***Kansas 1972* Podcast**
Episode 8 – Kansas Through the Camera's Eye

SERIES INTRO

Tracy Quillin:
This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936)
The Grasslands. A treeless windswept continent of grass stretching from the broad Texas panhandle up to the mountain reaches of Montana to the Canadian border. Country of high winds and sun. High winds and sun. Without rivers. Without streams. With little rain.

Kara Heitz:
The camera, especially the movie camera, has often depicted the prairies of the Great Plains as a pretty harsh environment.

***The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936)**
High winds and sun. High winds and sun. A country without rivers and with little rain. Settler plow at your peril

Kara Heitz:
That's from Pare Lorentz's 1936 classic documentary "The Plow That Broke the Plains." Lorentz was hired by the US government to make a film that dramatically communicated how humans were responsible for the environmental calamity of the Dust Bowl. You can imagine how many Kansas farmers reacted to that message! (Although it's kind of true …)

Fast forward almost four decades and this barren and windswept image of the Kansas prairie pops up again in one of my favorite movies from the 1970s, Peter Bogdanovich's "Paper Moon."

***Paper Moon* trailer**
Kansas, 1936. Out of the darkest days of the Depression, comes the adventures of two unlikely con artists, Mose Prey and his companion, Addie Loggins…

Kara Heitz:
In 1972, Hollywood movie crews descended upon central and western Kansas to film *Paper Moon*. The wide shots of long and dusty roads in the middle of a flat and almost treeless landscape certainly add an aura of desolation, even lifelessness. In the film, this landscape acts as a contrasting backdrop to lively and vexed human interactions. But in terms of public relations, this negatively uniform portrayal of Kansas persists in popular culture, even to this day.

But it's not just the depiction of dust and drought, it's something deeper that this image connotes – the sense of an unchanging, unmoving space, where people, history, culture are almost frozen in time. And anyone who has lived in Kansas, in the 1930s, 1970s, or today, knows this is definitely not true.

Kara Heitz:
In this episode, we look at two photographers who in the early 1970s engaged with Kansas and Kansans in more complex and nuanced ways through the lenses of their cameras.

We'll look at some of the concerns about rural and small-town Kansas at the time.

"The bank is gone. So are dozen other businesses…"

Kara Heitz:
And see how photographer Terry Evans helped capture the human side of these issues.

"I was so moved by the people I visited and how their lives were moving and changing"

Kara Heitz:
We'll also discuss images from a gift that photographer Gordon Parks gave to K-State

"We know that this body of work was one that Parks carefully constructed, carefully thought about."

Kara Heitz:
And how these images reflect Parks' own complicated relationship with his home state.

"I think all his life he felt him himself as a Kansan. It's just the fact he just hated the way he was treated during that time"

SEGMENT 1 – TERRY EVANS

1970s*, The Agricultural Midwest, Farming in the Corn Belt*
The productivity of our farms here in the Midwest is one of America's greatest achievements. But there are problems as agriculture continues to change… Since today, more food can be grown on less land. Many agricultural areas are being bought up for other uses homes, and factories, and highways. Some farmers wonder, and we continue to feed a growing world population with less and less land. And what about higher costs? Deserted farm stands reminders of families who are unable to keep up. What will be the future for our Midwestern family farms?

Kara Heitz:
In 1972, the effects of economic growth and change were definitely on the minds of many Kansans. How would communities respond to interconnected issues such as the future of the family farm, shrinking populations in small towns, increasing migration to urban areas, urbanization of formerly rural areas, and growing rural poverty?

Terry Evans:
It was about showing changing conditions in rural Kansas. And so I, I traveled a lot around north central Kansas. And I went out a little bit farther west. Particularly communities that had some. Ethnic identity, cultural identity that was still alive.

Kara Heitz:
That's Terry Evans speaking about a Kansas Committee for the Humanities project she worked on in the 1970s, which documented how rural Kansas and Kansans were experiencing a lot of uncertainty in the face of social and economic upheaval.

Evans today is known primarily for her work photographing the landscapes of the American Midwest, especially her stunning aerial views of prairie ecosystems. Her work often explores issues of environmental sustainability and the relationship between humans and the land. Her photographs are in a number of major museum collections including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian, the Whitney, the Nelson-Atkins, and many others.

However, Evans' career did not start out with exploring the prairie landscape. For most of the 1970s, she used her photographs to tell stories about the people of Kansas, and how the lives of often overlooked individuals were impacted by the forces of tradition and change.

Terry Evans:
I grew up in Kansas City in a in a middle-class neighborhood. And I was always, as long as I can remember, curious about conditions of poverty. I think I kind of romanticized it. As a young woman… living in poverty looked to me like another world. And I just I wanted to know it and I wanted to understand it. And photograph it and try to tell those stories myself as a photographer.

Kara Heitz:
In 1972, the University of Kansas hosted a photography exhibit called “Poverty in Kansas”, which featured images that Evans has begun taking in 1970 as part of her first photography project.

She initially photographed a more urban area in Kansas City, Kansas, connecting with a local community organization to help her find subjects.

Terry Evans:
I would simply walk around the neighborhoods and photograph people, and I would go back. I didn't go just once. I would go back and I got to know them. Sometimes I would take groceries. I would always take prints to give them the pictures I'd taken. And so, you know, so I gradually began to know those their stories.

Kara Heitz:
Evans had received a bachelor’s in fine arts degree from the University of Kansas in drawing and painting. But her father was a professional photographer, and her parents owned a photography studio in Kansas City. So, while she was not formally trained in photography, she learned quite a bit from them. However, she also was receiving an “on the job” education during her “Poverty in Kansas” project.

Terry Evans:
I had no idea at the time, but, you know, this was my training in photography and to go into someone's home that I didn't know and establish a connection with him so that they were willing to tell me their stories and let me photograph them. I realized many years later was pretty amazing

Kara Heitz:
Evans expanded the “Poverty in Kansas” project beyond Kansas City, Kansas, and visited a number of smaller towns and rural communities, mostly in central Kansas.

Rural poverty was a growing concern not just in Kansas, but nationally. In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson created a commission to study the issue. In a report called “The People Left Behind,” the commission documented a poverty rate in rural areas of America at 25%, almost twice as high as the poverty rate in urban areas. Poverty rates in America, both urban and rural, did decline in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but pretty much since the 1970s, they have held steady. According to 2019 data, 15.4% of Americans living in rural areas and 11.9% living in urban areas had incomes below the federal poverty line.

And in 1972, Kansas politicians shared this concern.

Press release from the Office of Senator Bob Dole, Rural Development Act of 1972, 04-19-1972

Press release from the Office of Senator Bob Dole, Washington D.C., April 19th 1972 - Senator Dole … told his Senate colleagues today that the greatest need for rural Americans is improved income “so that those who are presently there will find it desirable and economically feasible to remain.” The senator from Kansas pointed out his belief that rural America is still the best place to live and raise a family.”

Kara Heitz:
While statistics and data are, of course, important, especially for public policy issues, sometimes a photograph can be more convincing. An image can help us connect directly to another individual in a way numbers simply cannot.

I asked Terry Evans if there were any of her subjects from the “Poverty in Kansas” project that she felt especially connected to.

Terry Evans:
then there was one couple that I photographed many times, and they had been married like 75 years. And I remember the last time I went there, the man saying, well, I lost mom last week. And, you know, I was so moved by the people I visited and how their lives were moving and changing. And, you know, their lives were rich, rich and full…

Kara Heitz:
In addition to the University of Kansas, the “Poverty in Kansas” exhibit traveled to Salina, where Terry Evans was living at the time. The back page of the January 23rd, 1972, edition of the Salina Journal printed four images from this exhibit, all of them children, along with a rather poetic piece of editorial text.

***The Salina Journal*, 01-23-1972, “Statistics**”
The faces here are statistics in flesh – vulnerable flesh in early years. The children on this page are not poor – if being poor means knowing that you are.
Knowing poverty, that it is cruel and relentless, is reality beyond tomorrow.
They are solemn. The innocent stare from economic prisons whose walls they do not see - and cannot scale.
They live in Central Kansas.
They are neighbors.
Is it unkind to turn the bare flesh to newsprint, flat, rolled, thrown on Sunday doorsteps?
Is it harsh exposure to strangers – who may be compassionate – but again apathetic or offended?

Kara Heitz:
One photo from the exhibit featured in this article is particularly striking to me. It’s entitled “Two Children, Abilene, Kansas,” A small boy and girl stand in front of a rough-looking wooden wall, both with dirty faces. The smaller of the two children is the boy, who is positioned in the middle of the frame, body turned sideways, bright eyes gazing to his right, with light showing his face and body. The girl, possibly his sister, stands to the boy’s left (on the right side of the frame from the viewer’s perspective). Her figure has receded into the shadows. We don’t see her as clearly as the boy, but her eyes hold

your attention. They stare straight ahead, gazing fixedly at the viewer. On the left side of the frame is a wooden door, painted white, in contrast to the dark wall the children are in front of.

This photo currently resides in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. (Side note: we'll try to put links to all of the photos we specifically reference in this episode on the Humanities Kansas website.)

The "Poverty in Kansas" project became the first step in what would become Terry Evans' lifelong artistic practice.

Terry Evans:
You know, at the time I was debating, should I go into social work, should I get more training or should I be a photographer? And it became really clear to me through doing that project that what I loved was making the pictures and telling the stories through photography…that's when I knew that that was my life direction.

Kara Heitz:
During the early 1970s, Evans became connected with James Enyeart [`IN-YURT], who was the curator of photography at the University of Kansas art museum from 1968-1976. Enyeart would later be the director of the renowned George Eastman Museum and is considered a leading expert on the history of photography.

Enyeart invited Evans to work on a project with him called "Kansas in Transition – The Human Dimension," which was funded by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities (now Humanities Kansas).

If you remember from our very first episode, the Kansas Committee for the Humanities was founded in 1972, as part of a larger process of creating state-level humanities agencies across the country. Both the National Endowment for the Humanities and these state agencies were tasked with cultivating "wisdom and vision" in its citizens in the hopes of strengthening American democracy.

So how exactly were organizations like the Kansas Committee for the Humanities supposed to do this? By creating conservations. And these conversations were supposed to directly connect to pressing public policy issues of the day.

For the 1973-1974 funding cycle, the Kansas Committee for the Humanities chose the theme "Kansas in Transition." And if you have listened to other episodes of this podcast, you know the 1970s was definitely a moment of transition! Here is how a KCH brochure described this theme.

KCH, *Kansas in Transition* brochure
Where change is related to public policy, people have choices. Change, although inevitable, need not be mindless, unplanned, or disruptive. People need not be at the

mercy of impersonal forces rolling inexorably along. Kansans, like people everywhere, have choices. …

These public policy issues and others have been the focus of a series of forums sponsored by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities, working together with local organizations and interest groups all over the state. Experience suggests that there are no easy answers – perhaps no answers at all – but only intelligent choices. …

Kara Heitz:
Some of the topics funded during that 1973-1974 cycle include:
Land use and community development, Manhattan
Public Policy and the world of the aging, McPherson
The Individual in a rapidly changing culture, Salina
The Chicano dilemma: Cultural values in a changing community, Wichita
De-population and basic human values, Hays
AND
Kansas in Transition – The Human Dimension in Lawrence

In his description of the program for the Kansas Committee for the Humanities, James Enyeart wrote about the role of photography in sparking discussions about critical issues of the time.

James Enyeart:
“Providing the visual stimulation for discussion and thought will be an exhibition of photographs that record the texture of life in urbanized and industrialized areas; the effects of growth on the land and on the traditional rural community; the migration from rural to urban areas; the vitality of ethnic heritages; and the value of unchanged areas. The photographs will provide an opportunity to estimate the impact of change or lack of it on the quality of life throughout the state of Kansas.”

Kara Heitz:
Both James Enyeart and Terry Evans set off to photograph a variety of communities in Kansas, to show how larger economic and social changes were affecting them and also what traditions endured.

Enyeart put together a traveling display of 65 black and white photographs as well as a continuous slide presentation that documented topics such as industrialization, urbanization, unchanged rural areas, ethnic heritages, and the effects of change on Kansas communities.

The exhibition toured six towns in Kansas: Shawnee Mission, Topeka, Colby, Garden City, Coffeyville, and Salina.

***The Salina Journal*, 04-14-74. “The passing face of rural Kansas”**
The Salina Journal, April 14, 1974. The passing face of rural Kansas.

Mrs. Terry Evans … is compiling a portfolio of rural Kansas photographs with emphasis on customs which are vanishing in this modern age. The photographs on this page are part of a voluminous collection she has taken in the past few years. They will be among pictures displayed at an exhibit of photography entitled “Kansas in Transition - the Human Dimension” to be on display … at the Salina Community Theatre.
In conjunction with the exhibition, there will be a symposium, open to the public … which will include discussions on the topics of growth and change and how they affect Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
While the photographs on their own told important stories, to facilitate direct connections with policy issues, every exhibition included a symposium with a panel partly composed of James Enyeart and other humanities professionals. Additional panel members were drawn from the leaders of each individual community, such as the mayor or members of the chamber of commerce. Members of the public were invited to view the photographs, listen to a panel discussion, then actively participate in an open discussion about how these issues affected their communities.

James Enyeart:
…The discussion feedback part was very important to him. You know, this was not just an excuse to have a photo exhibit. He was very interested in the issues and, and in involving the local community.

Kara Heitz:
I think this really connects with that earlier statement by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities … there are no easy answers – perhaps no answers at all – but only intelligent choices. Issues like small-town depopulation, land use, urbanization, and rural poverty certainly have no quick solutions. But perhaps the combination of images and discussions provokes more thoughtful choices.

All the photographs, slides, and archival materials for this project are housed at the Spencer Research Library at KU. How cool would it be to see a 50th-anniversary exhibit! I’m just saying.

Kara Heitz:
The “Kansas in Transition – The Human Dimension” project was successful enough that James Enyeart thought it could evolve into something much larger. So in 1974, Enyeart approached the National Endowment for the Arts about a project that would become known as “No Mountains in the Way.”

Here’s Enyeart describing the project in an exhibition catalog.

***No Mountains in the Way*, Kansas Survey: NEA, 1975**
I selected two photographers who were born and raised in Kansas. Terry Evans, Larry Schwarm, and myself had all photographed Kansas for several years prior to this project. For each of us the essence or spirit of the state was manifested in a different

form … However, it was our consensus that when the three individual approaches were combined, an even greater sense of Kansas was apparent …

Terry Evans turned her attention to what she described as the strength, straightforwardness, and calm of rural Kansas people. …
Larry Schwarm turned inward to find the meaning of the outward symbols which stirred his sensitivities. …
For myself, the architecture represented a vast, vital storehouse of the promises and failures, the dreams and disappointments … of an ever-changing culture.

Kara Heitz:
This series of contrasts is revealed in the photos themselves. For example, the cover image is one taken by Enyeart. A solitary building fills most of the frame. It appears to be a wooden structure, perhaps a simple commercial building on the main street of a small town. You can't tell from the photo whether the building is abandoned or occupied. The blinds are open, but it appears empty inside. No human figures are visible, but a pair of dogs are standing on the sidewalk at the edge of the building. Does this mean there are people inside? Or are these wandering canines, sniffing around an abandoned building? The indeterminacy is what makes this image live in that contrast between, as Enyeart says, dreams and disappointments. Has this town succumbed to the trend of small-town decline, or is it holding on?

Another photo from the collection, this one by Terry Evans, also exists in this contrast. It's an image of four young men, all appearing to be right on that line between youth and adulthood. They pose as a group in front of an open bard door, holding positions that convey a sense of casualness. One is sitting on a haybale, another has his arm placed on his hip with a foot stepping up onto the hay. The other two are leaning against the frame of the barn door. All boys are gazing right at the camera, although with squinting eyes. Perhaps they are facing a sun we cannot see in the frame of the photo. Are they about to start a day of hard farm labor? Or are they about to drink a few beers after finishing their work? And how much longer will they stay? Or like so many other young people in rural areas, will they escape to what they see as "greener pastures" as soon as they transition into adulthood?

"No Mountains in the Way" was exhibited at the University of Kansas in 1975. Its success led the National Endowment for the Arts to create a grant category for documentary photography, which funded over 100 regional artists from 1976-1981 to create photographic representations of local communities across the country.

To this day, "No Mountains in the Way" is considered a groundbreaking project of documentary photography. In 2015, for the 40th anniversary of the exhibit, the Wichita Art Museum organized a show that included 63 images from the original collection. In 2016, the exhibit traveled to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. And it's kind of cool to think about how the seed for this all started in Kansas in 1972.

All three of the photographers involved –

James Enyeart, Terry Evans, and Larry Schwarm – have gone to to having long and accomplished careers as photographers. Larry Schwarm is a distinguished professor of photography at Wichita State University, and his work in the collections of the Smithsonian the Library of Congress, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and many others.

***The Land*, 1962**
The bank is gone. So our dozen other businesses all have remained on a feed star, a post office and a filling station on the edge of town. …
Couple to the decline of a small agricultural community is the decline and perhaps approaching extinction of the small farmer. We have cherished him since the days of Lexington and Concord as a national symbol of our virtue.
And our strength. Virtuous he still may be.
But Strong. He is not. …

Terry Evans:
I really have always seen photography as a way to learn about a subject that I didn't know about. That that is the core of it. And so I always thoughts that, that would come from getting to know people who were different than me from entering their lives briefly and photographing them.

Kara Heitz:
But as the 1970s moved on, the subject matter of Evans's work began to shift.

Terry Evans:
Then the prairie intervened and then I realized that land and ecosystems were also part of this whole.

Kara Heitz:
However, Evans sees her photography of mostly human subjects in the first part of the 1970s as directly connected to her later work on the prairie and other landscapes.

Terry Evans:
It's all part of a whole. And I actually think that's why I started doing aerial photography, too. It's from an aerial perspective. You see, one sees all of these different parts connected and it fits, ultimately into a circle and into a whole. A whole. System a whole way of seeing and being and so so it's people in land and land use and how we are connected to land where we live, where we work.

Kara Heitz:
This is such a contrasting perspective to the barren and lifeless Dust Bowl image of Kansas. Of course, poverty, declining rural populations, shifting farm demographics were and continue to be serious problems, but they are just part of a more complex, and constantly transitioning reality experienced by the people and spaces of this state.

I mean, don't all of our lives kind of inhabit that liminal space between promises and failures? And Terry Evans' camera has helped us see these connecting threads between all our stories.

Kara Heitz:
Terry Evans used her camera to capture the stories of her fellow Kansans at a moment when many of them were experiencing the effects of significant social and economic transitions. In our next story, we'll look at how Gordon Parks used the camera's perspective to investigate his own complicated relationship with his home state of Kansas.

SEGMENT 2 - GORDON PARKS

***The Learning Tree* trailer**
This is Gordon Parks successful and honored photojournalist. His career as composer, poet, and author has brought him worldwide recognition. His music, like the music you're hearing, has been performed by symphony orchestras in New York, Philadelphia, Venice, and Munich. His books have been published in nine languages. The 15th and youngest child of a Kansas farmer. He told of how it was growing up. In his bestselling novel, The Learning Tree, and now Gordon Parks has returned to the town where he lived it.

And there made that story into a motion picture.

Kara Heitz:
That's a trailer for the 1969 movie *The Learning Tree*, written and directed by Kansas native Gordon Parks. While he is mostly recognized for his work as a photographer, Parks was also the first African American to direct a film for a major Hollywood studio. It's actually really hard to introduce Gordon Parks because his artistic accomplishments were so multiple and varied. Besides photographer and filmmaker, he was also a writer, a composer, and, above all, a creator.

In this story, we're discussing a particular moment in Parks' career, when he is engaging with Kansas, and working through his conflicted relationship with his home state. And part of that story takes place at Kansas State University in the early 1970s.

Sarah Price:
In 1970, he received an honorary degree from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, and was asked by the university to gift a group of photographs to the university collection. And in 1973, he gave one hundred and twenty-eight photographs to the university, and the gift was the first that we have found in our research, the first that he curated for a public institution.

Kara Heitz:
That's Sarah Price, Registrar and Collections Manager for the Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University. She and curator Aileen June Wang created an exhibit about

Parks' photography gift to the school. The exhibit, entitled "Homeward to the Prairie I Come" ran from September 2021 until May 2022. You can still view a digital version of it online, and we'll put a link to it on the HK website.

Aileen June Wang:
in 1970, it's the time when he decides that he's going to leave life magazine. He started there in 1948, right? Had great success, was able to use *Life* Magazine as a platform for exploring and addressing certain issues and subjects that he were dear to him. And in 1970, he decides that he's going to leave this behind and move on to other creative projects that he wouldn't have had time to do if he kept doing, you know, work for a life magazine. So, it's a moment of transition between one major period to the next in his career.

Kara Heitz:
That's Aileen June Wang. You'll be hearing from both her and Sarah Price throughout this episode.

So in the early 1970s, Parks is leaving behind his very successful career at *Life* Magazine. (Side note: he was also the first African American photographer hired by *Life*.) And besides Parks' developing connection with Kansas State University, he is also shooting and releasing his next major film, which is very, very different from *The Learning Tree*.

***Shaft* trailer**
Shaft. Hotter than Bond, cooler than a bullet. Rated R. If you want to see Shaft, ask your mom.

Kara Heitz:
It's a long road from growing up in small-town Kansas to making a film about the streets of New York City. But Parks' time in Kansas was formative to his artistic career and would help create a complicated lifelong relationship with his home state.

To get a better understanding of Parks' childhood, and his later connections with Kansas, I spoke with Kirk Sharp. Sharp is the director of the Gordon Parks Museum in Fort Scott, Kansas. And the museum hosts a Gordon Parks festival every year in early October, so definitely check that out.

Kirk Sharp:
Gordon Parks was born in 1912, and he was born in a difficult time in America, especially here in the Midwest during segregation. And he also was born into poverty, too, as well. And so he was the youngest of 15 children. And growing up in Fort Scott during those times was not easy. It was very difficult for any Black families during that time period when Jim Crow laws was so held tightly.

Kara Heitz:
Parks attended the segregated grade schools of Fort Scott, which existed until the 1950s. And while the high school was technically integrated, Black students did not receive the same education as their white peers. And they were discouraged by many teachers and counselors from furthering their education. (Of course, at the time this was not uncommon in the Midwest, or anywhere else in the country. Discrimination was not limited to the Jim Crow South at that time.)

Kirk Sharp:
The times that Gordon lived in for Scott was difficult. Growing up to deal with those issues. But he still had fond memories of Fort Scott. He loved the country of Fort Scott, the surrounding areas, everything to do with it from the grass to the grasshoppers to the June bugs to the trees. And so that also had fond memories of it too, as well, living in the Kansas and Fort Scott area. But at the same time, he hated the way he was treated along with other blacks during this time period.

***A Choice of Weapons*, as read by the author**
I would miss this Kansas land that I was leaving. Yet as the train sped along, the telegraph poles whizzing toward and past us. I had a feeling that I was escaping a doom which had already trapped the relatives and friends I was leaving behind. For although I was departing from this beautiful land. It would be impossible ever to forget the fear, the hatred, and violence that Negroes had suffered upon it. It was all behind me now…

Kara Heitz:
Parks left Fort Scott when he was a teenager, first heading to Minneapolis, where he found work taking photos for a women's clothing store, and then on to Chicago, where he opened a portrait business, shooting mainly society women. This led him to his first notable work as a photojournalist, with the Farm Security Administration in the early 1940s. The FSA was a US government agency created during the Great Depression to address poverty in rural areas. Their famed photography unit created striking visual documents of the hardships and hope experienced by many Americans during the Depression.

After the FSA disbanded, Parks spent the rest of that decade developing both his photojournalism and fashion photography skills with various assignments that took him all over the US. And in 1948, he joined *Life* Magazine, a job that would take him all over the world.

During this period of his life, he didn't completely lose his connection to Kansas. He returned for personal visits and also for work…

But perhaps his most meaningful visit since he left Kansas as a teenager was in 1968 when he returned to Fort Scott to shoot his movie *The Learning Tree*. *The Learning Tree* was a fictional story, but it is definitely semi-autobiographical and reflects many of Parks' experiences growing up as an African American in Kansas.

When Parks arrived in Fort Scott to begin filming, the initial reaction of some members of the community was not very positive.

***The Parsons Sun*, 08-21-1968**
Gordon Parks, photographer and writer, showed up the other day in his old hometown of Fort Scott, along with four Warner Brothers executives, to look over the city for a movie locale.

Arrival of the movie people set off rumors around Fort Scott that the film was to be racist, immoral, or dirty; Mayor Frank Doherty called a meeting with the movie-makers, seeking to throw light on the subject.

Parks himself said, “It is not a racial story but is rather the life of two boys growing up under ordinary conditions. It shows the results of the proper home and the potential of the boy without a home life and what he could have been with the same type of family as his counterpart.”

Such explanations wouldn’t have been necessary if the rumor-spreaders had taken the trouble to read the book.

Kirk Sharp:
But when Gordon first arrived in Fort Scott, he was excited. It just brought so many memories. And he told one of his friends, one of the executive producers that came down from Warner Brothers studios. He was excited to relive some of the good things about Fort Scott. Then when he tried to get to a hotel immediately, he was immediately reminded about the racial barriers that still exist in this town.

Kara Heitz:
Parks ended up befriending the mayor, Frank Doherty, who helped sway public opinion in Fort Scott.

Kirk Sharp:
And within a couple of days they had a basically, which I think is still incredible, a day in honor of Gordon Parks at Gordon Parks Day at our local memorial hall with all the city leaders come and open to the public to as well.

Kara Heitz:
The community of Fort Scott quickly became excited about the filming, especially when locals were recruited as extras.

Kirk Sharp:
it holds so many fond memories for so many people that talk about either my reference to my father was in it, my grandfather was there, or I was in personally, not me personally, but people would say they were in the film and every time it brings as it comes up, people talk about that on days where they got to meet some of the cast members because it was an open set.

Kara Heitz:
I find it Interesting how Parks played down the racial themes of *The Learning Tree* in his interactions with Fort Scott at that time. I mean, central to the story is how the discrimination and even violence of racism affected the childhoods of two boys. But pushing a message so forcefully was not really the way Parks worked.

Gordon Parks, University of Maryland, 1970
I think that there is a message in *The Learning Tree* and as much as it sort of sets up the problems of today. I had people say to me, I saw your film and I was so mad, I was so angry. Why weren't you more forceful with it.

I said, Did I make you angry? Yes. I said, Well, then I made my point, and I think that's what I've tried to do in my writing. My music, my poetry is to somehow work with restraint. Because if the facts are there, if the emotions are there in a visual sense, people will draw them out. You don't have to beat people over the head to get them to understand what you're about to say. And if you do have to beat them over the head, you don't have much to say. So, what you to do is lay down before them what you feel is emotionally true and let them gain their own understanding from it.

Kara Heitz:
After the critical success of *The Learning Tree*, Parks' creative accomplishments began to be recognized and celebrated by institutions in his home state. In 1970, Kansas State University honored Gordon Parks with an honorary doctorate degree. Parks wanted to give something to K-State in return. So, in 1973, he gifted the university with a set of 128 of his photographs. The recent Gordon Parks exhibition at the Beach Museum of Art was based on the central premise that this photo collection was a conversation Parks was having with Kansas and Kansans.

Sarah Price:
So, the exhibition features selections from that 1973 gift of photographs, and in the exhibition, we explore the ways that he sought to project himself to his fellow Kansans with his experiences and his points of view through the images he chose to give to university. The photographs are, build a kind of self-portrait spanning his career and his different interests. The number of images that he chose from certain topics during his career, and then the size that he chose to print and frame those give away some of the artist's intentions for the gift and what he wanted to say with that gift to K-state.

Kara Heitz:
The collection of photos in the exhibit is wide-ranging, in terms of subject matter, composition, and style. We see examples of his work for *Life* Magazine, fashion photography, portraits of famous individuals, and even experimental images. And accompanying the photos were excerpts from Parks' prose and poetry. The interaction between the writing with the images allowed for a much deeper emotional experience for the viewer.

Of course, a number of the images in the gift are photojournalistic. These are the kinds of photos that Parks is most famous for, documenting the effects of poverty, inequality, and discrimination.

But Parks himself had mixed feelings about these photos.

Gordon Parks interview 2000
…pictures that I made that I have become the most important picture are pictures that I wish that I never had to take, of people who were impoverished, people in need. And I suppose I pointed my camera at people mostly who needed someone to say something for them who couldn't speak for themselves. So you take a picture of a little Brazilian boy out of a picture of a kid in Harlem who was in need. It may have been turned out to be the best picture, but it wasn't the picture that I really I or considered something that I would like to have taken. I had taken it, but I had to do it.

Kara Heitz:
Parks' desire to show a more complex picture of the lives of the marginalized is apparent in a set of images from the gift to K-State that look at the lives of African Americans.

Aileen June Wong:
But I think that one thing that Parks also wanted to make sure about is that the photographs representing African Americans not be just about poverty. Within that group, I would say, you know, almost half our photographs that address how African Americans deal with the adversity in their life, you know, being born in the U.S., you know, and in a culture of racial discrimination against them. There are many photographs that show their resilience and how they draw strength from each other through the communities that they create.

…some photographs that are about the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago…he writes that the members of the congregation were all people who were barely above the poverty line, all blue-collar workers working with their hands and, you know, experiencing quite hard lives. But they came together, you know, in this church community and clearly drew strength from each other and hope.

Kara Heitz:
The second largest group of photos in the gift are ones connected with Europe.

Aileen June Wong:
And I think that that's another important message that he's conveying. You know, that that Parks is showing that he's been to places far beyond Fort Scott, Kansas. I think that was an important point he wanted to make.

Kara Heitz:
Aileen June Wong discusses the importance of one particular photo in the Europe group.

Aileen June Wong:
Actually, it's the second largest photograph in the group, and it's it surprised me that it was a fashion photograph, and it was one for *Life* magazine that was published in 1951, and I was really struck by wow fashion photograph and it was big. Is it like maybe thirty-five inches by 50 or something like that, right? It was really big. … it struck me, it could be a painting for in the tradition of European grand portraiture. And so that was kind of the first time that I start thinking that Parks wasn't just thinking about fashion photography, that's about fashion, that he was trying to do something more.
And as I started digging through what fashion photography he included in the group, it was clear that the ones that he included were referencing earlier European painting traditions.

Kara Heitz:
But European portraiture is not the only Western art tradition Parks is gesturing to in this collection. Wang discusses the photos of Mohammad Ali by Parks.

Aileen June Wong:
Ali is, I think, in Parks' mind, you know, the, a celebrated athlete, an African American athlete who could represent what is the modern hero, you know, the 20th century version of a hero? And the sculpture he referenced in his photographs of Ali is a sculpture of a boxer who in the end, this sculpture basically kind of creates, how do I say, makes noble the athlete…

Gordon Parks, University of Maryland, 1970
I consider myself a militant, but a militant with my camera, a militant with my pen and whatever art I choose to work with and currently.

Aileen June Wong
I argue that you know, what he's doing is creating a counter-response to the idea that's quite entrenched in Western art history and also American culture, very much influenced by, you know, European art that, you know, in ancient Greek and Roman art, the heroic representations of the athlete are all, you know, kind of prime examples of the Caucasian body type.

And so I think that Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali's photographs are Parks' way of presenting an alternative to what a heroic athlete could look like.

Kara Heitz:
However, no matter what the subject matter or photographic methods, all the choices Parks made about this gift were a meaningful part of his message to Kansas.
If you read some of the writings about Parks, especially the more academic ones, his relationship with his home state is rarely mentioned as something important in his work. There is typically a reference to the fact he grew up poor in Fort Scott, but he got out and went on to important things elsewhere.

I asked Kirk Sharp if Parks thought of himself as a Kansan

Kirk Sharp:
I think he always saw himself as a Kansan. If you looked at most books, those memoirs he always referenced, Kansas, such as he talks about his on to Queen Mary traveling to Europe and can't believe a kid growing up in segregation and poverty in Kansas as achieving this…he talks about the Kansas skies, how he misses that. So, yes, I think all his life he felt him himself as a Kansan. It's just the fact he just hated the way he was treated during that time.

Kara Heitz:
Through the 1970s and until the end of his life in 2006, Parks continued to deepen his relationship with Kansas. He returned many times both for creative projects and personal visits. In fact, the title of the Beach Museum exhibit, “Homeward to the Prairie I Come,” is taken from the first line of a poem he wrote to accompany a selection of his photos published by the *Manhattan Mercury* newspaper in 1984.

The words of this poem I think really sum up his relationship with his home state.

“Homeward to the prairie, I come. The prairie is still in me, in my talk and manners. It puzzles me that I live so far away from our old clapboard house where, in oak tree shade, I used to sit and dream of what I wanted to become. I always return here weary, but to draw strength from this huge silence that surrounds me, knowing now that all I thought was dead here is still alive, that there is a lasting warmth here - even when the wind blows hard and cold.”

EPISODE CONCLUSION

Kara Heitz:
That hard and cold wind is part of the state, literally and metaphorically. The barren Dust Bowl images are part of the reality of Kansas. So is the rural poverty documentary by Terry Evans. But that is only a part of a complex and ever-changing set of people and landscapes captured by Kansas photographers like Evans and Parks.

So in the interest of not getting any more serious, I’ll leave you with my own personal favorite representation of Kansas, a little earworm from the 1980s.

Ah! Kansas jingle, 1980s
It's a wonderland, both day and night. Ah Kansas. Stay here while it feels all right. Ah Kansas. Can a country preview a three.
Hour clear blue canvas sky? I... Can linger a while.

SERIES OUTRO

KARA HEITZ:
Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:
Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.