

Culture-High & Low

Preserving Houston's Visual History: Story Sloane's Gallery

Story Sloane, III, owner of Story Sloane's Gallery, is passionate about Houston's history. As the holder of one of the city's premier private historic photo collections, he has been an outspoken advocate for preserving Houston's history and for finding ways to present our city's story to a wide audience. His love for Houston, for its history and culture, are readily apparent in the following interview by William H. Kellar, conducted at Story Sloane's Gallery, January 8, 2008.



I was born here in Houston at St. Joseph's Hospital downtown. And in the early 1960s, we moved out to Memorial. I went to Bunker Hill Elementary School, Memorial Junior High and then Memorial Senior High School. Father insisted that when we all hit 13 years old, we spend at least one day downtown and get to know the heart of Houston. He worked in an office downtown and would give us \$10, and us kids would just basically hit the streets and explore. That was my first introduction to downtown, running in and out of the tunnels, and seeing the type of architecture that was different than a shopping mall or a strip center. And I loved it!

THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH STORY SLOANE, III, BY WILLIAM H. KELLAR, JANUARY 8, 2008. UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ALL PHOTOS BY WILLIAM H. KELLAR.



Remains of the William Penn Hotel.

MY father was a petroleum land man so he was out on the road an awful lot. In 1983, he opened Story Sloane's Wildlife Art as a business for him to retire into. He always had a dream about running a family business—something that my mother and I could work at, as well as him when he retired. And we did that for many years until he retired, and then we came to the conclusion that we butted heads too much and it was not working out as far as the family business end of it. So, I took the business over in the early 1990s. My mother still came and worked and father helped to some degree, but I was the one who basically took over the helm of the ship and steered it.

Our direction of art has always been, to a large degree, sporting art—hunting, fishing and wildlife—but as things changed over the years, different types of art were popular—landscape comes in, Western comes in. We have always tried to go with the flow of what the demand of the community was as far as what we would present, but then we also decided that we wanted to present some things that have not been seen here in Houston. A good example of that is when we had artist Vladimir Lukin from Kazakhstan come in and we exhibited one of the largest exhibits of Russian art that I knew of in the city. We had over sixty of his paintings. He was a fantastic artist—did very, very bright colors. Van Gogh was his idol, so he patterned his style after him.

My personal background was in photography. I was degreed in photography at East Texas State University (ETSU) up in Commerce, Texas, which is sort of ironic because history can prove over the years to change various aspects of life, and when A&M took over the university, with the stroke of a pen, I became an Aggie! ETSU had one of the best photography programs in Texas that specialized in commercial photography. It was a wonderful education both in video and cinema, but my strong suit was still photography. They nurtured

my strong desire to want to follow the photographic end of my education.

When I got back to Houston after I graduated, I worked as a freelance photographer, which was a very difficult profession, and ended up working for a billboard company for about one year, photographing billboards as proof of performance for their advertisers. As I would photograph these billboards, I would drive around Houston because they are scattered all over town. One thing that kept popping up was seeing first hand our old buildings coming down. I noticed that all of this architecture was being torn down, and it was not on a year-to-year basis, it was almost on a month-to-month basis because I covered the whole city. So, that is when my first interest

processes like dye transfer photography, a lost form of print making for color photographs. We exhibited some of Jim Bones' photography—Bones apprenticed under Elliott Porter who was the master of color landscape photography. He was right along there with Ansel Adams. So, I was able to meet Jim, go on some workshops with him, and my interest in photography started getting a little bit deeper.

My father was on the board of the Harris County Heritage Society and worked with the park downtown. My mom was a docent down there at Sam Houston Park. So, through my parents, I was "volunteered," since I had a degree in photography, to photograph various events for them, which happened to be preservation-minded and historically-



Inside Story Sloane's Gallery.

in observing the loss of Houston's history and the lack of preservation really came into focus for me.

I continued the photography career but realized that as a freelance, it was just going to be too difficult on my own. My father had opened up this business and asked if I wanted to join him in it, so I decided to come to work here at the gallery. And, you know, over the years, we sort of, as I mentioned earlier, changed the direction of the gallery as far as what we were offering and started including a little bit of photography. It was not the vintage Houston photography; it was what I would call alternative photographic

mind with the city of Houston. I believe it was in 1982, the Harris County Historical Society was putting out a book called *Houston: Chronicle of the Supercity on the Bayou*. Pat Butler was the photo editor for this book and director of Sam Houston Park, and the curator of collections for the Heritage Society. He asked me to contribute photographs of areas of the city that I shot as well as go to these different archives and do copy work. That was my first real introduction of going into "the bowels" of the Julia Ideson Library or going to the San Jacinto Museum and going down in their archives and seeing what these places had. It was

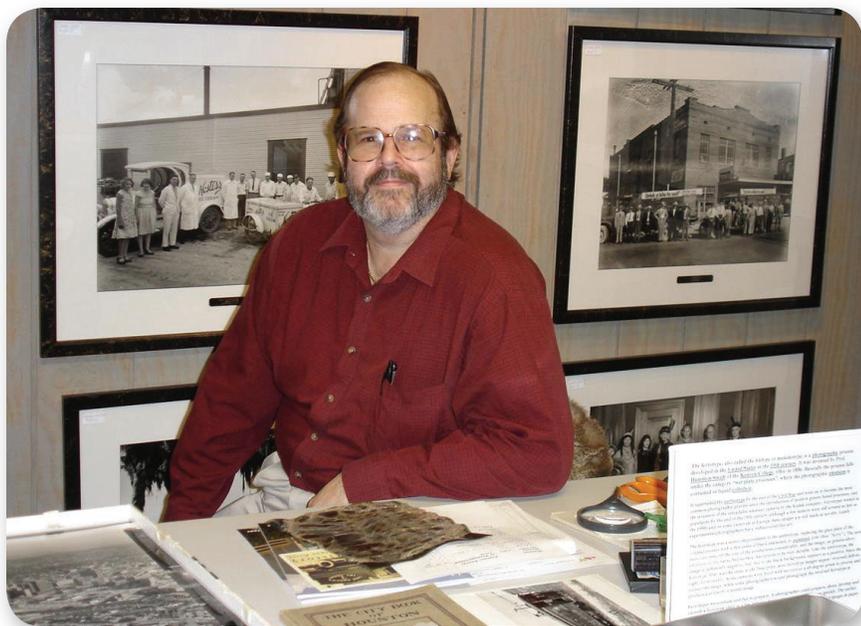
amazing what a wealth of history that they had stored onsite but was not available to the public. That was back in 1982 or 1983. So now, we are talking over twenty years back. And I am realizing that my goodness, you know, they have got these wonderful things that unfortunately probably will never see the light of day unless they get some proper funding. Out at San Jacinto Museum, it was just awesome the types of artifacts, from Governor Hogg's ring to Steven F. Austin's cigar case – all these objects that I could handle and almost just feel a sense of the prior owner and to get a strong bearing on our history of this area. And I realized that, going

was a photographer and contributed works in stories for *Stars and Stripes*. So, father had a strong background in photography. I had a strong background in photography. When dad ran across Calvin Wheat's collection as it was being burned for the silver content, he became extremely concerned. He lost weeks worth of sleep about it. But he did not tell me about it until after he had acquired this collection. He sat on this collection for about four or five years and then one day, he brought in a photograph that he had enlarged. It was a west side view that showed the Esperson building, a circus on the lot where City Hall sits, and the old Democratic Convention Center where

work in there to the mix but the main focus was going to be the Houston photography. So, that really was the beginning. The more photographs that I enlarged, the more it was like a sponge that drew me in. If I would scan one of these photographs and blow it up on the computer and start to edit it, then I would start to realize even more what great amount of information that the negative contained. I kept enlarging and clicking and enlarging and clicking and realized the fantastic clarity of these negatives. I am no longer looking at a building; I am looking at buildings next door to the building. I am no longer looking at those buildings; I am looking inside the windows to see if there is somebody looking out, to see if there is a sign in the window that dates the particular piece. Then, I am looking at the particular automobiles and I am blowing up the license plates so I can see the years that the photograph was made. So, it was quite infectious and it really got me going and pumped as far as I want to really start promoting Houston's history.

I thought it was such a shame that all of this could have been lost. So, my father, myself and my mother basically decided we were going to save this particular collection. My wife, Jerry, who was with the gallery and did all the custom framing, was right behind us saying, "let's present this to the public." I knew that the quality of these images was so good that people would want it as décor. My thoughts were if I could get a business or an individual to pay for this photograph to go in their office or go in their home, I am achieving two things: 1) I am helping to fund or finance my research in Houston's photographic history; and 2) that image is going to go out there in that environment and anybody who walks in, it is going to be in front of them. Here is Houston's history.

And it is basically an addicting form of art because nothing in Houston exists like it. There is no museum where you can go and see a photographic history of our city that is really



Story Sloane, III.

from witnessing it being torn down to witnessing it being neglected, well something needed to be done eventually to preserve and present it to the public.

And maybe it is coincidence that my father ran across this big photographic collection from a commercial photographer. It was being burned for the silver content. Dad was a high school photographer at San Jacinto High School and he was a photographer for Shell Oil. He was educated in photography in the Navy and then he transferred branches of service to the Air Force so he could go over to Korea and see active duty. And he

the Sam Houston Convention Center was built, which is now Hobby Center for Performing Arts. He showed me this photograph he blew up and I could not believe the detail, the historical content, that was in it and what has changed although, at the same time, it emphasized sprawl and the growth of Houston. So, that hooked me. I told him, "Gather up all the negatives and bring them to the gallery. We are starting a new focus of what I would like to do with the gallery." And we started blowing up, enlarging, and showcasing these vintage photographs of Houston. I added some of my own

complete. The Julia Ideson Library has almost 4 million photographs and negatives but less than, I believe, 3 percent are archived. So, what it is, it is a tomb. It is a tomb for this resource—a mausoleum, whatever you want to call it—it lies in state waiting to dissolve, waiting to all go away because of lack of funding. These negatives, everything that Eastman Kodak produced from around 1911 to 1980, have a shelf life of sixty-five to eighty years, and once they go bad, since it is on a celluloid acetate base, it will dissolve. It won't just fade, it won't crackle and reticulate, it will dissolve into a goo of acetic acid and it is gone. I mean, the memory, with a photograph, is concrete, it is there. That building is on the left side of the street and not the right side of the street because there, you have the photographic evidence right in front of you. And when all that is gone, there is not going to be any collaboration to other peoples' stories about how things were. And I think that is the biggest tragedy in the city right now, it is our visual history and who knows what we have that could fill in the gaps all the way back to 1848, which is when the first photograph in the city of Houston was made.

I have many goals. I have soap box issues like the Museum of Houston's History that I feel is very, very important to our community, but my main goal is to complete a photographic history of Houston from that very first one that a Mrs. Davis made, a daguerreotype portrait from 1848, all the way up to around the 1960s and 1970s. I feel the most at risk base would be from the mid-1800s to about 1920, 1930. I found in my research that once you get into the 1930s and 1940s, there is an awful lot of information out there. But then, when we shift from institutions like universities and colleges, we realize there is an awful lot in the public's hands, in the citizen's hands, that is sitting there, that they simply do not know what to do with. And that is a resource, just like the Julia Ideson photographic collection, that is going to waste. It all

could, I feel, unify the community. I have always viewed Houston as a fragmented society. If we had a place, a central place where the community could go as a whole and learn about everybody else, then that would help unify these different communities to where we would have one big city and everybody could understand that we have got to live together and get along. I believe history is a very important key or aspect in unifying all these varying communities. Learn about the environment that you live in and then you might find out, "Oh my, I did not know about this." For example, a lot of people here in Houston do not realize that Enrico Caruso (one of the

here, and if I could use that to hook them and to get them interested in Houston history, especially the small children, the youth, then maybe when they grow up, they are going to decide, "Hey, let's don't tear down that movie theater; let's save that movie theater." When this issue comes up in front of the public, somebody will step forward like Jesse Jones used to do and say, "Hey, here is the money. We are not going to whine about losing it, we are not going to cry about losing it, we are going to buy it and then we are going to preserve it so people will have the opportunity to experience it." That is not happening today. That altruistic nature of the money in this town, where



most famous tenors in history) came to Houston and that he sang at the City Auditorium. It was packed, and the promoter, she said, "Let's open the doors, let's open the windows", she wanted everybody who could not fit into the city Auditorium to hear him. And I can just picture hearing that beautiful voice echoing down Travis Avenue. So, things like that, we do not know about, the bulk of the citizenry does not know about, our school children certainly do not know about.

So, if we can educate them by coming into the gallery and saying, look, this is a mini-museum of Houston's photographic history for this date right

there are huge foundations, there are billions of dollars of money here—there is no reason that any of these architectural structures should be torn down because funds are here—you have just got to connect to the right person and say, "This is the right thing to do." Well, before World War II, there were a lot of citizens and community leaders that knew when it was the right thing to do and they would do it. After World War II, I noticed, and you know, you learn a lot of things in your research, that is not the way it is anymore.

What excites me when I start collecting the photography to present to the public is if I run across something

that I feel is very special. I ran across a photograph of the first flight in Texas made just south of Houston and I thought, "This is so exciting!" And then, I did a little bit more research and then it dawned on me that the first word spoken from the moon was "Houston." That was fifty-nine years after that first flight on a field just south of town. So, what we have been able to achieve in this city is remarkable, and it needs to be presented to the public and the public needs to look at it and say, "Wow! I did not know that happened here. I am proud to live in this city." We get such bad press from all over the country about Houston. They say we are too fat here; our city has an ugly skyline. I do not understand that because Houston has a beautiful skyline. Houston has a wonderful array of restaurants where people can eat; we have wonderful citizens. We are just fragmented. I think we need to all be brought back together in a positive fashion. I think that is the main goal of the gallery now, to showcase Houston's photographic history in a positive fashion, and put a smile on peoples' faces.

So, that is how I look at things. We have a lot of problems in this city, but let's start in one area and let's start preserving it. And Houston's history, at least my end of it, is the photographic history. I believe that people from all different areas, all different cultures, can walk in and say, "Wow! I did not know our community was like that back then." And then, I can tell them a story about, well, you know, there was, at one time in World War II, the *U.S.S. Houston* was sunk and they raised funds to buy a new ship. As a matter of fact, they raised enough funds to buy two ships. But 1,000 men stood up at one time, were sworn in on Main Street and I have not heard of a patriotic gesture like that from New York, from Boston, from Chicago, from Los Angeles, any of these other cities that really proved that the community stood behind the nation, stood behind not only the nation but the local community as well. And I just do not see that happening

today. So, I like to continue our quest in getting this imagery out to the city of Houston, and work on getting a museum built where everybody can have a little wing or a floor, as budget would permit, but in one location.

I want to keep that spirit, try to keep that positive spirit around all the time. And that is the challenge, keeping that spirit of community alive. The soul of Houston, I think, has been lost. I really believe that it is lost. And I know it is lying in state downtown. I know the key of it is in downtown Houston because that is where it started. And I believe that if we have a museum, it needs to be downtown where it can draw the people from all these outlying communities in and say, we are part of something and we are part of something that started in 1836 and it has continued to today because there is no other city like Houston in the world. And I do not believe any other city has produced leaders like Houston has and you could chronicle all the leaders . . . Jesse Jones is a good example. Made his billions of dollars in Houston, put his money back into the city, served in the government, served well under FDR, accomplished so much and then I think exemplified altruism of the spirit. And I do not see that. I just do not see that anymore.

One of my other goals is to do a book on Houston's photographic history. I

initially wanted to do a book that included the Bob Bailey collection which was a huge, huge archive that the city lost to the University of Texas. And that archive is going to handle the visual history of Houston mainly commercially but also socially from the mid 1930s to about 1980. It is a wonderful, wonderful collection. But we are talking about over 300,000 images. My collection is 2,500 images. But I feel it is the cream of the crop because my father sat down there and he went through over 20,000 images to pick what we have that we have been able to present. And, of course, being in the oil business, a large selection is oilfield related. But that is part of our history as well.

So, we keep having our shows, at least one or two a year, that showcase at least some aspect of this collection. Each photograph is a miniature time capsule and I think that that is a great way to present history, photographically. Eventually, I will work my way up to the 1960s and even further from that because there is so much history now. And I believe photography is that key element to holding people there. Combine it with an oral history and then I think you have got an important part, a step in preserving our past and our history. ★

COURTESY: STORY SLOANE'S GALLERY.

