



The Birmingham Public Library would like to thank

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Both Sides of the Lens was curated by Andrew Nelson of the University of Maryland, College Park and Jim Baggett and Kelsey Bates of the Birmingham Public Library Archives Department. The exhibition is available to travel.

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Both Sides of the Lens

Photographs by the Shackelford Family

Fayette County, Alabama (1900-1935)

From the collection of the Birmingham Public Library Archives

Both Sides of the Lens Photographs by the Shackelford Family Fayette County, Alabama (1900-1935)

In the early twentieth century, posing for a photographic portrait was an event — it was an opportunity for people to make meaningful visual statements about themselves, their families, and their communities. Those living in Fayette County, Alabama, and the surrounding area did not need to travel to a photo studio to have their picture taken. Instead, they could simply visit the Shackelford family. Mitch and Geneva Shackelford, along with their children, were multi-talented African American artists who played a central role in the rural Fayette County community of Covin. Though farming was their primary vocation, the Shackelfords were also commercial photographers who left behind a collection of more than 850 glass-plate negatives that are now preserved in the Birmingham Public Library Archives.

The Shackelfords photographed local residents and visiting travelers, taking pictures of individuals, families, school groups, and civic organizations. In an era when demeaning and stereotypical depictions of blacks were prevalent in the United States, the Shackelfords provided African Americans with a vehicle for self-representation. The Shackelford photographs offer a dynamic and rarely seen depiction of the African American experience in rural Alabama and show black people living full and vibrant lives in the face of the racial and socioeconomic oppression of the Jim Crow era. This exhibition offers a glimpse into life on both sides of the lens, telling the story of these remarkable photographers and those who stepped in front of their camera.



Unidentified portrait, c. 1905



Mitch and Geneva Shackelford with an unidentified boy, c. 1910s. Mitch and Geneva Shackelford were leaders in Fayette County's African American community and were instrumental in forming a local school and Baptist church. Geneva was known for her cooking, quilt making, and musical skill. The couple is pictured here on the steps of their home in Covin.

Mitch Shackelford and unidentified children, c. 1905. The Shackelford home stood on the road between Columbus, Mississippi, and Birmingham, Alabama, and served as a rest stop and boarding house, with Geneva Shackelford cooking for both black and white travelers who often spent the night. People also came to the Shackelford place to have their picture taken. The family owned a large format camera that used glass negatives to produce high resolution images. They developed the photographs in a darkroom built in the attic. Multiple members of the Shackelford family are thought to have produced the photographs in this collection.



Unidentified portrait, c. 1910s. The Shackelfords were often called on to take portraits. Customers would visit the Shackelford home and have their picture taken there or, as in this portrait, the Shackelfords would photograph a family, group, or individual outside of their own home or at another site.



Unidentified portrait, c. 1920s. The Shackelfords and the people they photographed carefully selected locations and poses to record specific aspects of leisure and everyday life. As seen here, posing on the porch steps with a pet can capture a sense of a casual day at home.



Unidentified portraits, c. 1910s.