



## KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

### Gordon Parks (1912-2006)

Gordon Parks was born the youngest of 15 children to an impoverished black family in Fort Scott, Kan. The segregated town offered little opportunity to the family, and following his mother's death, Parks left Kansas for St. Paul, Minn., at age 16. He tried to live with his sister and brother-in-law, but the two males did not get along, and Parks was soon on his own.



To make ends meet, Parks worked a variety of jobs including piano player, basketball player and busboy. While working on a train as a waiter, a magazine spread on the Farm-land Security Administration (FSA) inspired Parks to find his own voice. He searched through other photo essays and documentaries for additional insight into his new artistic vision. In 1938, he spent \$12.50 on a camera from a pawnshop and began his distinguished career.

In one month's time, Parks showed his first exhibit and caught the eye of Marva Louis, boxer Joe Louis' wife. She convinced Parks to move to Chicago, where he began taking portraits of society women and developing his talent in fashion photography. Parks soon won a photography fellowship from the FSA for an exhibit on Chicago's south side ghetto. Parks moved to Washington, D.C. and photographed Ella Watson, a member of the cleaning crew in the FSA building in one of his most notable images, "American Gothic."



Parks moved to Harlem to escape some of the prejudice and racial tension he encountered in Washington. He soon began shooting for "Vogue" and joined a photography project capturing images of small towns and industrial centers. In 1948, Parks submitted a freelance photo-essay on a young Harlem gang leader to "Time" magazine and won a position as photographer and writer that would take him around the world.

From the fashion industry to poverty in Brazil, from the Nation of Islam and gang violence to celebrity portraiture, Parks photographed everything and developed unique ways to communicate meaning in his various works. Parks soon branched out into filmmaking, literature and poetry. He adapted his 1963 autobiographic novel "The Learning Tree" to the movie screen. In 1971, he directed his most well known film, "Shaft" and its sequel "Shaft's Big Score" a year later.



A self-taught pianist, Parks displayed his music talents by composing the music and libretto to "Martin," a ballet based on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. that he composed and choreographed. Parks even exhibited abstract oil-based paintings in 1981. Parks campaigned for civil rights and was a notable activist throughout his lifetime. He co-founded "Essence" magazine and was a major contributor to the blaxploitation genre.

Parks died a cultural icon after battling cancer in March of 2006. His prolific works are cited with freedom as the underlying theme, and he lived by the words and encouragement of his mother, summed up by Parks in one statement: "The common search for a better life and a better world is deeper than color or blood."

