

For Immediate Release:

GORDON PARKS: Segregation Story

April 11 – June 27, 2015

Opening Reception: Saturday, April 11, 2015, 6–8 PM

Adamson Gallery is proud to present an exhibit of photography by Gordon Parks, one of the twentieth century's foremost documentarians of American life. This exhibition features a selection of images from *Segregation Story*, Parks's powerful 1956 photographic series, which documented an extended African American family in segregated Alabama. Originally commissioned for a September 1956 issue of Life Magazine, this series is an intimate portrayal of one family's perseverance through racial and economic subjugation in the Jim Crow South.

Gordon Parks began his career at Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration (FSA), working alongside Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and others, while capturing African-American life in Washington DC. After a stint working for the Office of War Administration and other federal agencies, Parks moved onto New York and Harlem in 1944 where he worked both as a fashion photographer for Vogue and for Life magazine, displaying the remarkable breadth of his talent. At Life, Parks produced striking photographic essays of subjects ranging from racial segregation to celebrities like Duke Ellington and Marilyn Monroe. Aside from his photography, Parks was simultaneously a writer, filmmaker, and music composer; he wrote the semi-autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963), along with several volumes of poetry and memoirs, directed the film *Shaft* (1971), including its sequel, and co-founded *Essence* magazine in the 1970s. Parks died in 2006 at the age of 93.

In 1956, Parks was sent on assignment to Mobile, Alabama for a September 1956 Life Magazine photo essay titled, "The Restraints: Open and Hidden," depicting one multigenerational African American family's adversity through segregation. He focused on Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Thornton, 82, and 70, and their nine children and 19 grandchildren of the related Causey and Tanner families, who lived near Mobile and Shady Grove, Alabama. The images illustrate what appears to be a fragment of a simple life in bucolic Alabama, yet the photographs display a more compassionate and poignant story of struggle and survival through oppressive restrictions forced on black families living within the confines of Jim Crow laws in the South. To Parks, the life of the Thorntons was all too familiar, having endured segregation and discrimination, growing up impoverished in Fort Scott, Kansas. As a reaction to his experience of injustice, Parks has said: "I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty." Parks was the magazine's first African American staff photographers.

Most journalistic photographs of the time captured the crusade for civil rights with images of demonstrations, brutalities, and racial inequalities. Parks's approach was entirely different, serving as crucial documentation in a prosaic yet profound way. His photographs were meant to challenge the perception of racism and to elicit empathy; to show that the Thornton Family were like any other family, except marginalized because of the color of their skin. While twenty-six photographs were eventually published in Life Magazine, most of the photographs from Parks's assignment were presumed lost for decades. In 2012, The Gordon Parks Foundation unearthed more than two hundred color negatives containing the full series, hidden in the basement of their archives. Many of the photographs from *Segregation Story* have been hidden from view in over half a century.

For additional information, please contact Adamson Gallery at (202) 232-0707 or info@adamsongallery.com

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