PHILIP BROOKMAN INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Philip Brookman
Consulting Curator
National Gallery of Art
Interviewed by John Maggio
December 03, 2019
Total Running Time: 1 hour 53 minutes and 32 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Philip Brookman

Consulting Curator

National Gallery of Art

Early life

01:00:14:03

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So Gordon Parks, when he really started out as a photographer, he started out as a portrait photographer. I mean, he saw pictures that inspired him, that reminded him of his own upbringing. Pictures made during the depression era. He saw them in a magazine and that inspired him to be a photographer. But when he does become a

photographer, he's self-taught but he's also—he's really making portraits and, you know, trying to figure out what to do with the camera. And so you know, there really wasn't the opportunity in 1938, 1939, 1940 when he's beginning for a Black photographer, you know, to take on the world the way that he does later in his career. There wasn't that opportunity for him.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So he—he really evolved that sense of a choice of weapons, the camera as a weapon against poverty and racism, and it evolved over many, many years. But I think that, you know, Gordon Parks really didn't fully understand that—that concept until he moves to Washington and really gets the training that he needs to understand how you can use a camera, you know, to take on those big subjects. He had to figure out how to do that and there were people that helped him; people like Roy Stryker, who was really his mentor at the time.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Well, early in his career Gordon worked as a waiter on a dining car for the Northern Pacific Railway, so he wasn't a full time photographer, he just did it at, kind of, in his spare time when he could. You know, he would, you know, use the camera at home during layovers or when he

was able to do that. And he was mostly making portraits of family members, of people in St. Paul. He began to publish them in the local African American newspaper, the *St. Paul Recorder* and *Minneapolis Spokesman*.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, it was really through that kind of interaction with publishing his pictures that he began to understand, I think, how to make pictures that would be, you know—that would be able to convey some sense of, for example, a personality. And I think that his early portraiture he was really interested in it and it was hard for him. He just began to, you know, to understand the you know, technology of photography.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He tells this wonderful story about how he was, you know, hired through, you know, just really good luck by a local department store, a women's wear store in Minne—in St. Paul, Minnesota. And you know, the first time that he comes with a four by five view camera, you know, to make pictures of the models who were there, he double exposes almost all of the film because he doesn't really understand how to do

it. And you know, then he had one good picture that he was able to print and then show to the, you know, proprietor Madeline Murphy.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And she loved it. You know, she loved it so much she said, "Well, come back tomorrow. I understand the problem." You know, "We'll have… " you know, "new people for you to photograph." And you know, he really—he sort of talked his way into these things and was self-taught early on, you know, and it was so amazing. So it was really through those kinds of experiences that he began to understand those experiences that he began to understand how I think—how to make images that could really, you know, convey some sense of who he was and what he was interested in. But that took a period of, I would say, three years before he really was able to do it. And then when Parks moved to Chicago, he is given a studio space and access to the dark room at the Southside Community Arts Center and it's there he's around all these artists; painters and sculptors and writers, you know, people who really were doing work that was socially incredibly important and it responded to the environment in which they were living.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

The Southside of Chicago in the 1930's and early 1940's, you know, was a place of great poverty and difficulty for people and so those artists interacting with Gordon Parks used that kind of language for their work. They said that their art was a weapon against the conditions in which we're forced to live. And so, I think it was sort of through that interaction that Gordon began to understand how to use the camera in a different kind of way than he had been. He then took the camera out onto the streets and photographed people and you know, the living conditions in which people lived in the Southside of Chicago.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And he was encouraged to do that by, you know, the artists he was working around. And one of the people who was I think critically important to him then was the painter Charles White, who was younger than Gordon Parks, but they became really good friends and it was White that really said to Gordon, you know, take your camera out, I'll go with you. You know, we'll go out and we'll look at what's outside, what's out there, you know, and how people like us are forced to live. And that's when he began to understand how to do it, but those pictures didn't really survive the—you know, the very first pictures he

made of—kind of a social environment where he really was thinking that way about the camera as a weapon.

01:06:19:21

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And I asked Gordon once, "What happened to those pictures you say you took in Chicago? Where—where are the negatives, where are those pictures that you say you made?" And he describes them so eloquently, but I had never seen them. He said to me, "I threw them all out. I didn't know what they were." And my sense is, you know, he kept some, he left much of it just behind when he left Chicago and you know, most of that material's gone. And he may have given some to people. You know, simply didn't survive.

Gordon Parks' family

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Gordon Parks is born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912. And he's born into a large family; he's the youngest of fifteen children. His father's children, fifteen. His mother had, you know, I think nine children. And then his father had been married before and his first wife died and then he's remarried to Sara Parks and so Parks—Gordon Parks is the

youngest of fifteen, and it's a truly loving family. It's—the family environment for him was what made him who he was, I believe.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And at the same time, Fort Scott in 1912 was an environment of real racism. Kansas was a free state in the late 19th century although it was also, you know, an environment in which, you know… African Americans, I think, in Kansas really struggled at the time, you know, to seek equality. Gordon went to a segregated school; the Plaza School in Fort Scott was segregated. And he remembers very well the environment being one of real racism in which he grew up.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He wasn't allowed to, you know, sit with his friends in the movie theater. He had to sit upstairs in—you know, like it was a southern state. And so you know, I think that truly affected him, and when Gordon was fifteen his mother died in 1928. And he was actually sent north. Her final wish was that he would travel north to live with a sister in St. Paul, Minnesota, because she wanted him to be able to finish his education in an environment that was not segregated the way that it was in Fort Scott.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So he actually goes on his own to St. Paul, Minnesota. He lives with his sister there and very quickly he's thrown out of the house because he gets in an argument with his sister's husband at the time, and so he also remembers riding the trolley cars back and forth between St. Paul and Minneapolis at night just to stay warm, and then he'd go to school you know, during the day. And you know, eventually that sort of became too much for him and you know—and he had to figure out really how to survive in a very difficult environment even in the northern Twin Cities in Minnesota.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So, the other thing I want to mention is that Gordon Parks is, you know—he's from a family that was born into slavery. His grandfather and his grandmother were both born as slaves in—his grandfather born in New Orleans, his grandmother born in Tennessee. And so you know, I think that also colors the environment in which he grew up.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

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It's true that Gordon encountered violence in his life and, you know, I think in some ways that's the choice of weapons. You know, I mean is he gonna choose, you know, to pick up a gun or use his fists to get where he wants to get or is he gonna use art, pick up a camera to you know, speak about the conditions that somehow engendered that violence. You know, he tells a number of different stories and you know, I think one is, you know, an interesting story that rings pretty true to his career.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And this is where he's in– in Chicago during the time when he was still kind of growing up in St. Paul, Minneapolis. He kind of runs away and, you know, hops a freight train and goes to Chicago because he wants to get away from– from his environment in St. Paul. He doesn't, you know, think he can really make a living in St. Paul. And so he runs away and he basically, you know, gets work in a flophouse, in a—you know, just a, you know, like an awful hotel maybe on South State Street in Chicago.

01:12:18:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it's there where he—you know, he's—basically he's discriminated against and, you know, he's given a room in exchange for kind of

helping around the place and he gets in a fight with the—you know, the manager of this flophouse and– and basically has to use a gun to get out of trouble there. One which he just finds, and I think that you know, that really upset him that he had gotten to the point in his young life where he had actually, you know, had to do that.

01:12:58:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So you know, then he was able to run away and meet up with an uncle of his who was also a pullman porter, you know on the railroad. And his uncle basically gets him out of town and takes him back to St. Paul. But you know, he was really in trouble then and I think he felt that, you know, if things hadn't gone just the way they went, you know, he could've been in jail for a long time or you know, he could've really hurt somebody or you know, he was forced in his life to pick up weapons that, I think, were not his perfect choice.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, you know, he thought about that and often, you know, kind of used that analogy of the weapon to—maybe it was to inspire other people, you know, as much as anything. You know, it certainly was the kind of language that other artists used. You know, art as a weapon against—you know, against the trouble that we face. And you know, I

can say too that when I first learned about Gordon Parks, I was in high school and I was given his book, *A Choice of Weapons*. *Choice of Weapons*.

01:14:16:05

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And for me at the time, you know, it was not only inspiring but it was an important book because I was just the age where I could potentially be drafted into the military during the Vietnam War, and I was interested in photography as well and so a photography teacher gave me *A Choice of Weapons*, told me to read it. And it inspired me to think about how art and photography itself could, you know, in some ways be an alternative to, you know, that life that I could have been facing at that time. So I think in some ways *A Choice of Weapons* was, for Gordon, it was a way to help to inspire young people to understand the alternatives to the violent lives that many people face in their upbringings.

01:15:09:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I mean, that–– it's a really interesting question about how the violence that Gordon encounters in his life, you know, throughout his life influenced not only who he was but his own style of—as a photographer and a filmmaker.

A Choice of Weapons

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think, you know, in some ways he… he would—he used a number of interesting strategies to kind of deflect the violence, to kind of push it away from himself. And one of those is that he often would reflect on the violence that he witnessed in his dreams, and he would write about that, and he also put it in his work.

01:16:06:07

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So you know, he kind of picks up an almost surrealist side in his work that you see in photographs like, for example, the work that he does about Ralph Ellison's book, *The Invisible Man*. And he makes these photographs that are—they're staged photographs that are quite surreal and they're kind of set up with actors to… evoke scenes from Ellison's book. And it was a kind of promotional project for *Life* Magazine, but at the same time, you know, I think it was a very evocative style that– that, you know, Gordon—basically he finds this as a way to push the violence that he himself had experienced away.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, he often would write about his dreams and, you know, in various memoirs that he wrote. He would talk about how, you know, the violence from his childhood even, you know, where friends would be—would die or would be killed by, you know, various situations. And you know, and that haunted him for his whole life. And he would write about this sometimes and how these situations would come to him in dreams and then you know would—you would kind of see those sort of images that one imagines, you know, that would be in his dreams, you know, coming into his work.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, he also certainly used that in his film, *The Learning Tree* (1969) where, you know, he would in some ways, you know, bring back those violent situations, you know, among the kids, you know. And how you know, there was one kid, Marcus, who used his fists and, you know, was always in trouble and eventually is accused of murdering a man and ends up in jail. And so, you know, those situations that actually Parks remembers from his own childhood he then puts into his work later in his life, you know, both his—his writing his novel, *The Learning Tree* and then the film, *The Learning Tree*.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, it's a good example of how, you know, he used those situations as a kind of morality tale that would show what happens when, you know, you make the wrong choice. And you know, it's interesting, I– I have really never met anybody quite like Gordon who was so clear about, you know, how—how violence in one's life can be so harmful and how racism in one's life can be so harmful. And he had no patience for it whatsoever.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I mean, he– he was so clear about how, you know, everybody really is equal and it has to be that way if we're ever gonna, you know, get beyond the violence. And you know, that was something that, you know, I never met anybody who really, you know, so truly embodied that idea. You know, he just didn't have patience for it. And you know, I knew him when he was in his—you know, his twilight years in his 90's and you know, by that time he'd seen everything and won every award he was gonna win and he—you know, he still, you know, embodied that idea that, you know, I think really came to him when he was a kid. And he kept it with him and he used it to survive and, you know, in the winters in Minnesota and in Chicago and, you know, and then he took

that and used it in his work, I think you know, really clearly to you know, to– to teach us about what that really means.

Influences

01:20:28:05

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So when Gordon moves to Chicago, he's given a studio space at the Southside Community Arts Center along with access to their dark room. In exchange, he mostly does, you know, photographic work of their events and documents the exhibitions, that kind of thing. And he's also—he's around all the artists who flock to the arts center. And these are people like the great painter Charles White and Algier Coutor, Charles Sebree, the you know, printmaker and painter Margaret Burrows is a very important colleague of Parks then. He's also—you know, meets you know, many of the important people who are encouraging the kind of evolution of African American art at the time.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

People like Alain Locke, the great philosopher, professor of education at Howard University, Langston Hughes, the poet and screenwriter at

the time. You know, he also comes into Chicago and Parks meets him and photographs him then. He meets Richard Wright, the author of… *Native Son*; you know the wonderful book about life in Chicago at the time, *Native Son*. And so you know, I think Parks is—you know, he's encouraged by being around all of these artists, but also they themselves are using language like the art that we're making is a weapon against the racism and poverty in which we are forced to live.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And I think that's, in some ways, where Gordon begins to understand that language and how he could use photography in a similar way. And then he's encouraged by Charles White to take his camera out on the street and he begins to photograph, you know, people in the environment in which they live on the Southside and was a… Chicago was, at the time, a segregated city in many ways. Not legally segregated but there were so many, you know, mechanisms and covenants in which, you know, Blacks were separated from Whites.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So the Southside of Chicago was, you know, it was not only this wonderful place for art and filmmakers and, you know, the painters who flocked there, you know, I think… worked in an environment of

real creativity. But at the same time, you know, it was an environment of real poverty. That's well documented in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think it's true that that Gordon was, you know, really looking for, you know, a community of artists in which he could sort of develop his vision as a photographer and so when he goes to Chicago, he would stay there sometimes on layovers when he worked as a waiter and then also as a porter on the railroad, and so he would visit art museums, especially the Art Institute of Chicago. And I think that in many ways, you know, Gordon, he learned as much about art and, you know, the ways in which artists make pictures by just looking voraciously at, you know, the galleries at the Art Institute—Art Institute of Chicago, but also at magazines.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, he just looked at every magazine he could find and looked at the photographs and especially fashion magazines. He taught himself how to light models by looking at fashion magazines and then understanding how he did it. You know, there's an interesting article that I found in a St. Paul newspaper called *The Pioneer* and it gave a

little description of Parks' photographs in 1940 when he was really just starting out and he had won an award at the… exposition at Chicago in 1940 and so the newspaper did an article about him.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it described his studio as, you know, his studio was the kitchen of his home and he could use it when his wife would let him when she wasn't in there cooking dinner for the family, and his lights were made from tin cans and, you know, bare light bulbs mounted in tin cans that they would have. And his dark room was in the bathroom. I mean, that's how Gordon Parks started out, you know, with very, you know, kind of rudimentary equipment and he didn't really have the money to do photography, but he was so obsessed with it that he taught himself to do it and figured out how to make things work.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So, you know, it's kind of an amazing story that he was able to overcome just something as simple as not having the lights that you need to light a model to make the picture that you were gonna have for the newspaper, a picture of somebody's wedding or something like that. And he was able to figure that out, how to do it and then you know, the rest is history.

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01:25:58:11

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Another early incident that inspired Parks' understanding of the power of photography happens in… December of 1937 when he sees a newsreel that is being projected in a movie theater that he visits in Chicago on one of the layovers that he has while he's working for the railroad. So, he saw a newsreel of the bombing of the USS Panay, which was an American gunboat that was anchored in the Yangtze River in China, in Nanking, China. And the Panay had been bombed by the Japanese during, you know, a kind of skirmish in China when the Japanese invaded China.

01:27:00:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, this became, you know, a very powerful and important incident in American-Japanese relations because the Japanese had bombed an American gunboat. And there was a photographer, actually, you know, who was filming the bombing and his name was Norman Alley and a very famous newsreel was then very quickly released in theaters and this is how Americans got their news at the time. You would see a newsreel, you know, of the events of the week when you went to the movies and so, you know, in the days before television news, you know, the newsreels were everything.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so Parks saw this newsreel when he was, you know, at the movies and he talks about how, you know, the thing that really got him was that after the newsreel was over, Norman Alley was there and he steps out onto the stage and, you know, and he talked about his experiences as a photographer, actually a war photographer who witnessed an event and then, you know, recorded it so that the world could see. And that truly inspired Parks to, I think, you know more than anything understand the power of the camera, of photography, you know, to show us, you know, what was happening in the world.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Just simply to show, you know, the events that were out there that people needed to see. And without photography we wouldn't see it so that was another way he was inspired to become a photographer. He talked about how, you know, maybe as much as seeing photographs in magazines that seeing the newsreels also kind of trained him to understand how photography could be a weapon.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

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Gordon Parks is self-taught as a photographer, and he didn't really, you know, go to school for it at all. He could have, maybe, but he taught himself. He was always working to support his family doing other things and so he basically taught himself by experience, by, you know, doing it and he got advice from the—you know, the camera shop where he would get his film and equipment and, you know, and then that advice kind of served him and he would experiment a lot with things like, you know, light and shadow and, you know, ways that he could express, you know, his ideas about you know, how to make a picture.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

But until he goes to– to Washington, he doesn't really have, you know, have any professional training or even, you know, they're not—other photographers who are helping him or mentoring him. I think that it was certainly the artists around Chicago who were, you know, kind of helping him to understand how to make pictures and, you know, encouraging him. And you know, this wonderful, you know, kind of sense about Gordon Parks at the Southside Community Arts Center and he has a show there.

01:30:18:03

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

But you know, all the other painters, they really saw Gordon as one of them and they described his photography as being like painting. You know, he was making photographs like a painter would make a painting. And I think in some ways it was that kind of, you know, just simply… you know, advice and encouragement and, you know, that would come from, you know, gatherings of other artists that really helped him.

Relationship with his mother

01:30:57:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that—that Gordon Parks was truly inspired by his own mother. I mean, she was a force in his life while she was alive. She was a very religious woman, and she used that to kind of corral and inspire all of her kids, and there were many of them. And they didn't have a lot of money and so it was, you know, it was a life of inspiration that she was able to, you know, to create for the kids that kept them going. And he—you know, he really I think learned you know, much of this—you know, this sensibility that held him together for his life from his mother.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

She taught him and she taught her children, you know, that everybody was equal and that, you know, even though, you know, the teachers at school may not, you know, give you a sense of that or may not convey that to you. You know, you're—you hold those ideas and you will prevail. And so he learned that from his mother and, you know, he sort of used the image of his mother, I think, in a lot of his work as well. You know, she's certainly a big presence in, you know, in his you know, memories of Fort Scott that he photographs in 1949 for *Life* Magazine.

01:32:28:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

She's a big presence in his novel and then his film, *The Learning Tree*. And you know, there's this wonderful scene in *The Learning Tree* where he meets his mother—you know, he's kind of gotten in trouble and he meets his mother, and they're walking home kind of through this… this proscenium, stage of trees down a path and you know, you see them only from behind and she's, you know, kind of teaching him you know, how it is you have to live in the world as a young Black man.

01:33:07:18

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And how it's not gonna be easy. But if you stick to the principles I teach you, you're gonna – you're gonna be ok. So he always credits her

and you know, I think you know, like all kids, he also must have been rebellious and you know, tested the limits of, you know, of her teaching and the teaching of her parents but—of his parents, but I think that he… he learned so much of that from his mother. And you know, it's remarkable because she was only with him for 15 years and then when she dies, the whole community comes out.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Sara Parks had been a seamstress and she worked also as a maid in a wealthy person's home, and you know, at the same time, you know, she had this large family to take care of and she did all of that, you know, without really, you know, thinking twice about it. That was her life. And you know I think the whole community of Fort Scott, Black and White, came out to her funeral when she died. And it wasn't just Gordon Parks who was inspired by her kind of teaching, but it was her family and the community as well.

Odd jobs

01:34:41:09

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that Gordon, you know, he certainly… lived a wandering life as a young person. He—you know, he runs away, he travels. He wants to be a musician more than anything. He learned to play the piano at home because his mother, you know, rented a piano that he could learn on and you know, then when he gets a job as a waiter on the dining car of the Northern Pacific, you know, then he travels between St. Paul, Minnesota and Seattle and Chicago and then back to St. Paul, Minnesota. So, you know, he's all across the western states and he– he learned a lot about life.

01:35:29:19

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, it certainly—both working life, working with, you know, the other people on the railroad as well as, you know, the people in the towns that he passes through. And you know, he tells many stories about that and I think in some ways, you know, it's a kind of typical depression era American story where, you know, the best way to you know, to survive and make a living is to be able to go wherever you have to go to do it.

01:36:01:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, one of the best jobs you could get as an African American man in St. Paul, Minnesota was to work for the Northern

Pacific because they hired the porters and the waiters and they were, you know, regular jobs and they got paid pretty well, you know, for– for that work. So he was able to establish, you know, a pretty stable life. Gordon gets married. In 1934 he marries his childhood sweetheart, Sally. And you know, they have a young son Gordon Jr., and so, you know, very quickly when he's pretty young he has a lot of responsibilities.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, so he has to settle down and raise his family, and so you know, the family is living, you know, kind of between St. Paul and– and Minneapolis where Sally's parents lived and then Gordon's on the road quite a bit working for the railroad, but he's providing for them until he gets in trouble. He gets into a fight with his supervisor, you know, who basically, you know, is a… you know, a racist guy. And you know, he's fired from his job and then he—you know, he really struggles then.

01:37:27:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He's not able to provide for, you know, for his family the way he wanted to and that's really when he picks up photography more seriously. He has the time to do it and he starts to work, you know,

making pictures and then selling them to the newspaper, and he actually doesn't sell pictures to the newspaper. When he starts out, he's given the job of circulation manager, but, you know, he contributes the pictures and they give him credit. They publish them and they give him credit, so that's visibility. And he gets a little ad in the newspaper for his studio, so, you know, I think you know, he's struggling doing it until he's able to, you know, to find the clients that will pay him enough money to really become a professional photographer. And that doesn't happen until he moves to Chicago.

01:38:18:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Gordon talked about how… on the railroad, he's given a magazine by a fellow waiter that truly inspires him and in the magazine are photographs that he describes as being Farm Security Administration photographs, and pictures of the dust bowl. And those are pictures that, you know, in some ways show people who are migrants who are traveling the country just simply to– to resettle themselves somewhere else so that they can survive during that time.

01:38:56:22

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And he relates to those photographs because, you know, I think he feels the photography… gives a sense of a people in trouble, and it

also creates a kind of sympathy, and he for the first time understood that photography actually could be, you know, a way of– of showing people, you know, how hard it is for others, and eliciting some kind of empathy. So I don't know what the magazine was that he saw, and, you know, in really studying it, FSA photographs weren't published in *Life* Magazine or very few other magazines at that time. This is 1938 and so you know, it's hard to know.

01:39:52:19

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

It could have been, you know, any number of different magazines. *New York Times* magazine, for example, did publish some of those photographs. *Life* published very, very few but did publish other photographs of the dust bowl, and so my sense is, you know, it's—we don't know what the magazine was, but it's something that inspired him. He saw them, you know, the photographs and– and he then talks about how, you know, when he gets off the train in Seattle after seeing this magazine, right away he goes and buys a little camera at a pawn shop in Seattle and, you know, the owner of the shop teaches him how to use it very quickly.

01:40:40:22

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And then he goes, you know, around just photographing everything he can, and he also talks about how he was photographing seagulls on a pier in Seattle and falls in the water because he's looking the other way, he falls off the pier into the water and then the pictures are ruined. But you know, these early photographs that Parks makes, they really have, you know–– they– they have a quality of somebody who has vision, and because of that, when he takes his film to be developed at a camera shop, at the Kodak shop in St. Paul, he's encouraged by the people at the shop.

01:41:28:11

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, and they tell him, you know, this is pretty good, you know, and if you keep going and, you know, you can make some good pictures, we'll give you an exhibition in the window, and that happened. That was his first exhibition in the window of the– the Kodak shop in I think Minne—Minneapolis. And so, you know, I think Parks, you know, kind of, early photographs had, you know, a kind of sense of some vision. He may well have been, you know, kind of very much imitating other photographs he's seeing in magazines.

01:42:01:00

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

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So he's looking also at fashion magazines and he's teaching himself photography by reading training manuals and, you know, photography books about how to do it and so, you know, he's certainly looking at *Vogue* and, you know… probably *Harpers Bazaar* and some of the other fashion magazines that are around and you know, he's looking at you know, some of the great work by those photographers. People like… Irwin Blumenfeld, for example; he's photographing for *Vogue*. Edward Steichen, who's photographing, you know, models for *Vogue* during that time.

01:42:53:10

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, I think, in some ways Parks also credits those photographers for helping to create, you know, his kind of sensibility of how to make pictures. And you know, that has to do with, you know, so many things. It has to do with looking very closely at things and you know, how do you compose a photograph so it evokes some kind of, you know, sense of a story or, you know, makes you want to buy that dress. He actually is learning how to do those kind of things and how to use light and shadow and all of the tools of a photographer to actually make pictures. So, you know, by the time he really, you know, picks up a camera with the intention of, you know, using it as a real tool to, you know, help the world be a better place.

01:43:48:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, I think he was pretty fully—fully formed as a—you know, as a photographer with a vision. But it's not until he gets a Rosenwald Fellowship and is sent to Washington DC to work with the Farm Security Administration himself in 1942; not until then that he really gets the training to use the tools in a very, very sophisticated way.

Rosenwald Fellowship

01:44:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

The Julius Rosenwald Fund is a kind of amazing philanthropic story in America. Julius Rosenwald was one of the– the heads of Sears-Roebuck and Company and, you know, because of his, you know, his business he comes fabulously wealthy. It's based in Chicago and so he creates this philanthropy called the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the foundation that he would then use to basically help other people, you know, in many, many ways by giving away money. So he created a foundation and funded it through Sears, and then there were a number of different branches to the– to the foundation.

01:45:21:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

But the Rosenwald Fund was especially interested in helping with equality in the United States, and helping to basically eliminate segregation and racism. One of the things they did was to fund rural African American schools in the south, and they did it by basically creating a kind of matching community fund that they would give half the money it would take to build a school and then they would expect the community would come up with the money to finish paying for it. Another thing that they did was they gave fellowships to artists and scholars and others to further their careers.

01:46:19:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it was primarily focused on African Americans, especially fellowships in, you know, in universities to do scholarship and also artists. So a number of artists were given Rosenwald Fund fellowships in the late 1920's all the way through the 1940's. And that was one of the ways in which African American artists were really encouraged and given the support they needed to do something they couldn't have done any other way. And people like Jacob Lawrence and Augustus Savage and of course Langston Hughes and you know, many other writers.

01:47:05:17

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Langston Hughes and Richard Wright and others received these fellowships. Charles White receives a fellowship at the same time Gordon Parks did. Gordon, you know, he learns about the Rosenwald Fund from his friend Charles White and it was a well-known philanthropy in and around Chicago. And they certainly helped to support, you know, a number of the artists in and around Chicago at the time.

01:47:34:16

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And Gordon decides with his friend, Charles White, that together they're gonna apply for a fellowship and this is in kind of the end of 1941, and Gordon applies for the fellowship in January 1942, and by April of that year he receives word that he's been awarded a 1,500 dollar—1,800 dollar fellowship to work for a year at the Farm Security Administration in Washington and his project that he proposed was simply to travel around the United States to different cities to create a kind of image of African American life.

01:48:22:10

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, basically to show in his photographs, you know, everything from, you know, from farming to, you know, community life

to churches and you know, all of it. That was his project he proposed. But interestingly there was a very, very close connection between the Farm Security Administration and the Rosenwald Fund, and so it was really the connection that allowed Parks be sent to Washington and basically hired as a fellow to be a photographer for a year working for the Farm Security Administration.

Farm Security Administration

01:49:12:20

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

The Farm Security Administration was a federal agency that was established by the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression and the purpose of the FSA, which actually was first called the Resettlement Administration, was to resettle and retrain American farmers who had lost their land during the Great Depression and during the Dust Bowl. And you know, so many farms, you know, had basically, you know, lost their farms because of, you know, like being inundated with you know, very poor growing conditions and were on the road trying to find some work somewhere.

01:49:59:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so the Resettlement Administration, and then it was called the Farm Security Administration, was set up to assist farmers in resettling, you know, and they had resettlement camps that farmers could move to and then seek work. And they also retrained them how to better treat the land so that they wouldn't lose it the next time. You know, they—you know, they helped to also give loans to farmers through basically, you know, these federal loan programs.

01:50:40:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it was a very controversial program during the time, but because it was controversial, it required a kind of propaganda branch and so the Farm Security Administration, Resettlement Administration, set up a unit of photographers and filmmakers who could help to document what was happening, what they were doing. And was run by a man by the name of Roy Stryker who was an economist. He wasn't himself a photographer, he was an economist and he understood very well how photography could be used to teach economy, economics.

01:51:22:21

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so he hired many of the very best photographers in the country at the time; people like Dorothy Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein,

Russell Lee, you know, many of the, you know, the very best documentarians and, you know, they made, you know, what is today considered to be one of the, you know, great archives of images of America during that time. They were primarily photographing in rural areas, you know, in the west and the south and the east.

01:52:04:03

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, they photographed all over the country but, you know, it was very much focused on the work of the– of the Farm Security Administration and then the photographs were given away by the agency to magazines and they did exhibitions and they, you know, they presented them to Congress. And basically they were made to make the case that the Farm Security Administration was actually doing the best job of, you know, helping farmers to make, you know, a better life.

01:52:44:16

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

The reason it was so controversial is because, you know, in Congress, more conservative congressmen at the time thought it was socialism. You know, they were actually helping people to–– to borrow money to buy new land and they were training them to treat the land properly but you know, it was controversial because you know, it was like you know, the government shouldn't be meddling in other people's

business in that way. And so they really required the photography program to help to present their case year after year.

01:53:23:03

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So when Gordon Parks goes there, it's May of 1942 and the Farm Security Administration is, you know, it's almost finished. It still exists, there's still work that they're doing, but it's almost over and the reason why is because December of 1941 is the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States enters World War II right then. And so before Parks is even in Washington and before he receives his fellowship, you know, the Farm Security Administration is almost over and the government is really turning its attention to the war effort rather than the… you know, the– the– the conditions in the country during the Great Depression to, you know, mobilizing the military, mobilizing the—you know, the manufacture of weapons and all of this.

01:54:23:20

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, you know, certainly the– the people involved in the Farm Security Administration are involved in that as well, and you know kind of as the FSA is winding down, the photographers, including Gordon Parks when he comes to Washington, are assigned to do more and more work for the agency that is to become the Office of War

Information, an agency that is new and is created to help to show people what's happening both at home and abroad during World War Two.

01:55:01:22

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So when Gordon arrives in Washington, he comes to the Farm Security Administration office, he's got his cameras with him, he's ready to go and, you know, he's ready to fight to make images that are really gonna, you know, speak about the racism and poverty that he himself had experienced. So at the time, this is 1942. Washington is a segregated city, I mean legally segregated still. It's a southern city. And so Gordon Parks had never really lived in the South and hadn't experienced the level of– of– of racism that he would experience in Washington.

01:55:50:07

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, Roy Stryker understood this and he knew that Parks as a, you know, young aspiring African American photographer was gonna have a hard time, even internally within the Farm Security Administration. And so he gave him a series of assignments. He said, "Gordon, I want you to leave your camera in the desk, and go out in the city, and buy—buy yourself some lunch, go have lunch and then go to the

movies and you know, it's—it's, you know, getting to be summer. Maybe you'll need a new coat. Go to the department store and get yourself a new coat and then come back."

01:56:33:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And Gordon didn't know quite what was happening, but he goes out and when he goes to get lunch at the lunch counter, he's turned away. He's not allowed to buy lunch there because they don't serve Black people. And when they go to the movies, he's also turned away; he's got to sit up in the balcony and there's a different entrance he has to go through. He had already experienced that kind of thing in Fort Scott so he understood it. And then when he goes to the department store to buy a new jacket, a new coat, he's not served by the staff. They won't—they won't serve him, they won't sell him a coat.

01:57:14:06

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So he's super angry by all of this and he goes back and talks to Roy Stryker and says, you know, "What's going on?" You know, "Why did you send me out there to experience this? I want to go out and now make photographs that really express all of this anger." And Stryker then said, you know, "This is just your first assignment. Now I want you to write all about how you feel; what happened to you and how

you feel. Just write it all down and start to think about how you would make photographs that would express that feeling." So he does this, he—you know, Parks writes a lot.

01:57:55:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He looks at a lot of photographs; I mean he basically starts out the first, you know, weeks of his fellowship. He's—he's beginning to, you know, get advice and to learn about how it is that you make photographs that can express the kind of feelings that he had his whole life. You know, he says… you know, "I wanted to go out and make a photograph of a bigot and just label it, you know, with the word bigot." And Stryker said to him, "You can't do that. I mean, that could be anybody, you know. You can't—it's not gonna make a picture that is effective in any way. You have to figure out how to make that photograph."

01:58:40:03

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, you know, I think it was really through doing some reading, and writing and looking very closely through many of the photographs in the FSA files that they kept there, you know, in their office in Washington that– that Parks began to understand, you know, what he had to do. So the first pictures he makes in Washington, he goes out

into the city and he photographs the demolition of buildings that are being demolished for new—new buildings that are being built for war workers coming into Washington.

01:59:20:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He goes to South—Southwest DC, basically into the alleys that are very impoverished slums and he photographed people living there. This is an area of Washington that was already slated for– for, you know, re—sort of reconstruction. And so he wants to go and he wants to, you know, meet people there and he photographed people, you know, in the alleys of DC and, you know, really showing the conditions. He starts to really meet people and understand how you have to talk to people and you have to be able to, you know, work with all these complex tools to make images that are gonna be effective.

02:00:07:21

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, he very quickly begins to learn this. He also has access to, you know, very sophisticated laboratory technicians who are helping to develop the film and print the photographs. He doesn't have to do all of that himself. You know, new cameras that he uses, you know, he's beginning, you know, to really understand how to use the large four by five cameras that the other FSA photographers are using

and the lighting that they do. And he's also meeting other photographers.

02:00:42:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

People like John Colliers becomes a very close friend of his and Marjorie Collins, other FSA photographers who are there at the time, and they help him understand some of the… techniques that he has to learn. And so, you know, it's very quickly Parks picks up, you know, what he's gonna have to do to make a difference, you know, with his fellowship time. And one of my favorite photographs that he makes kind of early on in– in June of 1942 is a picture of a young woman in new segregated housing that was built for war workers, for African American workers who were coming to Washington to help, you know, in the administration of all the agencies involved in the war effort.

02:01:39:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, many people are coming to the city and the population is growing, but housing is still segregated so Parks is sent to this new housing development in Anacostia—south of the Anacostia River in Southwest DC, and he makes a photograph of a woman making dinner at home, it's a very beautiful photograph. And she's peeling potatoes and she's looking out the window at her two little children

playing—you know, just out the window. You know, in many ways it's a picture that could be, you know, an advertisement that you would see in, you know, in *Life* Magazine at the time.

02:02:23:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

It's a very sophisticated photograph. You know, the woman is sitting actually looking through a window, her kids are playing outside. You know, and there's this real sense of looking over them while taking care of them and so it's a photograph that, you know, it's very much about how… you know, life is ok for African Americans moving to Washington and living in segregated housing. You know, the housing is nice and it's actually ok, things are getting better. So why is he making this picture?

02:02:59:10

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Why is the Office of War Information asking for pictures like this to be made? And you know, as I thought about this, you know, I began to understand better how you know at this stage of World War II, there was great tension in America, especially racial tension around the idea that segregation still existed in a society that was fighting a war that was all about freedom. And so, African American leaders were using

this situation in some ways to basically ask the government to make things better, to help to desegregate the country.

02:03:41:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And, you know, there were marches on Washington that were being organized and– and Roosevelt is– is basically forced by African American leaders to desegregate the military industries that are doing the manufacturing of, you know, like building ships and that kind of thing and you know, it's a very complicated and tense situation. And so what Gordon Parks is doing for the Farm Security Administration at the time is he's helping to make pictures that would ask African Americans to support the war effort and to show that, you know, yes things are not good because of segregation, but at the same time, we have to support the war effort because if we don't then America could lose the war.

02:04:36:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And then we'll all be enslaved again by Hitler. So that was the conversation going on at the time, and Parks' early photographs, you know, in some ways have to do with pictures of the African American community coming together around the idea of supporting the war effort, you know, segregated civil defense. You know, soldiers going off

to war, you know, soldiers in training. He's making pictures of all these kind of things. And so I think it's—you know, it's a complicated situation, but it's a training situation for Parks.

02:05:16:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He may not have, you know, fully understood or wanted to be making the photographs that he was, but you know in some ways he… he made pictures that were incredibly sophisticated in a community that many other photographers couldn't work in. And so I also asked myself, you know, why was it that the Rosenwald Fund wanted Gordon Parks to come to Washington, which was itself a segregated city for his fellowship? And you know, it really had to do with how, you know, the country was coming together around the idea of, you know, this push to, you know… to fight the war and turn the other cheek to the idea that the military was still segregated. And when the war was over then you know, things would get better. That was basically what the government was– was interested in saying at the time.

02:06:17:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

In some ways, I think working at the Farm Security Administration, then the Office of War Information, Gordon began to understand how photography could really be used to convince people of a point of

view. In some ways, he was working with the great propagandists of the time. People who were using images to help to convince the country of the need to fight a war. And one of the things that the Office of War Information is doing is they're actually creating a publication that's going to be distributed to African American communities across the country.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it's a very sophisticated publication called *Negroes in the War*, a pamphlet that could be reproduced in, you know, massive numbers. I think three million almost were created, and they were distributed in churches, in community centers and newsstands and you know, for free all across the country. And many of these photographs by Parks that he makes early in his time in Washington are used in that publication, you know, along with other works by other photographers working with the FSA and other federal agencies.

02:07:37:18

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, you know, I think that the– the purpose of the photographs he's making became very clear to Gordon Parks and he understood then, you know, how important they were, you know, in helping the country at the time to actually, you know, defeat the axis powers that

we'd gone to war with and I think you know, he understood the power of photography to be part of that effort. You know, on one level there's, you know, armies fighting the war with guns and tanks and ships and you know, all kinds of weaponry in Europe and in Japan.

02:08:24:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, and in another level you know there are artists and photographers working to also, you know, fight a war and I think that's, you know, in part how his understanding of his choice of weapons, you know, became more clear to him and his, you know, his true belief in it. You know I think he preferred to be, you know, behind the camera than you know, behind the—behind the gun.

Ella Watson

02:08:57:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that Gordon was–– was certainly aware that, you know, he was part of this effort, you know. And I don't know that at the time that he felt manipulated by it or– or that he shouldn't be doing what he was doing but, you know, I think he understood that the government and the Office of War Information and the Farm Security Administration

are really in many ways, you know, needing and using these photographs in a way that he may have been not entirely behind, himself.

02:09:34:16

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that he also needed to find his own voice with photography right at this time, and so Roy Stryker gave him that opportunity to begin working on a picture story, you know something where he could actually tell the story about—about a person for example, that he would meet that would maybe be more about the government's relationship with its own African American workers in a different way. So Roy Stryker actually introduces Gordon Parks to the cleaning woman who cleans the offices in the Agriculture Department where the FSA is based.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, he says to Gordon, you know, "Go and meet this woman, you know who cleans the offices. I think that you know, maybe you know she has an interesting story to tell so you know, ask her to tell you her story and you know, maybe she'll– she'll work with you to make a series of photographs." So Gordon then meets a woman by the name of Ella Watson who is a cleaning woman who works for

the agriculture department. A longtime federal worker in Washington who herself is raising, you know, like… you know, a family and you know, struggling to make ends meet. And so when they talk, Ella Watson tells her story to Gordon Parks.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

How, you know, she had actually, you know, struggled in her life and you know, her husband had died and she was now–– you know, her children were gone and she was now living in Washington with an adopted daughter, and her adopted daughter's young nieces and nephews who were there. Parks also refers to them as Ella Watson's grandchildren. And so, it's a life that's very hard for Ella Watson. She earns something like 1,020 dollars a year and you know, and shares this with her adopted family and helps to raise the kid.

02:12:08:06

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, Gordon Parks very quickly makes a portrait of Ella Watson. You know, he asks if he can photograph her, and he photographs her at work sweeping floors and cleaning the offices and then in one office, the office of the notary, the–– there's an American flag hanging on the wall and Parks poses Ella Watson in front of the flag basically holding her tools. You know, a very straightforward… portrait that, in some

ways, honors her work. It makes her appear to be a very serious, upright working woman who has worked for many years in her work.

02:13:06:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So she's posed and she has a broom and there's a mop leaning against the wall or against the desk kind of behind her in front of the American flag and you know, it's a very, very powerful photograph and Ella is, you know, she's standing and looking almost at the camera. Not quite, but really looking directly at the viewer. And as you see her, you know, somebody who is kind of dominated by this flag, which you know, it fills the upper half of the image. And so really it's the juxtaposition of the flag and the working woman, you know, that makes the picture so powerful.

02:13:53:22

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

In some ways, Gordon's asking a question with the photograph and telling a very powerful story about, you know, a woman who cleans the offices for the… the government and as is not able to advance in her work because she's Black. And at the same time we're fighting a war that's all about equality that's symbolized by the American flag with a military that's still segregated. So it's like this juxtaposition of the symbol of equality, you know, and the African American working

woman that creates, you know, a very powerful tension that, you know, in some ways became, you know, I think Parks' first, you know, real, you know, fully successful masterful photograph.

02:15:02:09

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it's–– that I say because, you know, of the story that it tells. You know, he's finally able to tell, you know, the story of his own anger over—you know, over equality and racism in a photograph. When Parks gives the photograph to Roy Stryker to show him, he brings a print in and Stryker says, "Well, you're getting the right idea, but you're gonna get us all fired." Because you know, the picture clearly doesn't serve the propaganda purposes of the– of the Farm Security Administration. And so, Parks continues to photograph Ella Watson. He worked with her for a period of weeks in August of 1942 and he photographs her at home, he photographs her at church, he photographs her neighborhood.

02:15:59:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He's basically making a picture story about her work—her work, her you know, the life of a working woman, and her children, and her you know, her grandchildren. And you know, there's one I think amazing photograph that he makes of Ella Watson at home where he shows

her, she's kind of preparing dinner and feeding the young kids who are actually the niece and two nephews of her adopted daughter, and all of them are in the photograph together, and the photograph is divided right down the middle and you see Ella Watson on the left side you know, helping to feed one of the young kids.

02:16:49:18

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, you kind of see through the kitchen into the backyard, you know, with the light streaming through, and then on the right side of the picture, you see the rest of a room, you know, a living space and there's a mirror sitting on top of a chest of drawers, and her adopted daughter is reflected in the mirror, and on top of the drawers you can see also a photograph that's sitting there and it's a photograph of Ella Watson's parents. So you're actually seeing four generations of this family all in one photograph that's composed in a very sophisticated way.

02:17:35:09

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

It's divided right down the middle and you know, on one side, you know, her daughter's reflected in the mirror and so you see her really simply as a reflection, and on the other side you see the daily life so in some ways it may be the—you know, the real life on one side and then

the dream on the other side, the dream life. A strategy that you see in other FSA photographs. It's not something that Gordon Parks just hit upon right there. He had seen that in other people's work. Often photographers would use photographs within photographs as an idea.

02:18:14:06

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, frames and windows and doors and mirrors, all of this, they're strategic devices that photographers use to tell stories; you know like you're looking through something or you're seeing something reflected that's not really there or might be in a different space, and so it's one of my favorite photographs, it's called *Ella Watson and her Grandchildren*.

02:18:38:19

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, Gordon has a very sophisticated understanding of how photographs work by this time. And so you know, if you want to really convey a sense of a person in their—you know, in their life and their environment, you know, you have to understand their history and you know, who they are and where they came from. And sometimes that can come through in photographs by, you know, including other pictures like family pictures.

02:19:09:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know Gordon, you know, he certainly begins to do that in this photograph that he makes of Ella Watson and the children, but you know, it's a tradition that he continues in, you know, other series and you know, it's a way of really bringing the past into the present and, you know, really kind of compressing time in a way in a photograph. That– that you know, it's something that you know, once you learn to do that, it's a strategy you can use to, you know, to help to tell a story.

The Tuskegee Airmen

02:19:50:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

At the end of, you know, Gordon's time with the Office of War Information, he is sent to Michigan to photograph Black fighter pilots, Tuskegee airmen in training, before they are sent to Europe to fight. And so, Parks you know, he now understands that, you know, the best way to do this is to like get to know the pilots really well, become friends with them, eat dinner with them, you know, live with them, fly with them, the whole thing; travel to Europe with them, you know.

02:20:30:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He—he understood that, you know, one of the most amazing things happening in– in the relationship of Blacks in the military to the government was that African Americans were, for the first time, being trained to fly, uh, fighter jet–– were being, for the first time, trained to fly, you know, fighter planes. And so, it was a really important project for Parks. He– he photographed portraits of a number of these pilots in training in Michigan, and he flew with them in training, and he actually was prepared, himself, to travel to Europe with the fighter group and document them in combat.

02:21:21:23

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it would be for the first time African Americans would be shown photographically flying in combat, and Parks understood the importance of that to the African American community; it was a super important thing at the time. So when it was time for him to go with the group to Europe, he wasn't allowed to go. There were a number of roadblocks along the way that were set up for him. You know, first he was told, you know, his papers weren't in order. You know, he actually traveled with the—you know, with the fighter group to the embarkation point near Norfolk, Virginia.

02:22:12:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He was there with them and finally he was told he couldn't go. And he tried to find out why this was and you know, eventually he understood that the military would not allow photographs of African Americans in combat. It was too controversial at the time publicly, to show especially sophisticated aircraft, you know, like the fighter planes they were flying in the hands of African American pilots successfully, you know, like fighting. It just was something that could not be photographed.

02:22:54:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

The pictures were made for—the pictures of training were made for a Office of War Information propaganda magazine that was called *Victory*. And it was a magazine that was actually distributed around the world and so the American propaganda machinery, I mean they really wanted to show African Americans in training, flying airplanes because it was intended to counter the German propaganda about racism in America. So, these magazines were distributed, they were thrown out of airplanes, distributed all over Europe.

02:23:45:07

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, and so when—I think when Parks was told he wouldn't be able to go with them and he understood that, he immediately resigned his commission that he had with the Office of War Information and you know, he left working with them, and then went to New York and started working there very quickly with Roy Stryker, who had already left the Office of War Information for Standard Oil of New Jersey.

02:24:21:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that Gordon's experience with the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information was a seminal experience for him. I mean, it was—in some ways, it was his first professional job… as a photographer and he was, you know, given you know, a lot of responsibility and he made amazing work. Really, some of the best work he ever made during that time. And so I think you know, that legacy it's something that, you know, everybody, you know, sees as a seminal experience for– for Gordon.

02:25:00:11

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

What happens with the Farm Security Administration photographers is that by October of 1942, which is really only a few months after Parks begins working with the FSA, by October, Roy Stryker understands that the FSA is not gonna last very long. It's not going to

be around very long, and so he actually moves a group of the photographers from the FSA to the Office of War Information. And he himself moves to the Office of War Information for a period of time.

02:25:41:07

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Very different job and a very different purpose than what the photographers were doing at the Farm Security Administration. But in some ways, because Gordon Parks comes late into the FSA, you know, he's really never part of that purpose. You know, his purpose there was much more about making pictures that would help to support the war effort, you know, and doing jobs for other agencies than it was for, you know, rural resettlement of farmers. He wasn't making those pictures.

Standard Oil Company

02:26:22:09

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So in January of 1944, Gordon begins working for Standard Oil Company New Jersey. That's its official name. And in, you know, some months before, I think in October of 1943, Roy Stryker had taken a job. He was fed up with the Office of War Information and he had taken a

job with Standard Oil Company, which was essentially a public relations job to set up a photography unit there that would help to document sort of the face of oil in the United States, but also internationally.

02:27:07:04

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so this was—I mean, it was a really important thing for the corporation, this public relations project because Standard Oil had, for some time, been vilified by the government for a cartel agreement that they had made with a German chemical company by the name of IG Farben. IG Farben Industry. And this agreement that was made in the late 1920's essentially kind of carved up territory and the German chemical company said, "we're not going to enter competition with you in the United States as long as you don't develop synthetic rubber." That was the essence of the agreement.

02:28:02:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so that was ok for a period of time but you know, by the early 1940's, the American industry wasn't able to provide many of the needs for the military to– to fight the war. And one of those needs was rubber. The Japanese had essentially taken over many of the rubber plantations in Southeast Asia, and the American companies were not

able to—American companies were not able to create synthetic rubber because of that agreement. And so all of a sudden, all this you know, new research and development had to be fast tracked and so Standard Oil did not have a good reputation in the country.

02:28:58:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

They decided to hire a public relations firm, one of the first times industry really gets into public relations like this. And one of the things that they begin doing is using art and especially photography to help to convince the country that Standard Oil is doing everything it can to help fight the war and also, you know, they're everybody's neighbors and we're all using all of Standard's products anyway and it's a good company to work for.

02:29:31:00

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So Gordon Parks was–– he was able to photograph for Standard really in the Northeast of the United States and in Canada. They didn't send him to the south where there were, you know, many refineries in the south and you know, and in the west because I think that Stryker understood that he wouldn't—you know, he wouldn't be able to work there, you know, because of segregation. So essentially, you know, he begins making very, very professional photographs in all kinds of, you

know, interesting and difficult situations and they're photographing all kinds of different aspects of what Standard Oil is and all of their subsidiaries.

02:30:17:20

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So it's not just an oil company; Standard Oil of New Jersey is also making grease that's used to lubricate locomotives or also the machinery of war. And it's being shipped to Europe, you know, in barrels and all of this. So Parks is photographing, you know, the production of grease. He's also photographing the role of African Americans in Standard Oil operations. He is asked to travel to Canada to photograph a—the work of a Standard Oil subsidiary, first in Alberta and then in Yellowknife, which is in the Northwest territories, very far north.

02:31:11:05

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And he makes, you know, photographs of gold miners who are also using the oil of one of Standard's subsidiaries in their work, and he's photographing… native people in the Northwest territories as well who, you know, he basically gets to know them and makes, you know, these beautiful portraits of a group of Native Americans in Northwest Canada.

02:31:46:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

It a–– I mean, it's an interesting question about Gordon Parks and social justice. I don't think that he thought of himself as engaged with social justice, per se, at this time in his career. When he left the Office of War Information, he was able to bring his family to New York and they could be together, but you know, he had to earn a living. And this was really the very first well paying job that he had. It was also based on assignments, it was freelance work. So he wasn't employed by Standard Oil, but he was doing assignments.

02:32:26:21

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Sometimes these would take him out for, you know, a period of several months out on the road. But you know, he was very well paid for the work. I think he thought, at the time, that while it was difficult, it was work that was giving him great experience, a great network of people he was working with, and also he was able to make photographs in different kinds of environments that took all sorts of different skills. He went to photograph a community in Maine in the winter and you know, he meets a man and his family in rural Maine who was a—had a general store and a gas station, a kind of SO dealer, which was the Standard Oil brand at the time.

02:33:28:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, this was a chance for Parks to actually live with and work with a White family in rural Maine and make a series of photographs that would describe their life. Very different than anything he had done before. So I think it was that sort of broad experience he was looking for, and it's interesting how, you know, one might ask how could he actually, you know, make photographs in that environment and did they welcome him? And in many of the situations he went into with Standard Oil, he was welcomed, you know, in the Northern parts of the country and in Canada.

02:34:12:12

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And you know, I think it's in some ways because of Gordon himself and his personality; he was able to win many friends just through the stories he would tell or his personality. He was very outgoing and you know, made people feel, you know, very welcomed but also feel very comfortable with him. So I think because of that, he—you know, he was very successful doing that work. And he loved doing it.

***Ebony* Magazine**

02:34:49:11

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Because Gordon's work for Standard Oil was freelance work, he did other jobs primarily in the media. He really wanted to work for magazines and– and he began doing assignments for picture magazines, especially *Ebony*, which is an African American lifestyle magazine kind of modeled after *Life* that was started by John Johnson. In November of 1945 is the first issue of *Ebony* and it was a very successful project and very successful magazine, and Gordon has photographs in the very first issue.

02:35:40:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So he was known as a kind of go to photographer to, you know, make portraits, make pictures of, you know, like feature stories. He was very successful at doing that I think early in his career. It's interesting how, you know, Gordon really never talked about the work that he did for *Ebony*. He never talked to me about it–– didn't talk to many people about it. And he did a tremendous amount of photography for them between 1945 and 1950.

02:36:16:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I mean, it's hard to know how Gordon's relationship with *Ebony*, you know, sort of evolved. I think it was a good relationship for the first few years and Gordon's also doing a lot of other work for other magazines, and I also know that *Ebony* was hard to work for because they—you know, they were also struggling and trying to establish their reputation and you know, they hired all kinds of photographers all over the country to do different things and sometimes, you know, you might have to wait to get paid and all of that.

02:36:48:17

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So—and I also know the photographers didn't get their copyright for the photographs, and so I think that Gordon—you know, it was for him a job and he did really good work for *Ebony*, but it may have been difficult for him and you know, by 1949 he's hired as the first African American staff photographer at *Life* Magazine. And so he really moves away from the world in which he was working with *Ebony*. And you know, he begins working internationally for what was the biggest picture magazine, and so that may have also contributed to his relationship with *Ebony*.

02:37:34:23

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And then years later, I think, Gordon was hoping that he would get help from John Johnson in– in promoting his films, beginning with *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft* (1971) and he didn't. You know, I think he didn't really get the help that he expected to get, so that may have also contributed to their relationship.

Life Magazine

02:38:06:08

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

So by the—by the mid 1940's, Gordon's, you know, become a successful photographer in New York. He's working a lot with the media. But he's also connecting, I think, very closely with a number of African American artists who are kind of around New York as well, and one of these artists is Ralph Ellison, who becomes best known for his incredible book, *The Invisible Man*. But Gordon and Ralph Ellison are good friends, and they begin working on a project in New York that's about the relationship between mental health and poverty in Harlem.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And it's something that, you know, it's an assignment that Ralph Ellison has for a magazine and they want to do, you know, essentially a picture story with photographs and Ellison would write the text. And it's focused on a clinic that provides the… mental health care for free for residents of Harlem. The only thing of its kind. And so, Parks photographs with Ellison, they go around together and they make you know a series of photographs around Harlem that are very, very powerful photographs of, you know, kind of living conditions in– in– in Harlem, which shows you know, poverty and people who are homeless and people who are– are– are struggling with their own mental health because of those conditions.

02:39:41:05

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And he also photographs the clinic. So, the relationship between Ellison and Parks, you know, continues really through the 1940's. The story that they worked on was never published, and yet one of the topics that they're working on and Parks learns about is the life of gang members in Harlem, you know, and how young kids are in some ways forced to, you know… become members of gangs and lead a kind of gang life because of the living conditions their families are in.

02:40:29:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so, Parks continues, you know, to think about doing a project about youth gangs in Harlem. It's something he knows about and a point in 1948 when he has an opportunity to approach *Life* Magazine with an idea for a story. He proposes to do a story for *Life* about youth gangs in Harlem. And they eventually agree and then Gordon begins working with a young gang member, a 17-year-old kid by the name of Red Jackson who he meets and gets to know really quite well.

02:41:18:17

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

They spend a lot of time together before he ever photographs Red. And so, Parks over the summer of 1948, you know, he spends a lot of time photographing Red Jackson and his family. You know, in some ways this is like what he learned from the Farm Security Administration project he does with Ella Watson. He knows that he has to get to know somebody really well and spend time with them and photograph his family. So he photographs, you know, at home with Red Jackson.

02:41:59:07

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He photographs his mother, he photographs his brother. He photographs, you know, the gang member doing the dishes and he also photographs him out on the streets with his—with, you know,

members of his gang. He photographs fights and violence as well as, you know, the kind of tender moments among kids. So it's a really interesting, you know, kind of look at the life of a young, you know, gang leader in Harlem that in many ways it kind of defies the stereotypes of what one would think. And so, I think, you know, this is a point where Gordon Parks, you know, he fully realized his technical ability to do this kind of project.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And because, you know, he's in a position to make photographs about something that very few other people could do; you know he's able to actually create a story for *Life* Magazine, you know, the biggest picture magazine in the world that could… you know, if not overturn, it could push back at our sort of overarching stereotypes about youth gangs and the violence. You know, I think Gordon was much more interested in exploring the reasons for that life than he was at exploring, you know, the kind of spectacular violence of it.

02:43:30:11

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so because of the success of *Harlem Gang Leader* when it was published in *Life* Magazine in November of 1948, Parks continued to do assignments for *Life* and not long after in February of 1949, he was

hired onto the staff as the first African American photographer at *Life*, which was a really big deal. I mean, this was, you know, a–– an entry into the media for an African American photographer that hadn't happened before into the mainstream, you know, media that was seen internationally, and it was an opportunity for Parks then to present the—a picture of the African American community, internationally, that really wasn't known and hadn't been presented before.

02:44:28:13

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And that included, you know, all kinds of things. You know, portraits of artists. It wasn't just, you know, the things he had done before, you know, like stories about– about segregation, but it was much more of a kind of overarching look at the African American community that was so essential at the time.

02:44:50:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that it's a very complicated situation when a photographer's working for a magazine like *Life*. I mean, you really don't have control over the editing of the story and the pictures, and so I think that he certainly didn't get the story that he wanted it to be. And I think, you know, he was not involved in writing it, but at the same time he was able to present images that were, you know, a kind of different look at

gang life than had been seen before. You know, there were a number of letters written into *Life* by people after it was published and you know, they did go both ways.

02:45:34:02

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, some were quite critical and thought that it was a very negative look at Black life in Harlem and others were much more sympathetic. You know, I think for Parks the publication of the story was more important than control over the content of it. You know, he wasn't in the position to get the control over the content at that time. And later in his career, you know, beginning in the early sort of 1960's, he actually leaves the staff of *Life*. He's no longer staff photographer and he continues to do work for them.

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PHILIP BROOKMAN:

Specific assignments where he has more control. He could ask for more control and so I—you know, I think that was, you know, it's something that he kind of worked through in his career. He was able to think very carefully about how he could… present, you know, the image of the African American community, you know, to as wide an audience as possible in a way that would be effective.

02:46:47:15

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

In some ways, you know, I think the importance of a story like *Harlem Gang Leader*, it comes as much from, you know, the quality of the photographs certainly, but also the fact that it was done by an African American photographer in an African American Community in 1948 was really influential. I mean, that– that alone inspired a number of other photographers and– and– and magazines to actually begin desegregating those industries. So I think you know, he was a pioneer. It was the first time that it really happened the way that it happened and you know, its importance comes as much from that as from, you know, the–– the– that content of the story itself.

Legacy

02:47:49:01

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I think that it's important to understand Gordon Parks', you know, great influence on people. He was, you know, somebody who really struggled in his life and was able to succeed, you know, and in some ways rise to the very peak of his various professions over a period of, you know, of his career. And so, that was really influential and inspired, you know, not only photographers, but also artists and

filmmakers and musicians and you know, all kinds of people who have seen his work.

02:48:30:10

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And so it's the—you know, the notion that, you know, that he was the one who was the pioneer who kind of broke through the barrier that was there, was—was really important. And so you know, I think in some ways his importance comes from his pictures, his style, his ability to work with people, but also, you know, his influence goes far and wide. He understood that. You know, I think by the early 1960's when he sort of moved more away from photography and more away from *Life* and moved more into writing and you know, sort of experimenting with his work.

02:49:15:13

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

He wrote a novel, he wrote a series of memoirs, he made films, documentary films, and then feature films all in the span of the 1960's. And so you know, I think that was a time when, you know, he kind of pushed himself, you know, even just that much further, and he did much of that to inspire future generations of African American people, you know, to understand that they could choose their own weapons. They could, you know, tell their own stories, that the voice was—you

know, was so important and there was now opportunity to, you know, to make those stories heard.

02:50:05:18

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

I mean, Gordon—he was—you know, he was such a cool person and everybody thought of him that way and you know, I think that comes from, you know, his proximity to this vast social change that begins with the modern Civil Rights Movement, and that coincides with the moment that Parks decides to become a photographer. So, you know, with the beginning of World War II and you know, the need to desegregate the country, you know, to make things better you know, through the 1940's.

02:50:43:00

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, and the desegregation of schools and you know, the… pushing of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's, and the March on Washington, and all of these things that Parks is involved in photographing. You know, I mean he was there. He was kind of the eyes and you know, the boots on the ground through, you know, the whole modern Civil Rights Movement. And so, I think that in some ways, you know, is– is his legacy.

02:51:19:21

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

You know, I think one of the keys to understanding Gordon Parks is that he witnessed the entire modern Civil Rights Movement. He became a photographer really when the movement begins with the—you know, the advent of World War II and the need to desegregate the country, and the push to do that and to desegregate schools and to, you know, essentially create the Civil Rights Movement that leads to the civil rights legislation that completely changes the country. Gordon Parks was the eyes of that movement.

02:52:02:10

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

His pictures were the pictures people saw. He was the boots on the ground, he was there. You know, he was in the South, you know, making you know, photographs of, you know, segregation in the south in 1956. 1955, 1956. He was—you know, he was there at the March on Washington. In, you know, 1963, he was there at Martin Luther King's funeral when King died. He was the one the Black Panther Party came to and asked him to be their minister of culture and he turned them down because he felt that, you know, his—you know, his role as the eyes of the Civil Rights Movement was more than just, you know, the—you know, the Black Power Movement of 1969, 1970.

02:52:50:14

PHILIP BROOKMAN:

And I think, you know, in some ways Parks is now, you know, known for all of that. And you know, then he– he pushed all of what he had learned into his understanding of, you know, how to tell a story. He pushed that into the film, *Shaft* that he directed, you know, the first you know, significant, you know… image of a strong African American character in a film like that. And you know, people were, in some ways, blown away. Parks was there.

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