

Postively Fourth Avenue: Tracking the early footsteps of photographer Gordon Parks

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

Gordon Parks (1912–2006), creator of the hit movies *Shaft* and *The Leaning Tree*, photographer, author, filmmaker, musician, composer, and more, got his early inspiration from his mother, popular music, and the movies while he was living in and around 39th Street and Fourth Avenue in Minneapolis. It put him on a lifelong path as a true renaissance man in the arts.

Like a click of a camera shutter, Parks's early life comes into focus:

CLICK: Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks is born on November 30, 1912 in Fort Scott, Kansas, youngest of 15 children.

CLICK: At seven years of age Parks takes piano lessons, showing early aptitude for music.

CLICK: Gordon Parks's mother, Sarah, dies in 1928, and with his father not really in the picture, the 16-year-old comes to St. Paul, to live with his sister.

"The full meaning of my mother's death had settled over me before they lowered her into the grave. They buried her at 2:30 in the afternoon, now, at nightfall, our big family was starting to break up. Poppa, a good quiet man, spent the last hours before our parting moving aimlessly about the yard, keeping to himself and avoiding me . . . Now I realized that probably he hadn't spoken more than a few thousand words to me during my entire childhood."

CLICK: Two days before Christmas, Parks is thrown out of his sister's home by his brother-in-law, and now homeless, rides the streetcar between Minneapolis and St. Paul to stay warm.

Despite the holiday hardships, for the next nine years off and on, Gordon Parks makes Minneapolis his home. He finds a job as a waiter in a restaurant early the following year, but just before Christmas 1929 (a holiday that is never a happy one for young Parks), the owner of the restaurant is arrested, and Parks finds himself once again on the street.

The piano comes to the rescue, and at 17 he soon lands a job playing tunes in a Minneapolis whorehouse. The years 1929–1933 he finds day work as a waiter and feeds his creative side with songwriting and

performances with local bands, which include playing live on local radio. At this point it appears that music, not photography, will be his calling, but life intrudes.

Parks marries Sally Alvis in March of 1933 (the same year President Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected for his first term with a raft of social programs to combat the Great Depression) and moves into Sally's parent's home at 3928 Fourth Avenue South in Minneapolis. The 1950s ranch home that shares the same street number today is not the house Parks lived in, but if you look up and down the block, other small compact homes of mid-to-late thirties vintage still give you the visual flavor of the neighborhood that Parks knew.

"The four of us were feeling good as we drove to my father-in-law's house . . . Joe Alvis had fully relented and demanded that we live with him . . . Mom Alvis . . . fried three chickens . . . slipped in two bottles of cold wine, which we drank upstairs since Joe's . . . religion would not tolerate such a thing. I had suddenly become more than the outlaw who had stolen Joe's daughter."

Roosevelt's ideas for recovery took hold, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a dynamic social public works program that paired young men 18 years of age or older with outdoor work with pickax, shovel, and three meals a day, grabbed the attention of Parks, and soon after his marriage, he shipped out to

Fort Dix, New Jersey, for two six-month enlistments building campgrounds, planting trees, and preventing beach erosion. Back home on Fourth Avenue, \$25 of Parks's \$30 pay every month was sent back by the Government to help feed Sally and her family. That was the beauty of the CCC program. Not only did it feed and clothe the CCC recruit, it also helped the survival of their families at home.

"Over two million of us eventually joined the Corps. We planted millions of trees, fought the Dutch elm disease, built fishponds, fed wildlife, cleared tremendous areas of beach and camping ground, and 47 recruits lost their lives fighting forest fires."



Parks and his wife, Sally, lived shortly at 3928 Fourth Avenue South after their marriage in 1933. The original home was torn down and replaced with this one-level ranch sometime in the 1950s or 1960s.



Parks's last address in Minneapolis was at 3525 Fourth Avenue South, in 1940. By this time he was shooting for the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* and had three solo exhibitions in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Nineteen thirty-four brought a return to Fourth Avenue South, and the local bandstands, but expanding horizons seems to be Parks's strong suit, and he lands a job as a Pullman Porter and waiter on the Northern Pacific Railroad out of Minneapolis, bound for all points including Chicago and the Pacific Northwest. Aside from the steady work the CCC provided, the railroad job was Parks's first well-paid job, enabling him for the first time to have a little walking around money when he wasn't tucking people into their berths in the sleeping car.

In Chicago three years later in 1937 on a train layover, Parks takes in the renowned Art Institute of Chicago, and then a movie down the street. Showing on the screen that day is a war documentary shot by motion picture cameraman Norman Alley entitled *Bombing of the USS Panay* (available for viewing on YouTube), the story of a US Navy gunboat that is bombed by the Japanese. Japan had invaded China, and during the siege of Nanking (a theatre of war in which famed conflict photographer Robert Capa was also documenting, whom Parks actually met while working as a Pullman Porter between Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chicago. "I talked to painters, writers, and photographers

Gordon Park's Band to Play Matinee Dance

A matinee "swing session" is scheduled for Union Hall, Third and Plymouth Ave. N., Minneapolis, Sunday afternoon, when the Gordon Parks Chicago Savoy Orchestra will make its official bow to Minneapolis and St. Paul dancers and music lovers.

The affair will begin at 3 p. m., ending at 9 p. m., and is being presented by Ely N. Martin and Mr. Parks.

The Parks orchestra, according



Gordon Parks

to available reports, is a first class group of young musicians brought here from Chicago and have among its personnel Pat Louis, one of the most sensational trumpet players in the band business.

The popular Florence Ward, radio find, is vocalist with the Parks' orchestra.

A small admission fee of 25c per person will be charged, with couples for 40c.

This is your first chance to hear Gordon and his new band. Everybody welcome.—Adv.

Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder, Sept. 17, 1937

whenever I discovered them in my car," he remembered, the PANAY was sunk while performing a rescue mission of US journalists and other civilian personnel. Entirely shot by Alley, Parks is mightily impressed that despite the danger, Alley stayed with the story until the gunboat finally sank in the river. Parks leaves the theatre for Union Station and his waiting train, a changed man.

"He had no way of knowing it (Norman Alley) but he had just changed my life. I sat through another show; and even before I left the theater I had made up my mind I was going to become a photographer."

A couple of days later Parks again finds himself with some time off; this time in Seattle, Washington, and he walked into a pawnshop and bought a Voigtlander Brilliant, a 120mm film camera for \$12.50. The Brilliant, with a look-down viewfinder, boasted "automatic film winding and counting," quick focusing of the f3.5 lens, and a Compur rapid shutter. He snaps his first roll of Puget Sound but must wait until his train reaches Minneapolis again to see the developed photographs.

"I went down to the wharfs and fell headfirst into Puget Sound, trying to shoot pictures of seagulls. Luckily, some firemen were nearby and I hung on to my camera, splashing about hollering for help until they fished me out with a long pole."

Any photographer can well imagine the excitement Parks felt when he handed in that first roll of film to the clerk at the Kodak store in downtown Minneapolis. Arriving back at the Kodak store a few days later to pick up his prints, Parks was shocked and elated to hear that the store was inviting him to submit future pictures for consideration for exhibition there, which eventually happened.



"Eastman Kodak developed the first roll of film – surprisingly, it had survived its bath in Puget Sound. And when I went for the prints one of the clerks complimented me on my first efforts: Keep it up and we'll give you a show' . . . six weeks later Eastman gave me an exhibit in the window of their downtown Minneapolis store."

"It shows the importance of brick-and-mortar camera stores and the part they still play in the encouragement of newly-minted photographers," says National Camera historian, Rebecca Lawson. Indeed, for a novice photographer like Parks, editors and camera stores seemed to take an interest in his work and were kind to him in the years that followed.

Again, another Christmas approaches and Parks gets into a fight with his boss on the railroad, and once again, Christmas sees Parks without a job. He switches to the Chicago and Northwestern railroad and even plays a little semipro basketball before getting into his photography full-time over the next two years.

Two blocks up the street from the Alvis house is the Minneapolis Spokesman-Recorder at 3744 Fourth Avenue South. Designated a Local Historic Landmark by the City of Minneapolis in 2015, the newspaper is the longest-running African American paper in the state. Founded by editor Cecil Newman (whose name is still on the office door), a self-described "bookaholic" who served the black community in print with the motto "As it was spoken, so let us record." Newman took a liking to Parks and saved some space in the paper each week for his photography. Walking into the closetlike room today that serves as the paper's archive, you can almost feel the presence of not

only Gordon Parks, but other black performers and poets like Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes that Cecil Newman featured prominently on the front pages of his paper. Again

"There was no pay; I accepted the space for the pleasure of seeing my work published . . . Then Cecil appointed me official staff photographer – and circulation manager . . . Unfortunately I was a better photographer than circulation manager."

Nineteen forty brings us to the last Fourth Avenue address for Parks and his family at 3525 4th Avenue South. Sally Alvis Parks gave birth to Toni Parks and that may have necessitated the move from her parent's home for good. By this time Gordon Parks was working for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, winning awards and hosting three solo exhibits

of his work in St. Paul and Minneapolis. In 1942 he had a fellowship with another alphabet Roosevelt program, the FSA (Farm Security Administration), where he shot his famous photo *American Gothic* of cleaning woman Ella Watson. He was well on his way to work in Chicago, in New York, with *Life* magazine, as well as a featured photographer for magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*. While working for Standard Oil as a staff photographer, he buys a home in White Plains, New York, in 1946 so that Sally can finally enjoy a home of their own, and thus ends his Minneapolis story.

CLICK: For 13 years (1933–1946) five blocks of Fourth Avenue South, in a tightly knit African American Minneapolis neighborhood, was home to who Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard University later referred to as "the most important Black photographer in the history of photojournalism."

"My mother had freed me from the curse of inferiority long before she died by not allowing me to take refuge in the excuse that I had been born black. She had given me ambition and purpose, and set the course I had since traveled."

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: There is plenty of room to take in the life of Gordon Parks. Fourth Avenue offers lots of space to pull over and imagine him striding down the street

SOURCES

- excerpts from Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 1965, Harper & Row, NY now available by Minnesota Historical Society Press
- gordonparksfoundation.org
- artnet.com/artists/gordon-parks/
- Gordon Parks and the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder*, minneapolisismn.gov/hpc/landmarks/WCMS1P-152391
- Special thanks to John Liss and Rebecca Lawson at National Camera Exchange.

Charlie Maguire is a traveling songwriter, musician, and union organizer who makes frequent stops in Hennepin County.

Photos by Charlie Maguire unless otherwise noted.



Mural on the side of *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder's* historic building at 3744 Fourth Avenue South.

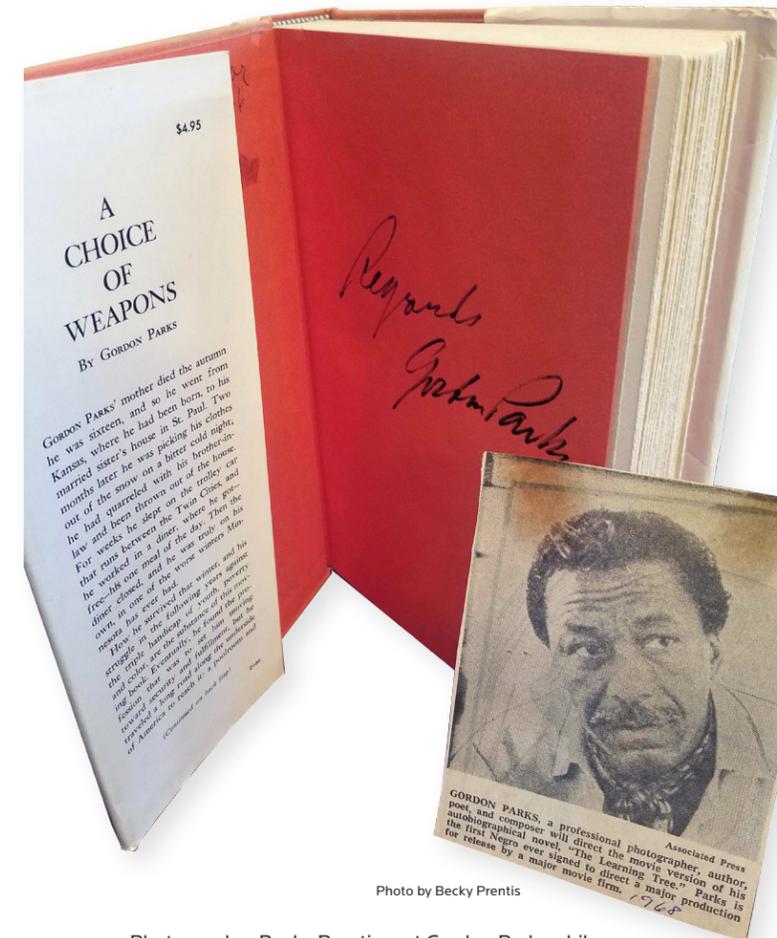
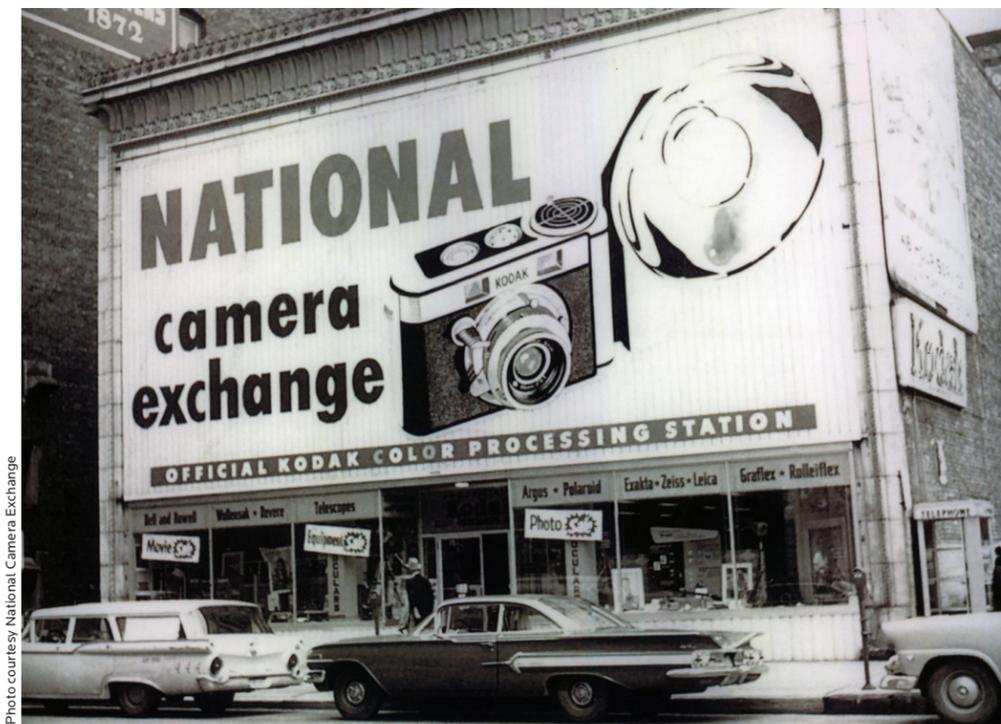


Photo by Becky Prentis

Photographer Becky Prentis met Gordon Parks while still in high school. "I went to his book event at Williams Arena with my friend Kathy, and we sat in the front row! He sat on a stool and just chatted and people asked questions. He spoke to both of us at the end of the program. He was so talented and interested in many things."

MINNESOTA SPOKESMAN-RECORDER

Publisher Tracey Williams-Dillard, granddaughter of founding publisher Cecil E. Newman, invites you to celebrate the newspaper's 85th birthday August 3 from noon – 4 p.m. aboard the St. Croix River Majestic Star. The cost is \$60. For more information, follow the paper on Facebook @MNSpokesmanRecorder or call (612) 827-4021.



The Kodak store in downtown Minneapolis at 114 S 5th Street, where Parks developed his negatives, was bought by National Camera Exchange in 1957. Though no longer at this location, National Camera is still in business and celebrating 105 years in business at its three stores.