

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gordon Parks

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks,
Dates:	March 12, 2001
Bulk Dates:	2001
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:57).
Abstract:	Fiction writer, film director, and photographer Gordon Parks (1912 - 2006) worked for Life and Vogue magazines, traveling around the world to photograph varied issues such as the fashion industry, poverty in Brazil, the Nation of Islam, gang violence, and eventually celebrity portraits. Branching out from his photography in 1963, Parks directed his first film, 'The Learning Tree', based on his autobiographical novel of the same name. Parks went on to direct many films, including 'Shaft.' Parks has also composed music and written several books including 'A Choice of Weapons.' Parks was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 12, 2001, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_054
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

A versatile and prolific artist, Gordon Parks, Sr., warrants his status as a cultural icon. The poet, novelist, film director, and preeminent documentary and fashion photographer was born on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas, the youngest of fifteen children. Parks saw no reason to stay in Kansas after the death of his mother and moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, at age sixteen to live with his sister. After a disagreement with his brother-in-law, Parks soon found himself homeless, supporting himself by playing piano and basketball and working as a busboy.

While working on a train as a waiter, Parks noticed a magazine with photographs from the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The photos by such documentary photographers as Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein led him to Richard Wright's 12 Million Black Voices, other photo essays about poverty and racism, and the social and artistic voice he had been seeking. Parks bought a used camera in 1938, deciding on a career in photography. In 1941, Parks received a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation to work with Roy Stryker at the photography section of the FSA. In Washington, D.C., he trained as a photojournalist. He would work with Stryker for the next few years, producing work and honing the modernist and individualistic style he became known for by photographing small towns and industrial centers throughout America.

By the end of the 1940s, Parks was working with Life and Vogue and in that capacity did some of his most famous work. Traveling the globe and covering issues as varied as the fashion industry, poverty in Brazil, the Nation of Islam, gang violence, and eventually celebrity portraits, Parks continued to develop and create new ways to convey meaning through his work.

Branching out from his photography in 1963, Parks directed his first film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his autobiographical novel of the same name. Parks went on to direct many films, including *Shaft* in 1971. In addition to film, Parks composed music and written several books including: *A Choice of Weapons* (1966), *To Smile in Autumn* (1979), *Voices in the Mirror* (1990), *Arias of Silence* (1994), and a retrospective of his life and work titled *Half Past Autumn* (1997), which was recently made into an HBO special.

Parks passed away on March 7, 2006 at the age of 93.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Gordon Parks was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 12, 2001, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer, film director, and photographer Gordon Parks (1912 - 2006) worked for *Life* and *Vogue* magazines, traveling around the world to photograph varied issues such as the fashion industry, poverty in Brazil, the Nation of Islam, gang violence, and eventually celebrity portraits. Branching out from his photography in 1963, Parks directed his first film, *'The Learning Tree'*, based on his autobiographical novel of the same name. Parks went on to direct many films, including *'Shaft.'* Parks has also composed music and written several books including *'A Choice of Weapons.'*

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Parks, Gordon, 1912-2006--Interviews

African American photographers--Interviews

African American artists--Interviews

Authors and publishers--United States--Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

Fort Scott (Kan.)--Race relations

Segregation in education--Kansas--Fort Scott

Homelessness--Minnesota

African American pianists--Interviews

House of David

Julius Rosenwald Fund

United States. Farm Security Administration

African Americans--Pictorial works

Stryker, Roy Emerson, 1893-1975

World history, Modern--20th century--Pictorial works

Blaxploitation films--United States

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Photographer

Filmmaker

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, March 12, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, Section A2001_054_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Artist Gordon Parks explains how he wrote 'The Learning Tree' and retells the true stories which inspired the book. He shares memories of his mother and his father. Parks also describes his childhood home and the racial relations in 1920s Fort Scott, Kansas, including stories of segregated schools, white friends, and his mother taking care of a white neighborhood boy.

African American photographers--Interviews.

African American artists--Interviews.

Authors and publishers--United States--Interviews.

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.

Fort Scott (Kan.)--Race relations.

Segregation in education--Kansas--Fort Scott.

Homelessness--Minnesota.

African American pianists--Interviews.

House of David.

Julius Rosenwald Fund.

United States. Farm Security Administration.

Stryker, Roy Emerson, 1893-1975.

World history, Modern--20th century.

Blaxploitation films--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, Section A2001_054_001_002, TRT: 0:30:12 ?

Artist Gordon Parks recalls the experience of his mother's death and subsequently moving to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1927. He discusses his homelessness, his playing piano in pool halls and his playing with the House of David Basketball Team while in St. Paul. He discusses his friends and meeting his future wife, Sally Alvis. Finally, he talks about playing piano for a traveling orchestra, his musical inspirations and his arrival in Harlem, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, Section A2001_054_001_003, TRT: 0:27:02 ?

Artist Gordon Parks discusses the purchase of his first camera and his first roll of film. Parks discusses winning the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1962 and, subsequently, working with the Farm Security Administration. He discusses his mentor, Roy Stryker, and learning that he could use his camera as a weapon. Furthermore, Parks details how he composed his famous 'American Gothic' photograph. Finally, he briefly mentions playing against the Harlem Globetrotters with the House of David basketball team and his experience with gypsies.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, Section A2001_054_001_004, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Artist Gordon Parks discusses his 23-year career with Life magazine, beginning in 1948, with stories of Paris, violence and danger. He also discusses the composition of his first piano concerto. Finally, Parks discusses how he came to write the screenplay for, produce, and direct the film, The Learning Tree.

Video Oral History Interview with Gordon Parks, Section A2001_054_001_005, TRT: 0:28:03 ?

Artist Gordon Parks discusses the making of and the success of the Blaxploitation film, Shaft. He also discusses his retrospective project, Half Past Autumn. Additionally, he explains that everything should be filled with poetry -- whether it is photography, music, or film. Finally, Gordon Parks considers his legacy, reads from Half Past Autumn and shares a multitude of personal photographs.