



## A Chat Between Friends...

The Newsletter of the  
Friends of the Leonard H. Axe Library  
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### Dr. John Edgar Tidwell Tells Us about Gordon Parks’ Kansas Roots

Dr. John Edgar Tidwell, professor of English at KU, came to our campus on February 19<sup>th</sup> as the guest of Friends of Axe Library, the PSU Tilford Group and the Kansas Humanities Council to speak on the life and art of Gordon Parks, accomplished photographer, writer, filmmaker, composer, journalist, activist and one of historical Fort Scott’s favorite sons. Dr. Tidwell spoke to us in the Governor’s Room of Overman Student Center at 4PM. Sixty Five people attended.



Dr. J. Edgar Tidwell

Dr. Tidwell opened up by reading one of Gordon Parks’ poems, *Kansas Land* which describes all the natural beauty of the passing Kansas seasons

before ending abruptly with the lines

“Yes, all this I would miss-- along with the fear,  
hatred and violence  
we blacks had suffered upon this beautiful land.”

Kansas, for Parks, could be a warm, welcoming place, until it turned into what Parks called a “plateau of uncertainty” This phrase describes the difficulties of navigating the social contradictions of Kansas , a state where:

1. You went to segregated schools until you arrived in high school, where you were suddenly “equal” (except for team sports).
2. They didn’t practice lynching as much as in the deep South but had a trigger happy sheriff to take care of their dirty work for them.
3. In the middle of Prohibition there was home brew in every barn, a blind pig on every corner and a quiet night could erupt in violence on account of alcoholism.
4. You would be shocked by a respected teacher advising you not to go to college because you were only fit for maids’, cooks’ and porters’ work.
5. The white kid you played with all your life suddenly uses the word “nigger” as if that word was harmless and inoffensive and you weren’t supposed to be insulted.

Below: Gordon Parks shooting a carnival scene from his film *The Learning Tree*. Parks is on the right, the Bearded Lady is center, foreground.



This ”plateau of uncertainty” even has an effect on the natural world, starting with the Kansas tornado which opens the book, killing a few inhabitants

and wiping out some people's livelihood. And it ends with the disease which kills Sarah Winger, Newt's wonderful mother and the moral compass and support of the family. She dies at approximately age sixty, much too young for a woman who loved and cared for so many people.

Dr. Tidwell discussed Gordon Parks' professional life, talking about the many careers that he pursued in his lifetime after leaving Kansas. He was forced to leave High School, but continued to teach himself one profession after another and excelled in just about all of them. Describing his habit of career hopping, he very humbly would say "...if I failed at one thing, I had something else to fall back on". As if there was any question of failure at anything he tried. *The Learning Tree*, based on his 1963 autobiographical novel, was his first feature film. Indeed, Parks is nearly the only "Hollywood" director, except for the legendary Orson Welles, who had complete artistic control over a film, directing, producing, composing the music and writing the script. And this was in addition to being the first African American to direct a major motion picture. He later directed the highly successful and groundbreaking film *Shaft!* and a number of other films for TV as well as the big screen.

After Parks collected his 40<sup>th</sup> honorary degree he quipped to a reporter "I think I'll close off the doctorates after this one.....Forty is a nice round number, it seems to me," But he always expressed disappointment that he had lost touch with the guidance counselor in high school who had told him he "wasn't college material" because he would have loved to dedicate one of his degrees to her.

Despite his homes in White Plains, N.Y. and Manhattan, despite his having travelled all over the world and rubbed shoulders with the best and the brightest in the literary and entertainment fields, and despite his mixed feelings toward Kansas as a "plateau of uncertainty", Dr. Tidwell said that he felt Gordon had always seen himself as a Kansas boy at heart. And Gordon proved that when he left instructions to be buried in Fort Scott next to the parents he loved so much. After Dr. Tidwell's talk, he fielded several questions from the audience, many of whom were not familiar with Parks' work or had forgotten it. (Film directors tend to be

invisible creatures. Likewise, photographers.) A few people in the audience with ties to Fort Scott expressed a desire to commemorate his memory in some way. And others said they would read books about him or by him or see some of his films. Dr. Tidwell has done a lot to restore the memory of one of Southeast Kansas' greatest artists and scholars to us.

### **Friends of Axe Purchases More Films**

At its last two meetings, Friends of Axe Library, in cooperation with Dr. Dan Ferguson of Human Performance and Recreation, purchased several new films for the video collection. At the December 19, 2008 meeting, the board agreed to purchase the following:

*A Doll's House*, directed by Joseph Losey (1973)  
*The Shaw Collection*,  
*Wuthering Heights*, Directed by Peter Kosminsky  
*The Red Badge of Courage*, 1951  
*Fahrenheit 451*  
*Phantom of the Opera*  
*Black Robe*  
*The Defiant Ones*  
*Dr. Strangelove*  
*In the Heat of the Night*  
*The Last Valley*  
*The Name of the Rose*  
*Nixon – Collector's ed*  
*I, Claudius*  
*Biography: Impressionists*  
*Fanny and Alexander*  
*Fassbinder Collection (Martha & Year of 13 Moons)*  
*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*  
*Iraq for Sale*  
*Persona*  
*Royal Hunt of the Sun*  
*Standard Operating Procedure*

At the February 6, 2009 meeting, after an e-mail consultation with Dr. Ferguson, we approved the following 4 films on leadership:

***7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Foundational Principles***

### ***The Four Factors of Effective Leadership***

#### ***Leadership by the Book***

#### ***Success Skills from the Corner Office***

We also agreed to purchase the great PBS classic about the Civil Rights movement ***Eyes on the Prize***. We expect to receive these items in a few weeks.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Annual Children's Book Festival Still the Mother of All Fundraisers**

Once again, Friends of Axe is having a Children's Book Festival in conjunction with the Young Authors' Conference on April 18, 2009 from 11:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M in the East Lobby of the Weede Gymnasium. We have accumulated a substantial list of books appropriate for readers from pre-school to high school. Some very fine picture books for the younger reader are ***Building with Dad***, by Carol Nevius, where a young elementary schooler gets the ultimate thrill of helping his construction worker father build a new neighborhood school; or ***The Champ: The Story of Muhammad Ali***, by Tonya Bolden, a beautifully illustrated book about the amazing life and career of Muhammad Ali. We also have wonderful books for the older child in middle school and high school, such as ***Texas Rangers: Legendary Lawmen*** by Michael P. Spradlin, a story in prose and pictures of the legendary police force of the Texas plains. And the very touching ***The Mailbox***, by Audrey Shafer, about a young pre teen who tries to keep things together after his uncle dies to avoid going to a foster home, and who also finds himself confronted with mysterious notes in his uncle's mailbox. Check our web site for a complete list.

(<http://library.pittstate.edu/friends/bookfest/>) All books start out at 25% off and all are signed by the author or illustrator. Come and see us for some great bargains.

Proceeds will benefit the Friends of Axe Library, which for many years has planned and supported many projects for library improvement, including purchases of furniture, films and books, organization of numerous lectures and an art exhibition and publication of a guidebook about the history of the campus. We have been particularly busy this year with two lectures sponsored by the Kansas Humanities Council, the Gene DeGruson

Memorial Lecture and an upcoming poetry reading in cooperation with the English Department. We have also purchased many new DVDs. We hope that you can help us by coming and enjoying our book festival.



One of the foul tempered tigers from ***The Man-Eating Tigers of Sunderbans***, by Sy Montgomery

### **Poet, Teacher and Environmentalist Jeffrey Thomson to Read from his Poetry at Axe Library**

Jeffrey Thomson, associate professor of creative writing at the University of Maine at Farmington, is coming to Pittsburg to give a reading at Axe Library on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at 8PM. The reading will take place in the Special Collections department in the basement of Axe Library. Professor



Jeffrey Thomson, PhD

Thomson will be producing his fourth book of poems this year. ***Birdwatching in Wartime***, which will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in early 2009. Many of the poems in ***Birdwatching in Wartime*** arise from Thomson's experiences in the rainforests of the American neotropics, specifically Costa Rica and Peru, where he

has previously hosted student groups on field trips. One of his specialties is environmental writing.

CMU Press also published his last book, *Renovation*, in January 2005. In addition to these books, he has a forthcoming collection of poems translated from the Spanish of Juan Carlos Flores entitled *Many Ways to Dig a Tunnel*. It will be published by Green Integer Books in spring 2009. Along with Matt O'Donnell and Camille Dungy he has developed an anthology of emerging poets entitled *From the Fishhouse* which will be published by Persea in the Spring of '09. As he told us in a recent e-mail: "2009 looks to be my annus mirabilis."

Thomson's work has been awarded a 2005 Literature Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, a 2006 Pennsylvania Council for the Arts Individual Artists Fellowship, and, most recently, the 2008 Individual Artist Fellowship in the Literary Arts from the Maine Arts Commission.

Jeffrey Thomson's reading is being sponsored jointly by the Department of English and the Friends of the Leonard H. Axe Library. All members of the public and the PSU community are welcome to attend. Refreshments will be served.