

**An Exploration of the Segregated South:
The Photographs of Gordon Parks**

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I learned about Gordon Parks several years ago, while watching a PBS documentary on influential people from Saint Paul, Minnesota. I was astounded by Parks' photography. His documentation of the segregated south was particularly striking; Parks traded the somber, black-and-white images commonly associated with the Civil Rights Movement for photographs in vibrant color that captured the everyday difficulties of a southern African American family. I immediately knew that Gordon Parks' work as a Civil Rights photojournalist would be a History Day topic that I was interested in, and that a website would be the perfect medium to highlight this. While constructing my website, I was inspired by the Gordon Parks quote: "the subject matter is so much more important than the photographer," so I designed the project to have only one photo of him personally, but as many pictures of his assignments as possible.

My research for this project was interesting and rewarding. There is an abundance of primary sources available for my topic; in addition to his photography, Parks also wrote eighteen books, composed music, directed films, and painted. I also had access to a collection of all the original *Life* Magazine issues from September to December of 1956, so I was able to read *The Restraints: Open and Hidden* and *A Sequel to Segregation*. I was also lucky enough to get an interview with Peter Rachleff of the East Side Freedom Library in Saint Paul, Minnesota, who analyzed the significance of Parks' work. I also had the exciting experience of attending the *Segregation Story* exhibition at the Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I could view original photographs from the *Life* article. This opportunity also allowed me to speak with the gallery's director, Leslie Hammons.

Since moving on from state competition, I have improved many aspects of my project. I have been fortunate enough to connect with staff at the Gordon Parks Foundation about my project. I have also conducted more research on the representation of African Americans in mainstream press before and after Parks' career at *Life* Magazine, which has given me a better understanding of how Parks' photography affected the public and overall depictions of blacks in media. In addition to the interview with Leslie Hammons, I have also connected with John Kaplan, a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer and professor of journalism at the University of Florida, and Michael Dibari, a photojournalist and professor of visual media at the Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications. These interviews have allowed me to further comprehend the effect of Parks' Civil Rights photography on readers of *Life*, on other photographers, and most importantly, on the image of the average African American.

The photography of Gordon Parks explored the topic of segregation in a way that the white American public had previously never seen before. By documenting the discriminative treatment that African Americans encountered during the mid-twentieth century, Parks' photography expanded the very limited portrayal of blacks available to whites, which ultimately led to a more compassionate awareness of them.