



Gordon Parks - BIOGRAPHY

Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, on November 30, 1912, to Sarah Ross Parks and Andrew Jackson Parks. The youngest of 15 children, Parks' mother died when he was 15 and he was sent to live with a sister and her husband in St. Paul, Minnesota. His brother-in-law threw him out after an argument, and for the next several years Parks lived mostly in Minneapolis and Chicago, struggling to finish school and supporting himself as a busboy, piano player, railroad porter and dining car waiter, and member of the Civilian Conservation Corps.



In 1937, Parks bought a used camera at a pawn shop in Seattle and began taking pictures. He became an accomplished fashion photographer and in 1941 won a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. In January 1942, he went to work in Washington, D.C., in the renowned documentary photography section of the Farm Security Administration. Parks freelanced at Glamour and Vogue and in 1948 became the first African American photographer at Life magazine, where he worked until 1972. During that time he used his art to document poverty in Harlem and Latin America, and the civil rights movement in the United States.



Gordon Parks wrote about his childhood in Fort Scott, Kansas, in his autobiographical novel *The Learning Tree*, published in 1963. Parks then became the first African American to produce and direct a major Hollywood motion picture with his film adaptation of *The Learning Tree*, filmed in Fort Scott and released in 1969. In addition, he wrote the musical score for the movie. The film was among the first 25 films placed on the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1989. He also broke new ground in African American film with *Shaft*, featuring a hip black hero, and *Leadbelly*, an account of famous blues and folk singer Huddie Leadbetter.

Parks went on to direct other feature films and documentaries, to author several books, to write original musical compositions, film scores, and a ballet, and to co-found *Essence* magazine. He won an Emmy Award for documentary for *Diary of a Harlem Family* in 1968. In 1972 the NAACP awarded him the prestigious Spingarn Medal following the publication in 1971 of *Born Black*, a collection of articles on notable African Americans. He received the National Medal of Arts in 1988 and has received over fifty honorary degrees in literature, fine arts, and humanities. He was inducted into the International Photography Hall of Fame and awarded the Jackie Robinson Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002.

Gordon Parks died at the age of 93 on March 7, 2006, in New York, New York, and was laid to rest in Evergreen Cemetery in his hometown of Fort Scott on March 16, 2006.