

"They're happy, because they've taken in the spirit."

Photographer Caroline Davis



SPECIAL/CAROLINE DAVIS

As a new believer got an old-fashioned dunking, photographer Caroline Davis caught the action above and below water.

'Wade in the Water'

Photographer chronicles fading tradition of outdoor baptisms

By GREG GARRISON
News staff writer

When Caroline Davis was a small child in Tuscaloosa, her nanny sang her to sleep with the hymn, "Wade in the Water, Children."

Annie Morgan, the former nanny, had been baptized in a river as a child in Selma. The hymns she sang were the same ones sung at river baptisms.

Ms. Davis grew up to become a photographer who specializes in underwater photography. Her favorite subject is baptism in the river — a dying tradition in Alabama and other states where it once was considered a standard point of entry to Christian faith in the Deep South.

"This is what I love," said Ms. Davis, a recipient of two Alabama Arts Council grants for her work in preserving images of outdoor baptisms.

Some of the churches whose ceremonies she photographed have since stopped outdoor baptisms.

"They're dwindling," she said. "Now I'm a historian."

A collection of 23 of her baptism photos are on display at the University of Montevallo through Nov. 1. The exhibit will move to the Coleman Center's Altman-Riddick Museum in York from Nov. 2-Dec. 13.

Though she now seems to have been born to take pictures of outdoor baptisms, she accidentally swam into her first one.

While scuba diving in the Grand Cayman Islands in 1997, she encountered a group of Jamaicans who were conducting a baptism in the water.

That same summer, Ms. Davis, a pilot, was flying in south Alabama and saw a river baptism. Shortly after that, a friend called and invited her to take pictures at a river baptism.



A newly baptized convert emerges from an outdoor baptismal pool.

Then church members would tell her about other baptisms.

"They just started accepting me," she said. "It's taken years for them to get to know me and trust me."

Baptismal pools

Some of the pictures are in rivers or creeks; others are in baptismal pools dug in the ground and formed with concrete blocks.

"In Boligee, there are a lot of these baptismal pools," Ms. Da-

vis said.

But there are very few river baptisms still going on.

Many of the churches that traditionally baptized in rivers typically quit as soon as they could afford a new building with an indoor baptismal pool, she said.

"Some are ashamed of it," Ms. Davis said. "You're poor if you have to baptize outside."

Her photographs were all taken in Greene, Sumter and Hale counties. Most of them show the action from both un-

derwater and above.

"Because my background is underwater photography, I take that angle," she said.

Her underwater camera equipment couldn't penetrate the silt-filled water in some of the rivers.

"It was all mud," she said. "It's very difficult."

There were other problems too, Ms. Davis said.

One church in Livingston that formerly baptized in the river stopped when there were reports of an alligator living in the water.

On occasion, some people didn't want to be photographed at all and asked her to leave. She did.

Ms. Davis doesn't name any of the churches or people who appear in her pictures, to protect their privacy. It's more about the cultural tradition, not any particular person, she said.

The photographs are all in black and white to convey the sense of an ancient tradition kept alive. "It's ageless," she said.

Baptisms were rarely planned out in advance — she usually had very little notice.

Ms. Davis had to spend a lot of time talking to church members, learning about when they were having revivals and whether or not there were any new converts. "Right after the revival, they go down and baptize," she said.

Very often, there was only one person to be baptized.

That meant Ms. Davis had only a few clicks of the shutter to capture an emotional moment that lasted 10 minutes at the most. At first, Ms. Davis wasn't sure what emotion she was after.

"The children were so frightened and scared," Ms. Davis

► See River, Page 2H

RELIGION

Friday, October 26, 2001

RIVER: Photographer records baptisms

► From Page 1H

said. "I wanted to capture it."

But then she realized it was something different. "They're happy, because they've taken in the spirit," she said. "It's not fear at all."

Ms. Davis said she was baptized by sprinkling as an infant in a Presbyterian church. "I was

dragged to church as a child," she said. "I didn't know anything about the New Testament."

She said she's learned a lot from watching others be baptized. Now Ms. Davis said she might like to get baptized by immersion. "I want to be baptized outside," she said.

Sprinkling as an infant doesn't

have the same emotional impact as a new convert being fully immersed in the water, Ms. Davis said.

"I didn't have a voice," she said. "They want to come out and tell the world they're taking God's path."