

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1912 on a farm in Fort Scott, Kansas, Gordon Parks was an iconic African American photographer in the mid-20th century. His works covered a variety of subjects from fashion to poverty, but his most important productions were centered around the American Civil Right movement. A versatile artist, Parks also wrote poems, novels, and even screenplays. One of his novels, *The Learning Tree*, Parks adapted into a film that he directed.

At 25, Parks took an interest in photography. He was quickly identified as a rising star by the wife of heavy weight boxing champion Joe Louis and kick-started his career with that endorsement. Shortly thereafter, he began to specialize in fashion and portrait work of important people. His techniques at the time were groundbreaking, and he was known to experiment. Barbara Streisand once called him "the most provocative and celebrated photojournalist in the United States." It is doubtless that his art was all the more important because he was working for big name magazines like Vogue at a time when racial divides were still prominent in American society.

Parks' work was incredibly impactful because of his ethnicity, talent, and the time period in which the majority of his work was produced. He had access to parts of American culture that Caucasians who were the primary producers of high-profile works at the time did not have. He was also able to see scenes of poverty with the eyes of one who had direct experience with it, and that enabled him to get to the heart of the matter and affected all who viewed his work in its proper context. For his efforts, Parks was celebrated even in his own time and received a plethora of awards including an honorary doctorate of Kansas State University.

### Sources:

"Biography." *The Gordon Parks Foundation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 May 2014. <<http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/biography/>>.

"Gordon Parks Festival Scheduled at K-State University Nov. 4-11." *The Fort Scott Tribune* 18 Oct. 1973, 324th ed.: n. pag. Print.

Contributors: Sadie Manley, Alina Shcherbatykh, Justin Phemister

## BEHIND THE SCENES: THE LEARNING TREE

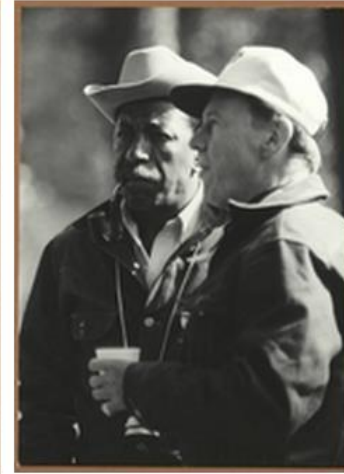


Newt and his mother Sarah discuss living in Cherokee Flats (pgs. 35-36): **Sarah** - "I hope you won't have to stay here all your life, Newt. It ain't a all-good place and it ain't a all-bad place. But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else. Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad - just like the fruit on a tree. You know that, don't you boy?"

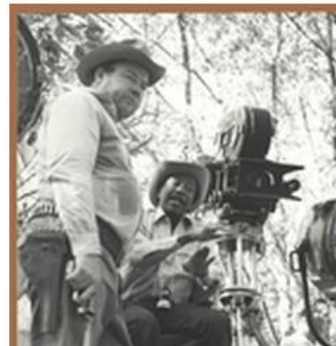
**Newt** - "Yessem." **Sarah** - "Well, if you learn to profit from the good and bad these people do to each other, you'll learn a lot 'bout life. And you'll be a better man for that learnin' someday. Understand?" **Newt** - "Yessem." **Sarah** - "No matter if you go or stay,



A photograph of Gordon Parks on the set of *The Learning Tree*



Gordon Parks smokes a pipe while on location for his 1969 film, *The Learning Tree*.



Gordon Parks on location at the funeral.

## Part 2, Behind the Scenes: The Learning Tree Page

think of Cherokee Flats like that till the day you die - let it be your learnin' tree."

The following photographs were taken on the set of Parks' film, *The Learning Tree*. Parks wrote and directed the film, which was adapted from his 1964 semi-autobiographical novel. Both the film and the novel were set near Fort Scott, Kansas, where Parks grew up. Much of the film was shot on location in Fort Scott. It was released in 1969, becoming the first Hollywood studio film directed by an African American.



Gordon Parks gives direction to actor Dana Elcar on the set of the 1969 film, *The Learning Tree*.

Gordon Parks on location at the funeral scene of the 1969 film, *The Learning Tree*.

*The Learning Tree* is a movie adaptation of a novel by Gordon Parks using the same title. Set in 1920s Kansas, it is focused around a year in the life of Newt Winger. We see Newt Winger, a young black teenager, go through life in a small town. Within the year, he experiences sex, love, segregation, sadness, and death. After witnessing a crime by a black man against a white man, Newt decides to tell the truth; causing thanks and hate amongst the town. Newt is shoved into adulthood because of the events that happened in the year and learn many valuable life lessons. The story explains many of the very universal struggles that most African-Americans went through during the time before the major Civil Rights Movement. The book took place in Cherokee Flats, which is a fictional southeastern Kansas town. In keeping with the setting, Parks chose to film near Fort Scott, KS. This semi-autobiography of Parks' life was well received by most critics in the movie industry and boosted Parks' directing career. Its success in the film industry also led the way for many more movies by black directors.

### Sources:

The Gordon Parks Papers. Richard L.D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University.

"The Learning Tree (1969) - Full Synopsis - TCM.com." Turner Classic Movies. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.

"Gordon Parks." IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.

"The Learning Tree (1969) - Full Credits - TCM.com." Turner Classic Movies. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Apr. 2014.

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Filming of *The Learning Tree* Photograph Collection. Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections, Hale Library, Kansas State University.

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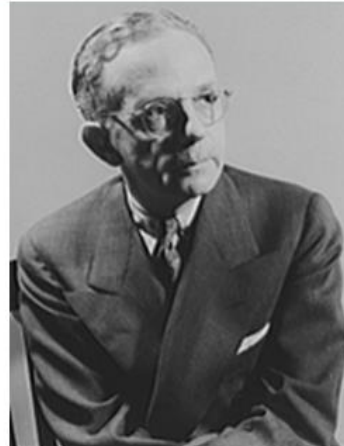
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## PARKS WORK



Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. addressing the citizens' committee mass meeting, Washington, D.C.



Walter Francis White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.



Inter-racial activities at Camp Christmas Seals, where children are aided by the Methodist camp service. Camp buddies.



Sonny Greer, drummer for Duke Ellington in New York City.

**"The subject matter is so much more important than the photographer." - Gordon Parks**

## Part 2, Parks Work Page



Rex Stewart,  
trumpeter  
with Duke  
Ellington's  
orchestra, at  
the  
Hurricane  
cabaret in  
New York  
City.



Ray Nance, trumpet player and violinist of  
Duke Ellington's orchestra, at the  
Hurricane Ballroom in New York City.



Paul  
Robeson,  
American  
actor,  
athlete,  
bass-  
baritone  
concert  
singer,  
writer, civil  
rights  
activist,  
Spingarn  
Medal  
winner, and  
Stalin peace  
prize  
laureate.



Marian Anderson broadcasting a Negro  
spiritual at the dedication of a mural  
installed in the United States Department  
of the Interior building, commemorating  
the outdoor concert which she gave at the  
Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of  
the American Revolution refused to allow  
her to sing in Constitution Hall.



Lawrence Brown, trombonist with Duke Ellington's orchestra in New York City.



Juan Tizol, a valve trombone player of Duke Ellington's orchestra at the Hurricane cabaret in New York City.



Portrait of a government cleaning lady named Ella Watson.



Photograph of Duke Ellington at the Hurricane Club in New York City.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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## RESOURCES

More of Gordon Parks' work is available online at these locations:

- [Other works of Gordon Parks](#)
- [The Gordon Parks Foundation](#)
- [Wikimedia Commons](#)
- [The Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art](#)
- [Google Cultural Institute](#)

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## ABOUT

**“There’s another horizon out there, one more horizon that you have to make for yourself and let other people discover it, and someone else will take it further on, you know.” – Gordon Parks**

Gordon Parks is a prominent figure in the photography community. His work focused especially on social justice and civil rights before, during, and after the height of the moment. Photography proved to be an effective way for Parks to shed light on an issue he and much of the country viewed as an ongoing problem. But photography wasn’t his only specialty - Parks also published multiple books including 1964’s semi-autobiographical *The Learning Tree*, and went on to direct 1969’s movie adaptation of the novel. The book and movie’s protagonist spends much of his time in rural Kansas, furthering Parks’ particular relevance to Kansas State University and home via his social commentary on the prejudices he himself was witness to. Having lived in the very time he was writing about, his autobiographical works can serve as primary historical sources. His birthplace and work settings make him a very relevant character in Kansas history and worthy of our particular study and work. Parks’ work is not only prominent in Kansas, however, but is also celebrated throughout the world. Recently, his work has been seen in exhibitions as far away as Moscow and Rome (“Exhibitions”). Digitally, some of his photography has been preserved by The Gordon Parks Foundation. However, because their mission focused on funding exhibitions and books about his work, their digital collection is far from extensive. Their archive includes only his photographs and offers very little metadata about his pieces. In addition, a collection of his photographs that appeared in Life magazine in 1948, which were originally exhibited at the New Orleans Museum of Art, is now digitally preserved by the Google Cultural Institute.

This collection provides more background information on Parks and his work than does The Gordon Parks Foundation archive; however, it is still greatly limited in its scope. Our prototype Gordon Parks Collection provides select Gordon Parks’ photography, as well as photographs from the set of his film, *The Learning Tree*, and our vision for the future is that this resource will offer the public a cohesive center for Parks’ photography (and eventually his literary works). The project in its ideal form will represent his work in a photographic timeline, but due to

technological issues that cannot be achieved at this time.

The photos we have provided are complete with scholarly notes and metadata provided by students studying Parks and his work at Kansas State University. The future of Parks scholarship is bright, and we hope that this burgeoning resource will enable researchers to visualize the larger scope of Parks' work and allow for other voices to collaboratively fill in gaps and contribute. We hope to represent the currently fragmented works of Parks in a digital, unified form and begin to foster a collaborative compilation of his life's work.

### **Editorial Statement:**

The works that we are presenting are just a sample of the available work, chosen by means of most abundant available metadata. We chose to present the photos with caption descriptions generated from our original sources. We organized the photos by source, and each source has more work available for future additions.

### **Sources:**

"Exhibitions." The Gordon Parks Foundation, The Gordon Parks Foundation, n.d. Web. 15 April 2014.

The Gordon Parks Foundation and New Orleans Museum of Art. "Gordon Parks and 'Harlem Gang Leader.'" Google Cultural Institute, Google, n.d. Web. 15 April 2014.

"The Gordon Parks Foundation." Biography. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.

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