

Snapshots can be truly artistic



1-26-12

BY C.W. LATTIN
Orleans County historian

This week's column is inspired by an article which has appeared in the December/January issue of the magazine "Art and Antiques." It is entitled "Snapshot poetic" with an informative lead-in which follows. "Vernacular photography, a growing collector-driven field, finds mystery and masterpieces in the lenswork of unknown amateurs."

I have felt for years that we should not underestimate the photographic images produced by amateurs. Often their snapshots capture not only something of historical interest but also occasionally elevate to a more spiritual sphere of true art.

In the past couple of decades, more people have become aware of these images and their importance. Flea markets, house sales and antique shops can provide the collector happy hunting grounds for special aesthetic images by some unknown shutterbug. These photographs from the 1890s up to recent times give us a wealth of knowledge ourselves.

When photography was first invented in the late

1830s up into the late 19th century, all photos were taken by professionals. When George Eastman perfected an easy-to-use camera in 1892, photography became practical for amateurs. In fact, Eastman's slogan was "You press the button, we do the rest." So it was when photographic film was the process, which chronicled the lives of American families for generations.

In the Art and Antiques article, John Foster is quoted as follows: "All the photos made today with digital cameras, cell phones, iPads: they're all ephemeral; they're all pixels on screens. Literally, they're just impermanent light. By contrast, an old snapshot is something tangible, warm, more permanent and packed with history."

For our purposes here I've included three local snapshots from different periods of time. For one reason or another they capture something which makes us take a longer

Vol. XXXIV, No. 4

Bethinking of Olde Orleans

look at the image. The old gentleman and his young friend were taken circa 1905. The young woman in a canoe was taken around 1925. The children on the picnic table ready to jump into a pile of leaves dates to about 1960. In this photo the two girls with hoods are Hillary and Martha Smith, daughters of the Rev. Jack Hillary Smith, rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Albion.

Make sure your old photos are labeled and don't be too hasty in overlooking the most commonplace subject as something which could be worth a thousand words in poetic language.