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Review of *Calvin Littlejohn: Portrait of a Community in Black and White* by Bob Ray Sanders

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enthusiastic reception surrounding the publication of a similarly themed title, *Behold the People: R. C. Hickman's Photographs of Black Dallas, 1949–1961*; and Littlejohn's family contacting the director of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin about possibly donating his prints and negatives there. These are significant because they point to the need for an archive to preserve and organize material of this scope—some 70,000 negatives and 55,000 prints made over the course of a more than fifty-year career—as well as the identification of an audience for this historical, regional subject matter.

The resulting volume is a significant contribution to our understanding of African American life in the twentieth century. Calvin Littlejohn (1909–1993) belongs to a history of African American commercial photographers that begins with operators like James Presley Ball originating in Cincinnati and the Goodridge brothers in Pennsylvania and Michigan, and includes James VanDerZee in Harlem, the Scurlock Studio in Washington, DC, Richard Samuel Roberts in North Carolina, and Charles “Teenie” Harris in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, among others. Theirs is a tremendously significant contribution to this country's visual history, because it was these photographers who consciously corrected the one-sided public image of African Americans being told through the lenses of white photographers. Indeed, the book opens with a quote from Littlejohn recollecting the moment when watching a billboard being erected of a black boy eating watermelon he made a conscious decision to “show the *best side*” of African Americans.

Journalist Bob Ray Sanders's biographical essay is brief, light, and engaging; it weaves many quotes from the oral history recorded with Littlejohn before his death in 1993 and thus the reader gets a good sense of the imagemaker. It is clearly aimed at a general audience; while it paints a vivid picture of Littlejohn's career it does not delve into the history of photography to contextualize Littlejohn's work within that history. If it had, it might have even more greatly expanded its audience's understanding of Littlejohn's significance. The images are divided into subject categories that correspond to Littlejohn's work with brief introductory notes: schools, businesses, community and social events, churches, sports and entertainment, and world leaders—a “visual social history,” as Don Carleton, Executive Director of the Briscoe Center, calls such work in his foreword.

So why is a book like this of interest to an audience outside of Fort Worth or even the Great Plains region? What does it contribute to the history of photography or, more specifically, the history of black photographers? In 2010 it is still common

Calvin Littlejohn: Portrait of a Community in Black and White. By Bob Ray Sanders. Foreword by Don Carleton. Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2009. xi + 200 pp. Photographs. \$29.95.

Calvin Littlejohn: Portrait of a Community in Black and White came about through the confluence of two significant events around 1994: the

to hear people remark, when shown an image of middle-class African Americans from the first half of the twentieth century, that they had no idea such positive circumstances existed. *Calvin Littlejohn* bears eloquent witness to a history that still needs telling.

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