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The striking segregation photos that were almost never seen
by Barbara Hoffman



Photo: Gordon Parks Foundation, Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation and Salon 94, New York

The photographs are in color — but the injustice is as clear as black and white.

On assignment for Life magazine in 1956, photographer Gordon Parks focused on an extended African-American family in southern Alabama. His color photos — one of black children standing outside the chain-link fence keeping them from an all-white playground (below) — shocked the world when they were published. And they infuriated Alabama, which essentially ran that family out of town, denying them even the chance to gas up at the local pumps.

Now, nearly 60 years later, 23 of Parks' photos — some of which never made it into the magazine, and were discovered only after his death, in 2006 — are hanging at Salon 94, including "Department Store, Mobile, Alabama" (above).

The exhibit, "Segregation Story," set to originally close Dec. 20, has just been extended a month, says gallery director Fabienne Stephan. She hopes other people, particularly those who never knew those Jim Crow times, can witness them now.

"His estate warned us there'd be a chance we'd want to extend it," she says. "I think people tend to forget the pioneering and courage of Gordon Parks."

Parks knew all too well what it was like to be on the wrong side of the chain-link fence. And yet, born in segregated Kansas in 1912, he somehow managed to become a Renaissance man — a pianist, photographer, poet, composer and, with 1971's "Shaft," groundbreaking filmmaker.

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How hard it must have been for him to leave New York, even briefly, for the rural South, and train his lens on a separate and utterly unequal world divided by “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs.

“Segregation Story” runs till Jan. 17; Wednesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. | Freeman Alley, off Rivington Street



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