The Norman Baynard Photograph Collection: 
Three Perspectives

The Baynard Photograph Identification Project
by Chris Travers

Local photographer Norman Baynard (1908–1986) operated a commercial studio in Logan Heights for over 40 years where he documented the social, political, and religious life of San Diego’s African-American community. From 1939 through the mid-1980s, he photographed individual and group portraits, residences, businesses, street scenes, churches, weddings, sports, clubs, political and civic functions, funerals, Masonic and Eastern Star organizations, and Muslim groups. His large body of work constitutes a unique record of San Diego’s twentieth century African-American community.

Originally from Michigan, Baynard moved to San Diego and opened N.B. Studio out of his home at 2912 Clay Avenue in 1939. The studio later moved to the business district on 29th Street and Imperial Avenue. A long-time Muslim, Baynard changed his name to Mansour Abdullah in 1976. His photo studio’s name also changed – first to Baynard Photo, and then to Abdullah’s Photo Studio.

This remarkable historical photograph collection was donated to the San Diego History Center by Norman Baynard’s son, Arnold, in 1991 and was minimally processed at that time. Undertaking the thorough processing, cataloging and re-housing (moving the negatives from acidic envelopes to archival-quality envelopes) of a collection of this size is both time consuming and costly. SDHC applied for and was awarded a grant in mid-2009 from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to make this collection more accessible to the public and to lay the groundwork for future preservation efforts.

The first step was to determine accurately the cost of re-housing and cataloging the entire collection. Over a period of months, staff worked with

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volunteers to determine that there were 13,521 unique photo sessions and a total of over 29,217 images. While the negatives were being counted, those that were especially interesting for subject matter and composition, as well as technical qualities like exposure and focus, were noted. From the thousands of negatives viewed, 500 images of various subjects were selected. These 500 negatives were then sent to the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) in Massachusetts to be digitally photographed. From the original digital files a smaller thumbnail version was made to attach to the catalog records that were created.

The basic catalog records were created by consulting Baynard’s original index cards as well as the San Diego City Directories, biographical files, and other resources in the SDHC Library. A major challenge for the project was that the index cards contained only minimal information about the photo shoot—just the name of the client, the one who paid for the shoot, and sometimes a date. The name of the client was not necessarily the same as the people shown in the images. The names of the people, places, or events in the photographs were not usually noted.

To get more information about the images and to tell the stories of the people in the photographs, it was necessary to take the photographs out into the community. First, a small exhibit of 50 images was displayed at the Arts and Culture Fest at the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation in South San Diego. The images were then shown at the Nineteenth Annual Kuumba Fest held at the Lyceum Theatre. Following that, binders were created with the basic catalog records and printouts of the 500 selected photographs. These binders also contained forms that allowed people to record what they knew about the images. Churches, senior centers and various social
organizations were determined to be the best sources of information about the decades shown in the images. Community meetings were held at Bethel A.M.E. Church, the George L. Stevens Senior Center, New Creation Church, The Catfish Club, Bethel Baptist Church, and The Rotary Club of Southeastern San Diego.

Reviewing the images brought out many emotions—both laughter and tears—as people remembered those days in Logan Heights. As the Baynard Photograph Identification Project was drawing to a close, an exhibit about Baynard and his work was created at the History Center. This exhibit will also travel to the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation early in 2012. Additional programs and lectures will be held in conjunction with the exhibition and identification project, including a photography workshop for young people. A webpage was created to share the images and information online and allow viewers to add their own comments and information to the images.

During the course of the project, experts on African-American studies and photography were brought to the History Center to assess the contents of the collection. Dr. Deborah Willis, Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, was joined by Dr. Camara Holloway, Assistant Professor of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Art at the University of Delaware, and Dr. Cristin McVey, to explore the local and national significance of this collection. Dr. Willis also presented the lecture “Posing Beauty: African American Images from 1890s to the Present.” At last this collection was getting the national attention and recognition it so richly deserved.

In addition to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the James Irvine Foundation, the Charles & Ruth Billingsley Foundation, the Heller Foundation, Union Bank, Wells Fargo Bank, and Balboa Park Online Collaborative, all generously supported this project. Local TV station, Channel 4, an enthusiastic supporter of the project, filmed community meetings and interviewed many individuals as they shared their stories. Segments about the project have run on San Diego Insider, and a half-hour TV special documenting the project was shown on Shades of San Diego. The footage compiled throughout the project is also included in the exhibit.
The Baynard Photograph Identification Project brought the photographs to the community and the community to the History Center. It was a tremendous success and generated a dialogue and joint effort that will continue for years to come.

Recollections of my Father by Arnold Baynard

My father was a family man and religious. He worked for Convair for two years in the photo lab-processing center. He also worked as a gardener in Mission Hills. He played a banjo at a nightclub for awhile. Most people considered my father a gifted and talented man for someone who only finished the second grade. I have always known my father to be honest and respectable. He was a very hard worker who worked 12 to 14 hours a day and believed in paying for most items up front and not on credit. He built his first house at 2912 Clay Avenue.

My father always made sure we had clothes on our back and food on the table. Back then they didn’t believe in sparing the rod and spoiling the child. If you misbehaved you got spanked. We were taught to respect our elders. While my
father had a successful business, I feel that this respect was due to my mother’s contributions. She would make appointments, take pictures in the studio and hand-paint all the color photos for my father. Together they were a great team.

Curating the Baynard Photographic Exhibition by Nicholas Vega

Initially settled in the 1880s, Logan Heights is one of San Diego’s oldest neighborhoods. Always home to a variety of ethnicities, Logan Heights became a predominantly African-American community by the mid-twentieth century. The district identity of Logan Heights emerged as one grounded in family, religious conviction, and commitment to social equality and economic enterprise.

Norman Baynard established himself as the community’s photographer of choice. Working out of both his home and a professional studio on Imperial Avenue, Baynard and his camera served thousands of clients. People, places, and events of more than five decades are documented, ranging from intimate portraits to promotional shots and photojournalism. Now, nearly 30 years after he took his last photo in 1985, it is clear that his images are more than snapshots that record moments in time. Collectively they offer a dynamic illustration of the rich history, culture and soul of one of the West Coast’s oldest and most dynamic African-American communities.

Norman Baynard moved to San Diego with his parents in the 1920s from Pontiac, Michigan. Despite being colorblind, having only a second grade education, and no formal photography training, Baynard established himself as a polished professional photographer in the local African-American community. He eventually opened Baynard Studio, featured in this exhibit, at 2695 Imperial Avenue, the area’s most bustling thoroughfare.

In addition to being a successful photographer and businessman, Baynard was a dedicated husband and father. In 1936, he married Frances H. Russ of

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In 1976, after a long association with the Black Muslim community at Muhammad’s Mosque No. 8 on Imperial Avenue, Norman became a devoted member of the Nation of Islam and legally changed his name to Mansour Abdullah. His studio was also renamed Abdullah’s Photo Studio. Mansour Abdullah (Norman Baynard) continued operation of the studio until his death in 1986.

**A Community Identity Surfaces**

During the mid-twentieth century, Logan Heights emerged as an African-American community in part because attitudes of racial prejudice prevented ethnic minorities from living in some San Diego neighborhoods, along with specifically written restrictive real estate covenants. Another factor leading to the development of Logan Heights was the desire of many of San Diego’s black residents to unite geographically for purposes of increased self-determination and political representation. Instead of being scattered throughout the city in small enclaves in various council districts, coming together meant a stronger voice in civic affairs. Along with more power at city hall, they could operate and patronize businesses in a welcoming environment. This became increasingly important during and after World War II as newly arriving defense-industry workers and military personnel of color required accommodations, services, and leisure-time opportunities.

Logan Heights has bustled with energy for nearly a century. The streets that comprise the district’s commercial corridor extend inland from downtown San Diego. Military personnel, manufacturers, educators and students, port and transportation professionals, retailers, and service providers have made it a hub
of activity. National Avenue, Logan Avenue, and Ocean View Boulevard are important locations of commerce in the center of Logan Heights, but Imperial Avenue has been the retail and social center of the area for most of this time.

Imperial Avenue, by the 1950s, was home to hardware, clothing, grocery, liquor, and furniture stores in addition to the Baynard Studio. Law and doctor's offices, restaurants, nightclubs, beauty salons, barbers and auto repair shops were also located along the thoroughfare. The presence of these businesses enabled residents to patronize and strengthen the local, black-owned economy.

During the 1940s and 1950s, a new economic demographic emerged in Logan Heights—a vibrant, hardworking African-American middle class. Residents were proud of their accomplishments and wanted to document them and they called on Norman Baynard to do so. His images often portrayed individuals achieving the “California Dream” and they exemplified collective success, as entire families were routinely photographed together. Family portraits taken in front of recently purchased single-family homes and new automobiles were commissioned, as were portraits of people in elegant clothing. Baynard’s photos reflect not just achieved success, but reveal their subjects’ aspirations for the future.

This community was interested in creating images that recorded status and conveyed their values. In the mid-twentieth century, for the first time, millions of African-Americans gained the means to do this. These images demonstrate that our nation’s middle class African-American communities were thriving—a historical reality that is often overlooked in accounts of the period.

Similar to other areas of the country, San Diego’s African-American community responded to segregation and social injustice by actively participating in the civil rights movement during the mid-twentieth century. This grassroots movement was supported by people of all ages and spurred the evolution of attitudes regarding social justice. Locally, Logan Heights was at the center of the civil rights activities taking place in San Diego. The various social changes occurring at this time helped shape the community’s identity.

The desire for social change and the battle for civil rights were expressed in a
variety of ways: increased membership in civil rights groups like the NAACP and Urban League, political organizing, student and public protests, community-led marches, and the formation of neighborhood defense groups such as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Brown Berets. Interest in new religious organizations such as the Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) also underscored a departure from business as usual. Clothing and hairstyles reflected a distinct black identity, as did new forms of music.

An Exhibition of Norman Baynard’s Photographs Comes to Life

In 1991, Norman Baynard’s son Arnold donated his father’s entire collection of negatives to the San Diego History Center. Such extensive collections of photographs that document African-American communities are virtually unknown west of the Mississippi. Because relatively little information about the photos was included with Baynard’s business records, the History Center sought support in 2010-2011 to identify the subjects of Baynard’s photos and place them on display.

Working with the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, the Baynard family members and volunteers under the direction of Chris Travers, the History Center took Baynard’s photographs out to a wide variety of community locations to seek help in identifying the people, places, and events captured in the images. Given the strong ties the photographs have to the community, an outpouring of interest in identifying the pictures quickly surfaced. The treasure trove of stories that emerged throughout this process has been used to enrich this exhibit, strengthen the History Center’s database records, and deepen our understanding of San Diego’s African-American history.

Portrait of a Proud Community combines the voice of the community with the photographic works of Norman Baynard to showcase the rich history of Logan Heights. Featuring more than 120 reproduced images from the Norman Baynard Collection, this installation differs from many traditional photographic exhibitions
in that it contains a number of interactive components. Greeting visitors at the entrance to the gallery is a reproduced building façade, similar to Baynard’s Imperial Avenue commercial studio. Guests are encouraged to try-on period costumes in a reproduced photo studio and pose for pictures as though they are actually being photographed by Baynard. A work station has also been installed that allows guests to search through the 500 digital images from the collection. To complement the images on display, a number of audio-video components have been inserted in this exhibit including video interviews from various members of the community, commentary from Diana Guevara, host of Channel 4 San Diego’s Shades of San Diego, and a sampling of recorded music from Baynard’s personal collection.

*Portrait of a Proud Community: Norman Baynard’s Logan Heights 1939-1985* will be on display at the San Diego History Center until January 22, 2012. For additional information relating to the exhibit and its accompanying programs, visit sandiegohistory.org/baynard.
Four firefighters inside Station 19 have been identified as (l to r): Sheldon Perry, Joe Smith, Timothy Williams, and Captain Alfredo Salazar, c. 1945. ©SDHC #91:18476-117.

Mr. Johnnie Williams, one of the earliest African-American detectives in San Diego, 1945. ©SDHC #91:18476-1112.

Mrs. Johnnie L. Byrd with her children, Darlene Byrd on the left, and Judith Byrd, on the right, wearing matching plaid dresses, 1945. ©SDHC #91:18476-1197.
A studio portrait of Jimmy Liggins, son of the preacher "Mother" Liggins. Jimmy and his brother, Joe, were both musicians and known for the song “Honeydrippers,” c. 1950. ©SDHC #91:18476-1718.

Lola and Robert Williams with their son Truman Youngblood. The Williams family lived near Imperial Avenue and 28th Street, July 12, 1947. ©SDHC #91:18476-1202.

Janette Bowser’s 6th birthday party held at 4150 Hemlock Street. Janette (now Janette Tate) is standing directly behind the birthday cake, 1950. The children have been identified as (l to r): Gwendolyn Marshall, Jewelene “Cookie” Williams, Katie Bartley, Arlin Bartley, Janette “Blossom” Bowser, not known, Beulah “Faye” Jones, Lorraine Foster, Alicia Summers, and Lorraine Foster’s sister. ©SDHC #91:18476-712.
John Handcox and his family at their reunion held in Presidio Park, 1968. From left to right: Ruth Handcox-Richardson holding toddler Sabrina Wright, John Handcox, Vinna Handcox holding the baby Barry Covington-Sharp, Glenda Wright-Reynolds. John Handcox was a sharecropper, songwriter, and poet. He also owned Handcox Market at 28th and Clay Street for over 20 years. ©SDHC #91:18476-163.

Jackie Green with her baby brother Jeffrey Green. Their mother was Vernice Green, January 6, 1964. ©SDHC #91:18476-203.

Exton Hullaby with his wife, Ethel, c. 1940. Mr. Hullaby was a singer with the gospel group “The Spiritual Kings” and a member of Bethel Baptist Church. ©SDHC #91:18476-1752.
Customers getting haircuts at Fay’s Barber Shop at 2816 Imperial Avenue. The barbershop was owned by Mr. Fay who later sold it to Leroy Arthur and Horace Smith. ©SDHC #91:18476-254.

Groom Oscar Boyd Flagg and bride, Connie, on their wedding day. The wedding was held at the home of Gardner Lee, the pastor of St. Luke’s Church, January 1, 1960. ©SDHC #91:18476-897.
Essie Smart is recognized as “Colored Woman of the Year, 1957.” Award is presented by Eva Young and her husband, Nelson Young, owners of The Lighthouse newspaper, February 23, 1958. ©SDHC #91:18476-633.


Photo as yet unidentified. ©SDHC #91:18476-1571.
The Spiritual Kings was a popular gospel group. Members included: Reverend Marvin Hines, who was a minister at Pilgrim Progressive Baptist Church, Exton Hullaby, Rudy Haines, and 2 unidentified members, c. 1955. ©SDHC 91:18476-1722.
Baynard children with friends dressed up to celebrate Halloween. Two of the children in the front row have been identified as Tony and Dora Williams, c. 1950. ©SDHC #91:18476-1566.

Frances Baynard with children, Arnold, Theron, Truelene, and Norma Jean, on Christmas morning, c. 1950. ©SDHC #91:18476-808.
Mrs. Maggie Bullock with children, Percy (left) and Melvin (right). Maggie was a talented singer known for her popular rendition of “Let It Breathe On Me” c. 1950 ©SDHC #91:18476-1738.

Men inside RBG House of Music located at 4268 Market Street. Earl Mitchell, father of baseball player Kevin Mitchell, is seen in the white hat in the center of the group, April 1974. ©SDHC #91:18476-247.

The little boy in the suit and hat is Glen Alvin Kirk, age 2, the first son of Richard and Truelene Kirk, 1956. ©SDHC #91:18476-1389.