

By the Kansas Historical Society

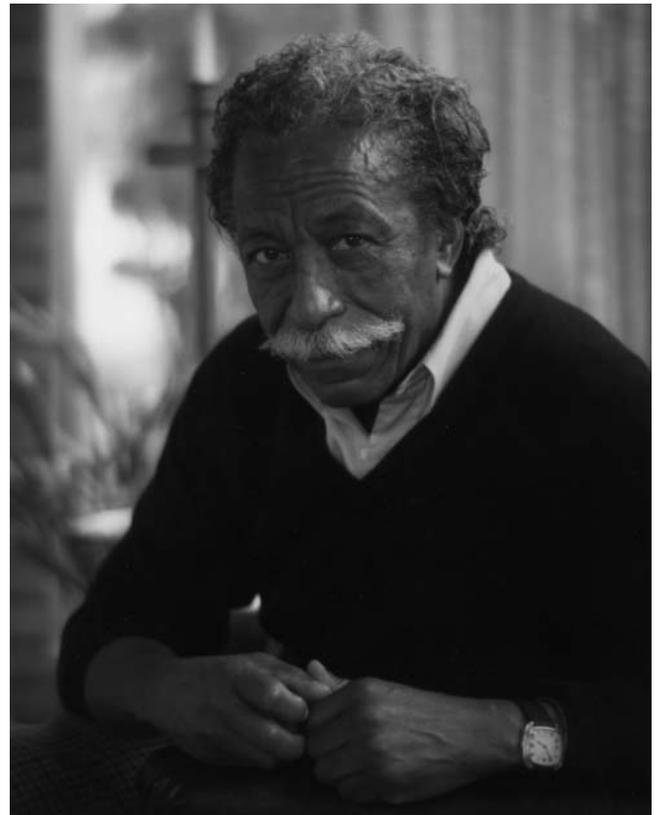
Gordon Parks: A Kansas Original

Many writers draw on personal experiences and familiar locations to set their novel, short story, play, or poem. Kansan Gordon Parks is among these types of writers. He wrote three autobiographical novels during his lifetime. The most famous of these was his first, *The Learning Tree*. In his novel the town is called Cherokee Flats, but it is based on Fort Scott, Kansas, in the 1920s and 1930s. Parks shared his experiences of growing up with the violence and fear of being black and poor in a predominantly white town.

Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks was born in Fort Scott in 1912. He was the youngest of the 15 children of Andrew Jackson and Sarah Ross Parks. When he was 15, Parks's mother died and his father sent him to live with a sister in Minnesota. Parks did a number of odd jobs including being a piano player and singer. In the Great Depression he worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, a government program that gave unemployed men jobs such as planting trees to prevent soil erosion. He also toured as a semi-professional basketball player, worked as a busboy, and later as a waiter and porter on a train. Jim Crow laws, which enforced segregation, affected all of his experiences.

It was during a stopover in Seattle while working on the train that Parks bought his first camera. Later he wrote:

I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, and poverty. I could have just as easily picked up a knife or a gun, like many of my childhood friends did... most of whom were murdered or put in prison... but I chose not to go that way. I felt that I could somehow subdue these evils by doing something beautiful that people recognize me by, and thus make a whole different life for myself, which has proved to be so.



Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks grew up in a time of racism and discrimination in America. In 1942 the Farm Security Administration hired him as a photographer. Other famous photographers who worked for the FSA were Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Walker Evans. They photographed Americans caught in the desperate conditions of homelessness and despair during the Great Depression. Parks chose to photograph the racism and injustice of Washington, D.C. Later Parks would become the first African American photographer for *Life* magazine where he traveled around the world shooting photo essays.

Gordon Parks would break many racial barriers in his lifetime. He was Hollywood's first major black director. He not only directed his autobiographical novel *The Learning Tree* but also composed the film's musical score and wrote the screenplay.

Parks wrote many novels, books of poetry, directed other films, and produced records of his own music. He also created a ballet about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Parks donated his materials to the Library of Congress because he "wanted it all stored under one roof and a roof that I [Parks] could respect."

Parks lived most of his life in New York City. However, towards the end of his life he came to terms with his childhood experiences in Fort Scott. He wrote:

In Kansas, always my touchstone, there had been infinitely beautiful things to celebrate—golden twilights, dawns, rivers aglow in the sunlight, moons climbing over Poppa's barns, orange autumns, trees bending under storms and silent snow. But marring that beauty was the graveyard where, even in death, whites lay rigidly apart from blacks.

I looked back to the heaven and hell of Kansas and asked some questions. My memories gave me some straight talk. "The important thing," they said, "is not so much what you suffered—or didn't suffer—but how you put that learning to use."

In 2004 the Gordon Parks Center for Culture and Diversity opened on the Fort Scott Community College campus. Parks died at the age of 93 in 2006 and is buried in Fort Scott.



Gordon Parks Center for Culture and Diversity, Fort Scott

