

The forgotten Freedom Colony: Stunning photos of the tiny east Texas community of Weeping Mary captures the state's rural past through the lives of its residents

- › Weeping Mary is an unincorporated town in rural east Texas with 85 residents, no schools or businesses
- › It was a 'freedom colony' with land from nearby plantations given to former slaves shortly after the Civil War
- › Of the stories Weeping Mary's elders tell about how the hamlet got its name, one tends to stick - a freedwoman named Mary was tricked into selling her land to a wealthy white man and wept when she realized
- › The origin story has inspired a play, movie, children's book and photographer O Rufus Lovett

By [JORDAN GASS-POORE FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#)

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No one knows how Weeping Mary, Texas, got its name. Local folklore has it that there was a freedwoman named Mary who lived there and didn't want to sell her land to a wealthy white man. So, the man in question persuaded a black man to purchase the land for him instead. Mary was tricked and distraught that she wept and wept. She became known as Weeping Mary name sometime after 1866.

The mystery surrounding Weeping Mary's name has inspired a play, a movie, the children's book *Simmering Secrets of Weeping Mary* and a photographer O Rufus Lovett who visited the unincorporated town in rural east Texas in the spring of 1999.



For eight years, Lovett would chronicle the community, which was established as a 'freedom colony' with land from nearby plantations given to former slaves shortly after the Civil War.

Today, Weeping Mary has 85 residents, a few of whom remember the days prior to 1968 when the community didn't have electricity or running water. They've felt the brush of urbanization's hand through indoor plumbing, central air and heat and the widening of lanes into streets. But the community remains closely tied to its history.



Weeping Mary, an unincorporated town in east Texas, was founded as a 'freedom colony' with land from nearby plantations given to former slaves shortly after the Civil War.





For now, at least, local folklore remains with the older folks in Weeping Mary, designated a historic state landmark in 2008

Toward the end of the war in 1865 Texas had about 250,000 slaves in the state, said Brett J Derbes, managing editor of the **Handbook of Texas**. Southern slave holders moved them there because they thought it might be a safer territory, he added



After the war, communities founded by freed slaves became fairly common in the state. Legend has it that there was an agreement made between the area's freed slaves that they would not sell their land to white purchasers – but that ultimately did happen and the details have been lost to history.

Lovett, a Longview, Texas, resident who is a long-time photography instructor at Kilgore College, has heard slightly different versions of the story over the years, and has read that perhaps the community was named for Mary Magdalene's weeping at the tomb of Jesus or after a previous Catholic church called Our Lady of Sorrows.

When Lovett started taking photos in Weeping Mary, getting anyone to share the origin story was difficult because some of the residents seemed suspicious of him, he said. But over a period of time the community's elders told Lovett their 'porch lore' and invited him back for barbecues, family reunions and services at the nearby Weeping Mary Baptist Church.

'I think it was just a matter of my asking and telling the stories,' said Lovett in a syrupy Southern accent. 'They're probably a little sensitive about that. You know, it's been kind of that folklore that's been handed down from one generation to the next.

'And during that time I was an outsider, even though we became pretty good friends, but here's this white guy asking questions about what some consider a sensitive past and so they were a little leery about telling me the story probably because it did deal with some racial issues.'

For now, at least, that lore remains with the older folks in Weeping Mary, designated a historic state landmark in 2008. The moments when the community's elders sat on their porches and told their stories is captured in Lovett's photographs.





The few remaining buildings scattered throughout Weeping Mary have fallen from their former glory and survive in memories conjured up by older residents





No one knows how Weeping Mary got its name, but local folklore has it that Mary was tricked into selling her land to a wealthy white man and became so distraught over this she wept

As the years went by, Lovett said this tradition was slowly being replaced by video games. Though the history of the community can now be found on YouTube, it's the storytelling that brings it alive.

JL Skinner, a deacon at Weeping Mary Baptist Church, has lived his life surrounded by the ghosts of his childhood. This patch of earth is where his life began, on the floor of his family home. There are the river birch trees he and his siblings played in and other toys.



'A lot of stuff we played with we tried to make,' said 64-year-old Skinner. 'We'd jump rope Hoppiescotch and shoot washers.'

But there are no longer enough children for these activities to continue and people's tastes have changed, Skinner said. His own children no longer live in Weeping Mary, though four aunts and an uncle remain. Over time, a lion's share of the original houses in Weeping Mary have been demolished and not replaced.

'If somebody gonna get a house built we all help. It ain't like that now. All the older peoples have died and the younger peoples with different attitudes,' Skinner said.

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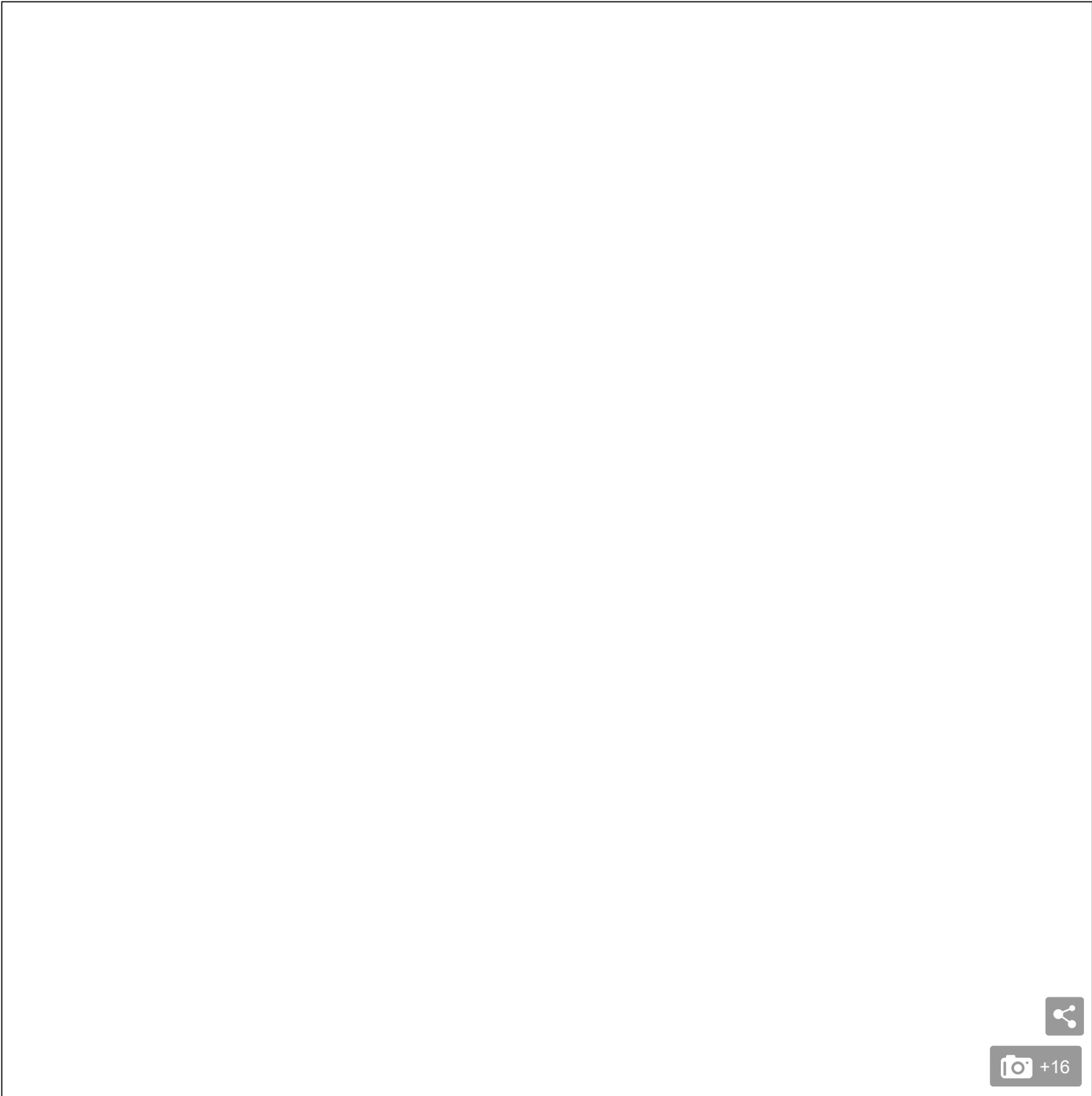
For a time, life in Weeping Mary was simple but tough, Skinner remembered. They 'were just low-country' folk that embodied the aphorism it takes a village to raise a child. His grandmother, the community's midwife, would delegate chores to him, such as picking berries, drawing water from the well and chopping wood. The callouses on his hands are all that remain of this time. The well is gone, his childhood friends are gone and wanderlust has never gotten to him.

'It's just a comfortable place,' said Skinner. 'Before I got out of school I got married and settled down until '85, then I bought the old McDonald place, where I live now. I ain't goin' nowhere; I'm still alive.'

The few remaining buildings scattered throughout Weeping Mary have fallen from their former glory and survive in memories conjured up by older residents. There's the Weeping Mary Baptist Church – what is believed to be the first establishment built in the community sometime before 1896. The church also once served as the local public school, which was common in post-Civil War freedom colonies.

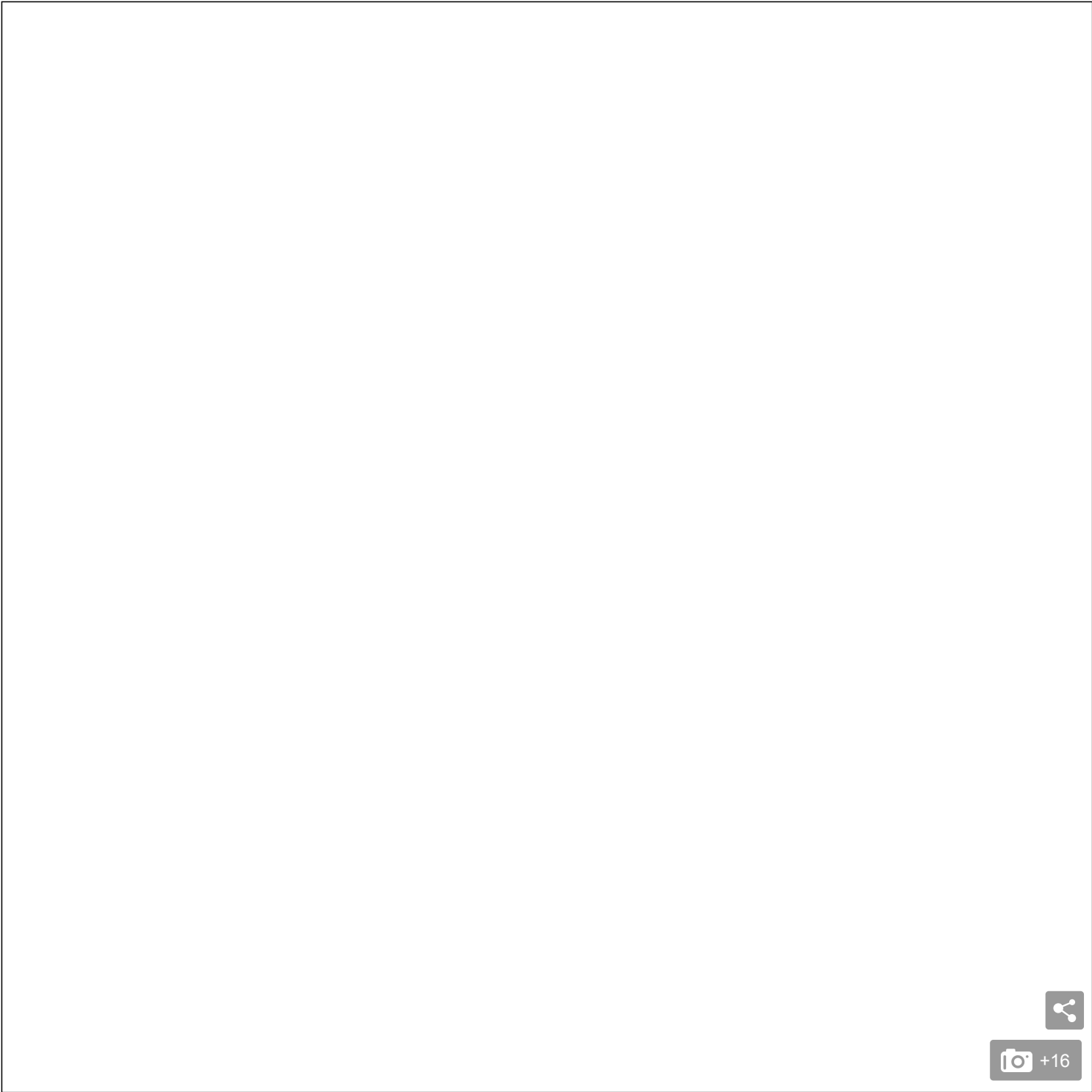
Residents who attended the one-room school at Weeping Mary Baptist Church in the 1930s and early 1940s recalled how difficult the teachers were and 'the terrible cold walk to school' since they did not have buses, according to the Dallas Morning-News. Instead, the teacher would walk from house-to-house to gather their 40 students and they would walk to school together.





The moments when the community's elders sat on their porches and told their stories is captured in Lovett's photographs





As the years went by, Lovett said the community's oral storytelling tradition was slowly being replaced with technology

The school portion of the church closed in the early 1940s when Booker T Washington School was built in Alto, Texas – the largest town nearby with a population of 1,208 – and a few other nearby communities in Cherokee County were bussed there and still are.

The one-story church with a small steeple, however, remains open. A handmade banner hangs over the pulpit that reads: 'The Legacy of Slavery' as a reminder of the community's legacy of slavery. Near the church is a cemetery that has unmarked graves of slaves and former slaves.

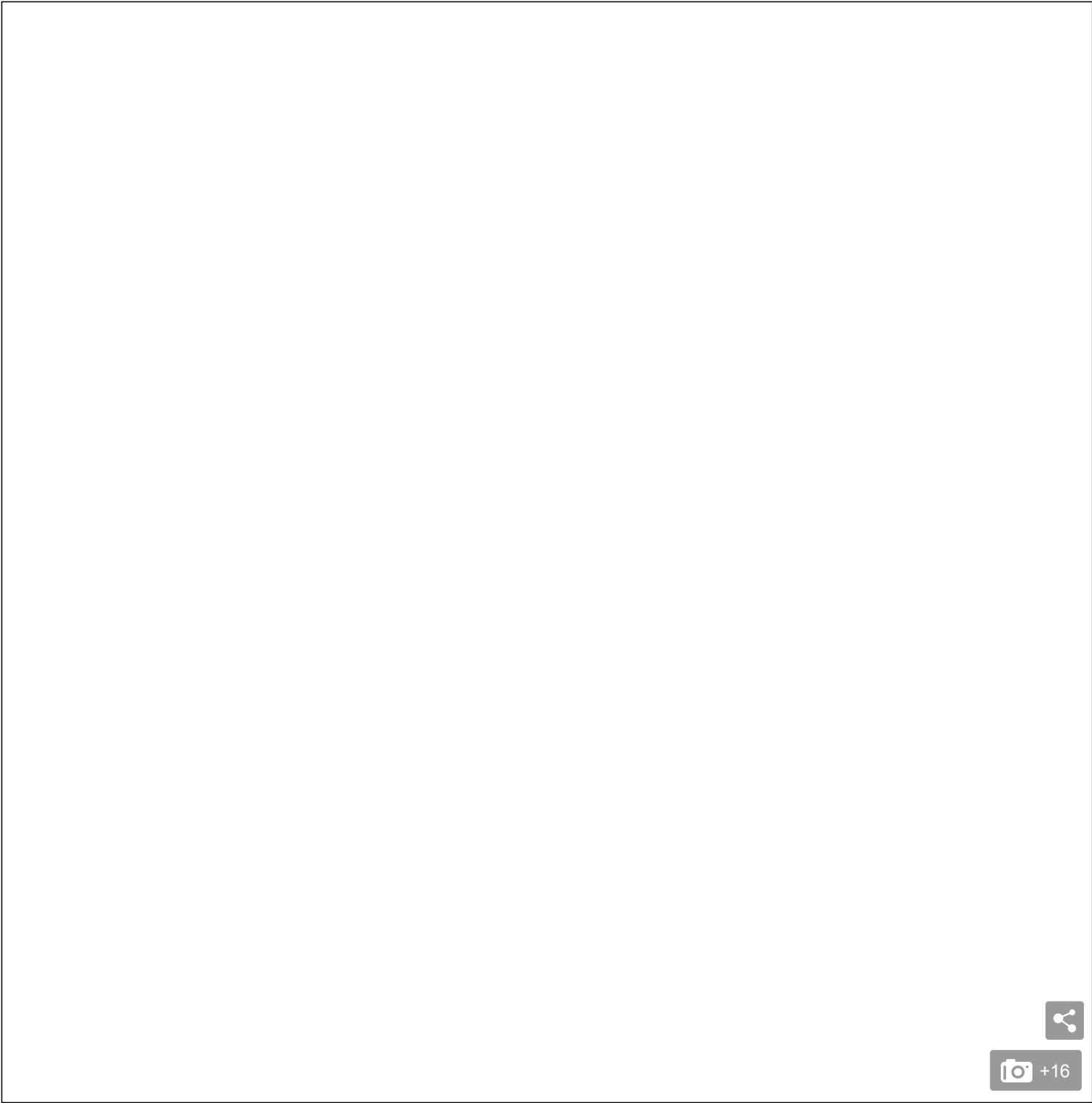


After the Civil War slaves gained their US citizenship and many of them shifted into sharecropping. They worked land they didn't own and were paid fairly low wages. One Weeping Mary resident recalled being paid either five or 10 cents an hour and no more than 50 cents per day for their work in the cotton fields, according to the Dallas Morning-News. Despite that 'terrible atrocity', some of these families were able to raise enough money to buy small plots of land over time, Derbes said.

As with most communities founded by freedpersons, the majority of Weeping Mary residents were farmers. Many worked on neighboring farms and others later worked at the nearby Indian Mound Nursery, operated by the Texas Forest Service. It remained a largely agricultural community up until recently.



Lovett's photos of the community are perhaps the most definitive work of the University of Texas Press



Lovett's interpretations encapsulate lost moments of this community hidden behind the east Texas Pine Curtain

The area was once predominated by miles of sugarcane, cotton and peanut fields. Today, cattle raising and logging continues, as more than half of Cherokee County is forest. Many people spend their time reading and discussing the Bible on their porches at the Weeping Baptist Church.

'It's a deeply religious community. It's a tightly-knit community with many community events,' said Derbes, who has not been to Weeping Baptist Church.

'They still know their neighbors, which is more than I think you can find in other areas. People live tightly compacted but don't even know each other. So



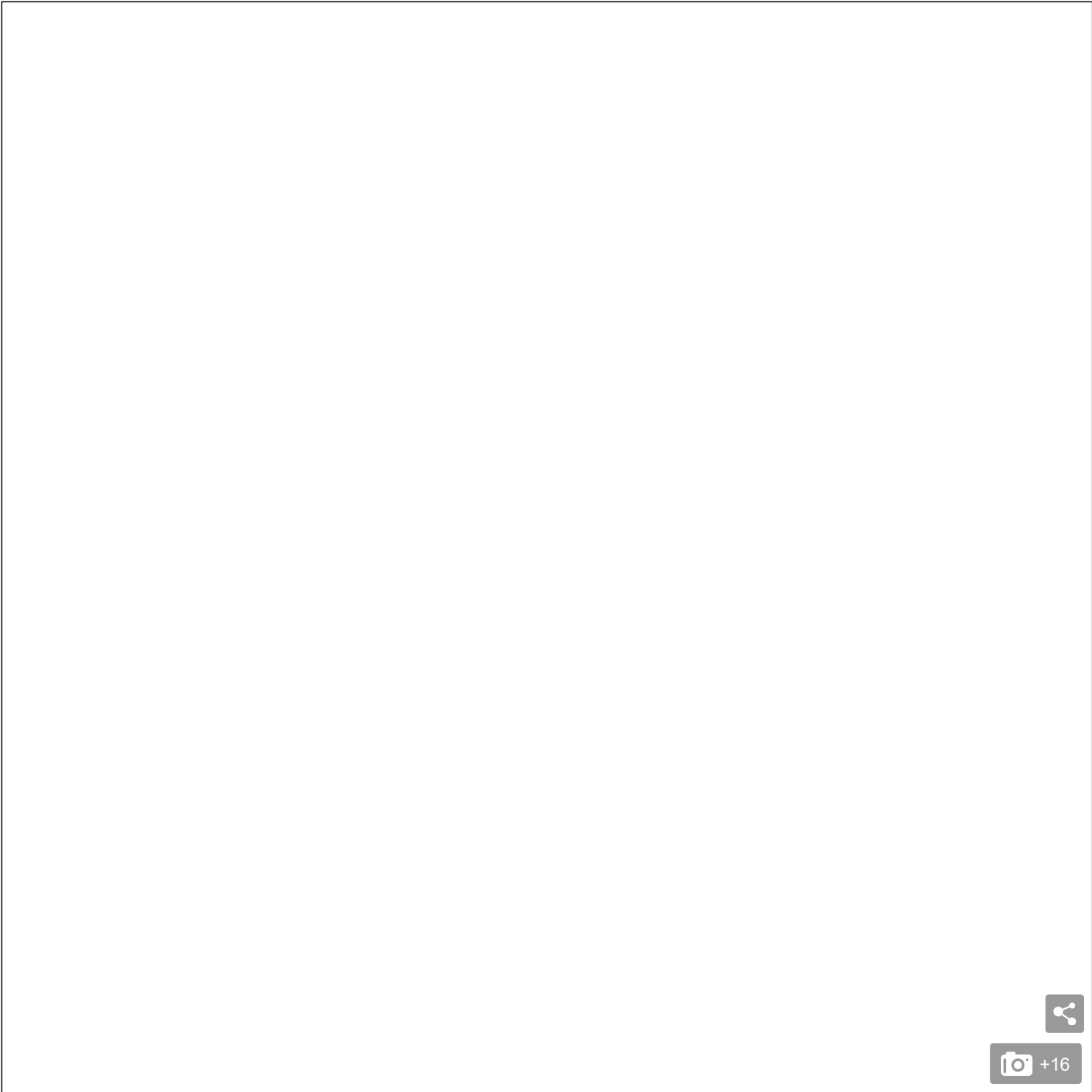
small east Texas town.'

Lovett's photos of the community are perhaps the most definitive work of his career. They are compiled in a 2006 book by the University of Texas Press. His interpretations encapsulate lost moments of this community hidden behind the east Texas Pine Curtain. His photos lie in boxes, hang on walls in his home gallery and are scattered in collections throughout the country. Much like some of the prints, Lovett's memories of his last visit to Weeping Memory have faded but remain present in his life.



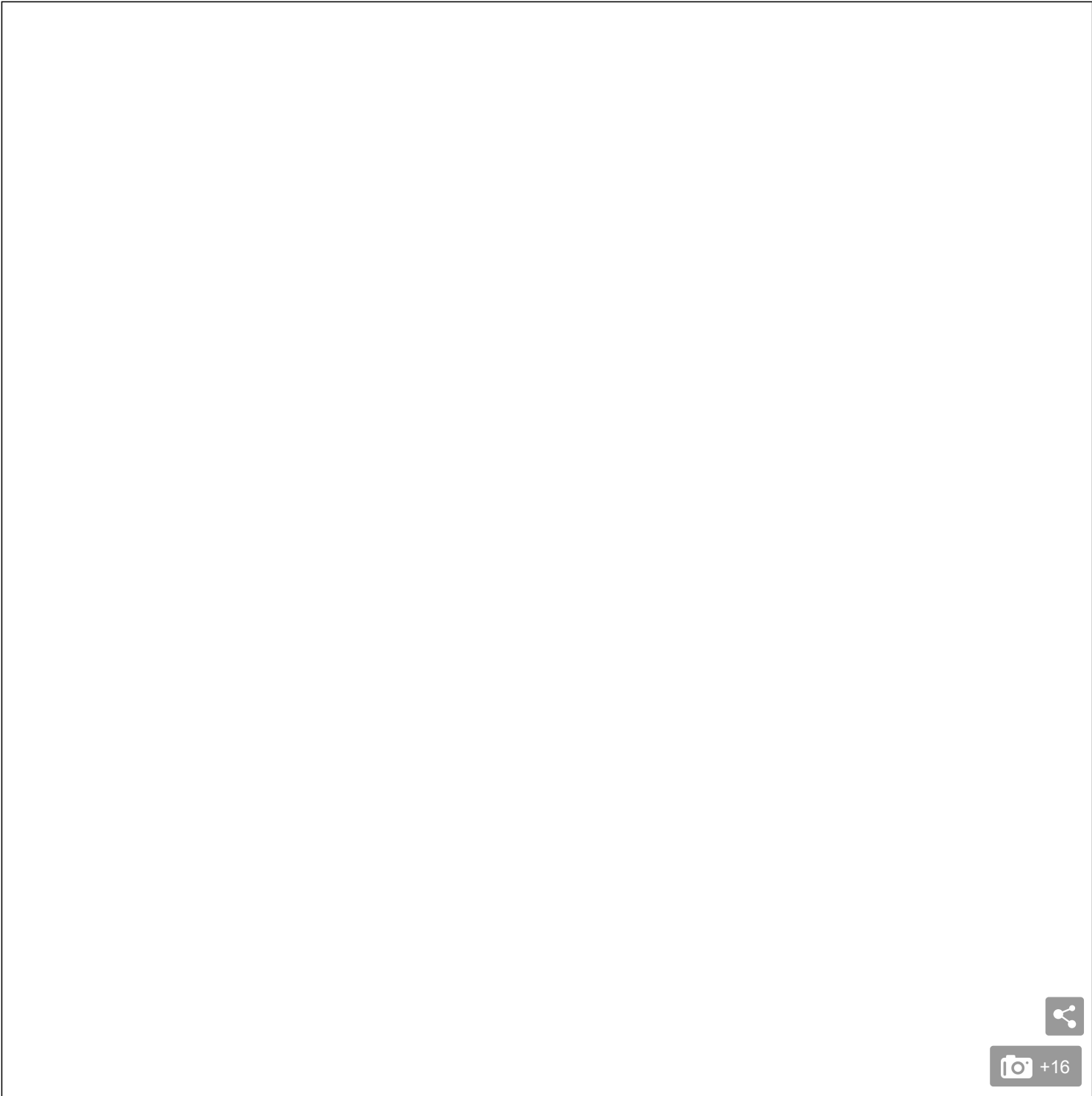
Some of the children Lovett photographed went on to graduate from college and have children of their own





It's been 23 years since Lovett became attached to Weeping Mary, and he still finds himself reflecting on his time there





It was difficult at times for residents to understand the beauty an outsider like Lovett might see within Weeping Mary, he said

The 65 year old said he has heard that some of the children he photographed went on to graduate from college, work for the highway department or raise children of their own. Other homes have been destroyed and built. It's been 23 years since Lovett became a resident. Now he finds himself reflecting on his time there.

It was difficult at times for residents to understand the beauty and history of Weeping Mary, he said.

'There's not a lot of opportunities to work there in Weeping Mary, some of them as far as Lufkin or Crockett, there's p



jobs,' Derbes said.

The pot-holed streets in Weeping Mary have no curbs or gutters. There are no schools, cemeteries or businesses. A makeshift all-purpose repair shop called the Oil Pit closed about two years ago when its owner, Cherry Jenkins, died, said Skinner, who used to work with him as a part-time mechanic and lived in a mobile home across from him.

A lack of jobs may be the reason why Weeping Mary only has 85 people, many of whom are descendants of the community's founders. Lovett remembered introducing himself to Jenkins to see if he wouldn't mind introducing him to residents because he wanted to photograph them.



There are no schools or cemeteries in Weeping Mary. Except for the Oil I



A lack of jobs may be the reason why Weeping Mary only has 85 people, many of whom are descendants of the community's founders





The residents have had mixed reactions to press about Weeping Mary because of the community's history of slavery





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One of the boys featured in Lovett's photo series expressed to Lovett his disinterest in the photo of him jumping into a backyard pool in his underpants because he was teased in school

Lovett made a few visits to Weeping Mary before he started taking photos. With his camera on the front seat, Lovett would drive the 95-miles down Texas Highway 21 to Weeping Mary bridge that spans a creek shaded by tall oaks.

'I wasn't going to invade them with cameras without getting to know them. The Daily Sentinel was interested in some of the early photographs and I did a "Weeping Mary", kind of a picture page to begin with and then later on they did have a reason for being there, an excuse if you will.'

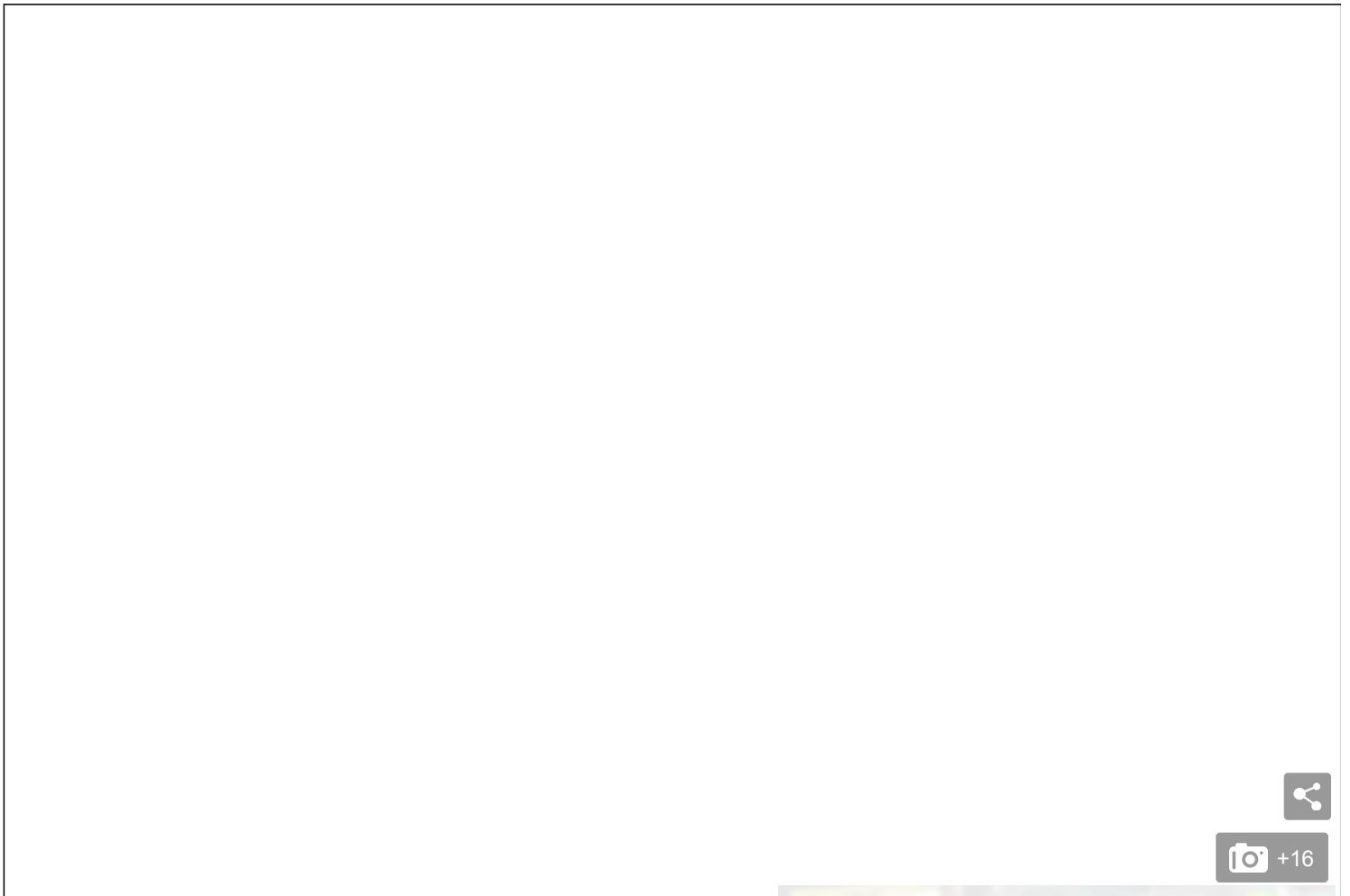


When 'The Children of Weeping Mary' was published in 1995 in The Daily Sentinel, the teacher of one of the boys featured in the series showed the article to the class. There was a photo of him jumping into a backyard pool in his underpants. The teasing he endured at school stayed with him as he grew older and he expressed to Lovett his disinterest in the photo.

'Those guys are grown men now and I've seen them since and I think they're okay with it because they became football players and they could have definitely done me some harm if they wanted to. They're nice guys,' he said.

The residents have had mixed reactions to press about Weeping Mary because of the community's history of slavery, Lovett said. Two sisters who were born into slavery, Nancy Ross Lockhart and Emily Ross Skinner, purchased the land on which Weeping Mary was developed, according to Texas Escapes. They later sold home sites to the families who live there now.

'They're kind of sensitive about people's reactions and their past and that sort of thing since they're descendants of former slaves, perhaps,' he said. 'They don't want to just be considered lower-class individuals, which they're not; they're just regular working folks.'



Photographer O Rufus Lovett photographed the residents of Weeping Mary

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