring and summer, towering sugarcane stalks hide the lower third of the oak's trunk and limbs. The only time I have a clear view of the oak's silhouette is in winter, after sugarcane harvest, and before spring planting begins. Even then, the background has a far-away horizontal line of trees that is distracting to the composition of a straightforward and clear portrait.

It's only in winter fog that the oak's shape and character are fully revealed. Draped in a gray robe of Spanish moss, the old oak appears like Scrooge's ghost of Christmas past. Like in Dickens' story, he speaks to me of seasons we have both weathered. But instead of an unnerving spectre, he is a spirit of quiet peace and a soothing signpost of our shared history.

One day in the future when I drive past, I will glance toward this cane field and he will be gone. But the memories we shared along the bayou will remain in this portrait, a ghostly reminder of all the old oaks that I have known—past, present, and yet to come. 🌳