n a leisurely drive through the Black Belt of Alabama, one can see elegant old houses that have stood for more than 150 years, churches whose steeples have beckoned generations of congregants, and fields of dark, rich soil where cotton once reigned as king.

The Black Belt of Alabama stretches from the Mississippi line to a few miles shy of the Georgia border and covers nineteen counties in the middle and southern portions of the state. Once home to some of the wealthiest citizens in Alabama, the area now struggles with high unemployment and an image of poverty and desperation.

With a mission to present the Black Belt in a fair but accurate light, photographer Robin McDonald and Valerie Pope Burnes, assistant professor of history at the University of West Alabama, have put together a stunning visual account of the region in their new book Visions of the Black Belt: A Cultural Survey of the Heart of Alabama. The book (11 inches by 11 inches) was published earlier this year by The University of Alabama Press in cooperation with Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center and includes 378 photographs and two maps. In August, USA Today placed ten photographs from the book in the paper’s “Best 10” feature.

When Valerie Burnes was director of The Center of the Study of the Black Belt, people often asked her for a recommendation of a book to learn more about the region. “And there wasn’t one,” Burns said. “There is an article here and there, a political mention; it’s in every Alabama history book, but there is no one, good go-to source. In the introduction, I was
Those good things encompass a wealth of artists including Charlie Lucas (“Tin Man”), Jim Bird, whose pasture art turns the heads of travelers along U.S. Highway 43 between Eutaw and Demopolis, and the quilters of Gee’s Bend.

“The Black Belt is the way it is because the people had this artistic impulse and they used what they had to express it,” Burns said. “It is not a cultural vacuum, not a cultural void, and we wanted people to see that.”

Burns said she hopes the book will whet the appetite of tourists to visit the places mentioned and meet the people who call the area home.

“Visions of the Black Belt is divided into eight chapters with places covered in the first half and people in the second half. “There are some people and places that didn’t get in there that I wish had,” Burns said. “That’s always going to be the case because you just don’t have room for everything and everybody.”

Robin McDonald, whose graphic design business is headquartered in Leeds, Alabama, made numerous day trips and a few overnight stays to capture the images he sought. McDonald already had a cache of photographs of the region from his six years of shooting calendars for the Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area. Burns accompanied McDonald on a few trips and helped set up contacts for him for other forays across the region.

“I’ve hardly met anybody in the Black Belt that didn’t know Valerie,” McDonald said. “So she became my base of knowledge about the history of the Black Belt.”

McDonald also tapped into the resources of Linda Vice whose website is Rural Southwest Alabama. “She took me to a lot of places in Clarke County that I wouldn’t have been able to find on my own,” McDonald said. “She took me to the Mt. Nebo Cemetery (Clarke County) where they have those wonderful death masks. But they are not true death masks because they were done while the people were alive.”

McDonald designed the book and said “I guess I kind of put it together as we went along. We were still adding pictures up to the end, really. In fact, at the last minute, when I thought the book was as big as it could be, Black Belt Treasures asked if we could include a few more of their artists.”

McDonald once again grabbed his Nikon, a new one he bought halfway through the project, and made one final road trip through Montgomery to Monroeville and back to Marion Junction to shoot the last four people included in the book.

The book covers a wide range of artists who are sons or daughters of the Black Belt. Writers William Cobb and Tom Franklin, photographer Jerry Siegel, woodturner Jerry Davidson, metal artists Mary and Dannie Pettway, and basket weaver Estelle Jackson are a few of the dozens of artists included.

“One of my very favorite portraits is of Billie Jean Young,” McDonald said when asked to choose a favorite photograph. “She is a writer and does just about everything in the arts.”

Young is associate professor of fine and performing arts and artist-in-residence at Judson College. She was inducted into the Black Belt Hall of Fame in 2014.

McDonald met writer Marlin Barton in Forkland (Greene County) where the author of The Cross Garden grew up. Barton often uses a fictionalized version of the area as the setting for his novels and short stories. “The picture I took of him is on the steps of the house he grew up in,” McDonald said. That photograph is also one of McDonald’s favorites. “It’s one where everything is just right,” he said. “The lighting was perfect, the setting just right.”
Andrew’s is a National Historic Landmark, a crude juice squeezed from tobacco plants. St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Prairieville (Hale County) was built by slaves in 1858, the last of the historic churches such as St. Andrew’s to be built. “I would immediately start to look at the photographs I had taken that day,” he said. “To me, that’s the most fun of all photography.”

Every night as soon as McDonald returned home, he would download the photographs he had taken that day. “I would immediately start to look through them,” he said. “To me, that’s as much fun as taking the pictures. Sometimes the picture you thought was going to be great didn’t work out for some reason. But what’s fun is when something you didn’t think was going to be interesting turns out to be great.

The differences here are what attracted people to the area. “The cost of living is very low in the Black Belt and as Baby Boomers retire they want to move to a place that is affordable,” Burns said. “And they want to get back to the small town they knew as a kid.”

Visions of the Black Belt: A Cultural Survey of the Heart of Alabama

Margaret Clevenger’s work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in the anthology Tuskaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.

(Below) The Mathews Cabin was built by Josiah Allen Mathews in Clarke County in 1830. The log cabin can be seen at the Clarke County Historical Museum.