

# Gordon Parks

Photographer, film maker, writer, composer

Gordon Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, on November 30, 1912, to Sarah and Andrew Jackson Parks. Gordon wrote, "Poppa was a dirt farmer who farmed mostly dirt, but he kept us alive and taught us about love and devotion." The youngest of 15 children, he attended local schools and left Fort Scott at sixteen after his beloved mother died.

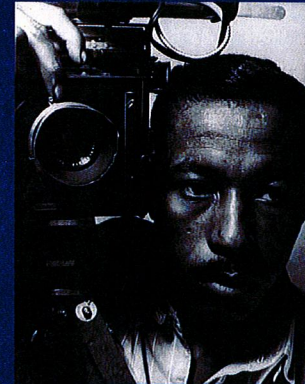
His mother's final wish for him was that he be sent to live with a sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. She knew that there, far away from the poverty and racial bigotry he had endured, he would find the inspiration their small dirt farm never provided. After a disagreement with his sister's husband, and in the brutal cold of a Minnesota winter, Gordon found himself homeless and struggling to survive by various means, including playing a piano in a brothel, mopping floors and washing store windows. He tried to finish high school in Minnesota twice.

Later while working as a waiter on a transcontinental train, he was struck by photographs in a magazine and bought his first camera, a Voigtlander Brilliant, for \$12.50 at a pawnshop. He started working in fashion and his photographs caught the eye of Marva Louis, the elegant wife of heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis. She encouraged Parks to move to Chicago in 1940, where he began a portrait business and specialized in photographs of society women.

After receiving the first fellowship in photography from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation in 1941, Gordon chose to work with Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C. It was at the FSA that Gordon took his first professional photograph, "American Gothic." This memorable photograph of charwoman Ella Watson standing before the American flag holding a mop and broom became his signature image.



Parks' American Gothic, Washington D.C.

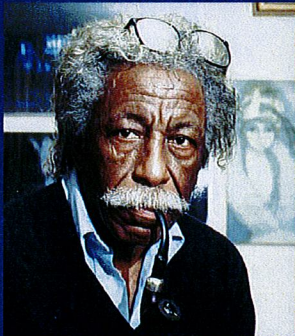


A young Gordon Parks with his camera



## Gordon Parks Museum

More can be learned about this renowned artist at the Gordon Parks Museum in the Fine Arts Center of Fort Scott Community College (2108 S. Horton Street). Part of the college's Gordon Parks Center for Culture and Diversity, the Museum celebrates the life and works of the famous photographer, filmmaker, writer, poet, and musician, while teaching about artistic creativity and cultural awareness. The centerpiece of the museum is the Gordon Parks Collection, began when Parks gave the Center some of his photos, including iconic works such as *American Gothic*, *Tuskegee Airmen*, and *Ali Sweating*. After his death in 2006, additional personal effects and memorabilia were passed on, including his film camera, a tripod, and writing desk. The collection includes the largest collection of his signed work outside the Library of Congress and helps preserve and protect his legacy.



Parks in the Director's Chair

When the FSA closed in 1943, Parks became a freelance photographer, balancing work for fashion magazines with his passion for documenting humanitarian issues. His 1948 photo essay on the life of a Harlem gang leader won him widespread acclaim and a position as the first African-American staff photographer and writer for LIFE Magazine, then by far the most prominent photojournalist publication in the world. Parks would remain at LIFE Magazine for two decades, chronicling subjects related to racism and poverty, as well as taking memorable pictures of celebrities and politicians.

His talents also led him to filmmaking, writing, music and poetry. He was the first African-American to direct a film for a major studio, Warner Brothers. Based on his biographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, Parks penned the screenplay

and composed the musical score, along with producing and directing the film. That, his first full-length film, was shot in Fort Scott, and is based on his childhood there. More films were to follow, including *Shaft*, *Leadbelly* and others.

Also to his credit is a piano concerto, a symphony for orchestra, a ballet honoring Martin Luther King and twenty-three books. He received the National Medal of Arts from President Reagan in 1988. Parks spent much of the last three decades of his life expanding his style and conducting experiments with color photography. He continued to work up until his death in 2006. He received over 50 honorary doctorates in his lifetime--a testament to living a life of overcoming barriers and achieving outstanding success both artistically and professionally.

