"Slices of Time" *Raleigh News & Observer,* March 7, 2004 By Caitlin Cleary, staff writer

FRANKLIN COUNTY--Professor **David Simonton** is in his customary Sunday morning spot, standing in the hallway of his Raleigh home, looking up at a large map of North Carolina mounted on the wall. The map, which was drawn in 1965 and once belonged to his father-in-law, is large enough so that it requires a few strides to go from Waynesville to Manteo.

A miniature forest of stickpins covers this map, each marking one of the 299 towns Simonton has visited and photographed during the past 15 years. Color-coded to indicate the quality, timing and frequency of these Sunday morning forays, the pins help him decide where to go next.

All of this started out simply as a way for him to explore his newly adopted home state and to document those uniquely Southern settings that Simonton, a New Jersey native, continues to find fascinating and beautiful. But the more he saw of North Carolina's small towns, the bigger his project grew, and the map quickly began filling up with pins. Over the years, he has crisscrossed the state, photographing the quiet downtowns and rail yards, the kudzu-covered fields and collapsing tobacco barns.

'Walker Evans said, I'm interested in what the present will look like as the past.'" quotes Sam Stephenson, an author and curator at Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, who is familiar with Simonton's work. "I look at it as an effort to document the things our culture tends to overlook or neglect."

Simonton, 51, teaches photography at Peace College. In his photos, he focuses mainly on downtown areas, many neglected and deteriorating, largely abandoned in favor of the newer, sprawling, big-box commercial strips. And although he mostly refrains from interpreting the meaning of his own work, Simonton has acknowledged the project can be read as a documentary about the changing South, a "sympathetic portrait of a region being homogenized by progress."

He chooses Sundays because the downtowns are most likely to be deserted, the residents at church or at home with their families, watching sports on TV or eating dinner. Every Thanksgiving Day, every New Year's, every Super Bowl, he goes out alone, taking pictures of the things people often miss as they drive by.

"I like to photograph, and I like to drive,' Simonton says. "Once you get out there, off the main roads, it's miles and miles and miles without seeing another car. It's the skies, the open spaces."

Centerville will be the 300th town he photographs in North Carolina, and after that, he intends to keep going. He has been to Shoofly, Bushy Fork and Lizard Lick; he has wandered the empty streets of Belgrade, Dublin, Troy and Carthage. He has been as far west as Sylva, and as far east as Oriental, producing a vast body of work that fills dozens of binders, boxes and frames.

"It's been so fun to see all those pins accumulate," says his wife, Carolyn Parker. "It's kind of shocking.'

But ultimately, what Simonton pursues are things like composition and light -- and scenes we might overlook as ordinary and banal. Any historical significance in his photos, he insists, is merely a byproduct of the visual attraction.

Today, Simonton cites photographer Robert Adams as he prepares for yet another Sunday road trip, opening his refrigerator door to reveal two crisper bins crammed with Ilford and Fujifilm canisters.

"Most photographs would never be taken except for an impulsive enjoyment, a delight that is notably free

of big ideas," he quotes, grabbing several rolls of film. Robert Adams is an acclaimed landscape photographer who has documented environmental ruin in the American West.

No plan, just interest

In his driveway, Simonton packs equipment onto the back seat of his scruffy, 15-year-old Nissan Sentra. It's by far the most reliable car he's used on his travels, says Parker, also an art professor at Peace. Its broken speedometer has been adjusted with helpful stickers that indicate the car's real speed. He can't say how many miles he's covered in his travels, but over the years, Simonton has retired about five old beaters, including a Ford Fairlane and a Festiva that was "like a toy."

In the beginning, he had no grand plan, he says. It was never about indexing the state or hitting any magic number. Sometimes he'd pick his destination just by name, like Ivanhoe or Tomahawk, and he'd drive and drive, only to find nothing there, just a crossroads or a single gas station. But the solitude and quiet appealed to him, and even some of the tiniest towns yielded visual riches that kept drawing him back

For the first few years he felt very self-conscious, like an outsider and interloper. He didn't want to tread on anybody's feelings, so sensitive was he to the North-South tensions he'd always heard about while growing up in New Jersey. So he looked around for the empty, abandoned places where he could work without disturbing anyone. But the tall, ponytailed man in a parka, carrying a giant tripod and unwieldy camera equipment, couldn't help but attract attention.

One afternoon in Raleigh, a man pulled a pistol on Simonton, an experience he calls "horrible," but which kept him from shooting for only about a month. On another trip, he was shooting late at night in a Kinston alley, when a police cruiser came up from behind, shining its lights on him. The officers asked what he was doing there.

"They said to me, 'You know, this isn't the safest place to be this time of night,'" he recalls. "I told them, 'Well, I do have my pepper spray.' They just looked at each other and then said, 'OK ... Godspeed.'"

But most situations are easily defused and explained, and Simonton finds himself welcomed by total strangers. In Lexington, he was invited inside Charlie Gaddy's barbershop to take more pictures. In Stem and Speed, he says, the mayors stopped and chatted him up, giving him, respectively, a primer of local civic history and a tour of a shrine to Gen. H. Hugh Shelton, 14th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was born and raised in Speed.

"He meets some of the neatest people," says Parker, a Raleigh native. "It's kind of affirming sometimes that there are such great people out there."

Simonton has reaped the benefits from his time-intensive and often expensive work. Over the years he has had solo exhibits and earned prizes and commissions. But he admits that most of the fruits of his

labor wind up in a box.

“If I let myself think about the money, I’d get nauseous,” he jokes.

As for his wife, she thinks it’s pretty funny that he’s now considered a “Southern photographer.”

“It’s nice that we’ve claimed him,” she says. “For me, it’s my home. He’s shooting things that I know and love. And I can’t wait to see his work when he comes back home.”

Affinity for the aged

The Nissan buzzes out past several new subdivisions, through the town of Rolesville -- “Small Town, Bright Future,” -- and into Franklin County; past a lone boy stomping across an empty field, past an abandoned CAT bus overtaken by weeds.

“Rich Square ... Ahoskie,” he says, absently reading a road sign. “Been to those places.”

Simonton keeps the radio off, wondering out loud if he has the right temperament for photography. Renowned photographer Garry Winogrand was nervous and frenetic, he says, while Emmet Gowin had a calm demeanor, demanding silence when he worked.

Simonton also talked excitedly about famous photographers he admired. Never having had a mentor, he wrote to landscape photographer Ray Metzker, telling him how much he loved his work, and asking him what a photographer’s “responsibility should be to his work.” To Simonton’s delight, Metzker called to thank him, telling him to get out there and keep shooting.

The photographer has become something of an expert at spotting what is truly abandoned, unoccupied, and thus fair game to shoot. Does the house have a heating/AC unit in the window? A mailbox? Does it have the old, rippled glass in the windows? Broken windows? Tracks or ruts in the driveway?

A devotee of the aged, of man-made structures succumbing to nature, Simonton rejects the shiny polish of the new for the authenticity and reliability of old things. He won’t work in color or with digital equipment. His 2 1/4 camera (a square format) doesn’t even use a battery.

“I guess I am drawn to the old things,” he says. “Because there’s more texture, there’s an almost randomness to it. New is always so ... ordered.”

It has been long, solo drives like these that, over the years, have produced a sort of time-lapse photo of North Carolina’s small towns. The state has a wealth of widely scattered, rural small towns, and over the years, those towns have lost population. Mom-and-pop businesses lost out to chain stores, and the downtowns suffered. Dr. Pamela Tyler, a history professor at N.C. State University, tells the same story Simonton’s photos do: the decline of tobacco, textiles and furniture production offers the next generation no way to make a living, other than to leave. (Tyler and Simonton recently served on a panel curating an exhibition of Depression-era photographs of North Carolina, taken by Farm Security Administration photographers).

“When you drive through any small town, you see the empty storefronts, the dusty plate glass on Main Street,” Tyler says. “It’s really a sad sight to see.”

Seen through Simonton’s car window and viewfinder, these downtown scenes change just barely year to year, the finer details changing over time: A pickup bed sags a little more, a sign comes off in

pieces. For the viewer, there is a pervasive feeling of silence and of being left behind.

But Simonton tries not to over-romanticize his subject. He recognizes that with each year of Sundays, his car trips get longer. He has to drive farther and farther out to get to those rural places and tiny towns, to find that which hasn't been razed, paved, developed or swallowed up by nearby cities' sprawl. He's grown accustomed to seeing downtowns boarded up and the Wal-Marts and the Food Lions come in. The old barns, empty rail yards and abandoned downtowns that he seeks to photograph are becoming less and less emblematic of the region than vast mall parking lots and cookie-cutter McMansions.

Some would argue that these changes create even more urgency for Simonton's project.

"I think David's work is really important," says Stephenson, from the Center for Documentary Studies. "There is a real tradition in documentary photography in photographing things before we lose them."

Stephenson grew up in Washington, N.C., a small town in the northeastern part of the state. He says Simonton's work is not exactly what the Chamber of Commerce might choose to put on promotional fliers, but he strongly identifies with the scenes.

"It reminds me of, as a kid, riding my bike to school," Stephenson says. "I wouldn't ride along the main street; I'd ride in the alleys and the parking lots behind the streets. The kind of things David photographs are the things you see when you're not in your car." "There's so many people, the only visual sense they have of the world," he added, "is what they see on a TV, on a computer or in their car."

Surprises on the way

Along the way, Simonton stops in Louisburg. Based on his vague memory of the town, he drives around and around, looking for an old factory he had photographed a few months before. After much searching, he realizes it is no longer there but has been reduced to a gravel lot where prefab garden sheds are being sold. He drives on to the town of Wood, where he veers onto a country road. The world is quiet and still. There isn't another soul around, but a bunch of balloons, let go who knows where, drifts horizontally across the sky, slipping between the power lines.

Simonton doesn't mind being alone out here. In fact, he insists he likes the solitude.

"One time I did go out with another photographer," he says. "But we basically ended up saying to each other, 'OK, meet you back here in two hours.'"

Suddenly, a small dog trots out into the road and runs alongside the slow-moving car. Its ribs are visible, and a look in the rearview mirror shows the floppy-eared beagle running down the yellow dividing line, continuing to follow Simonton's car.

Later on in the day, Simonton ventures inside a nearby barn and finds a dog that looks so similar to the beagle in the road, it could have been from the same litter. The dog lay nestled in the hay. Simonton calls to the dog before realizing it had died. He emerges from the barn looking stricken.

"Every now and again it happens," he says later in the car. "Something unexpected. Something that takes you out of yourself and puts you into the world."

Worth the drive

Simonton drives on to Centerville, town No. 300, and finds exactly what he's looking for, in the way the sun bounces off the snow, orange and blue.

"Hmmm, there's a lot of people out," he says, more to himself than anyone else. Three people, maybe four, are milling around the gas stations at the crossroads of N.C. 58 and N.C. 561, the town's main intersection.

"I think this calls for a cigar, don't you?" Simonton says, not waiting for an answer as he snaps open the Nissan's glove box and pulls out two Don Diegos wrapped in plastic.

He lights one, then climbs out of the car, which is pulled off to the side of the road, its tire treads caked with red mud acquired from a day of shooting.

The late afternoon sun is sinking fast, and Simonton hurries to set up his tripod before the good light fades and his viewfinder goes dark.

"This is great, this is perfect --this is just about right for number 300," he says, loading his film, cigar gripped between his teeth. "This is just what I was looking for. It's very unpretentious, but there are some beautiful things here."

More images to find

As he starts to turn his car toward Raleigh, Simonton says that he likes leaving a place knowing there are more images to mine, more pictures to be taken -- knowing that he can always come back to something. This return trip is a bit sooner than he'd thought. Seconds later he sees some arrangement of forms that makes him double back for one last shot.

"I could say that it'll look that way again," he says, "but I'd be lying."

Of course, if he were alone today, Simonton would shoot into the night, until he ran out of film, or until his fingers or the shutter just quit working. Then he'd go home, set up his developing trays on top of the Kenmore washer and dryer that occupy his makeshift darkroom/laundry room, stand at the enlarger and print for hours. He drives home facing a dramatic sky, the sun setting on his vision of the old South.