

S-C-U-R-L-O-C-K

Exhibit Illuminates Black Legacy, Black Promise

BY STEVE MONROE

Addison with Large-View Camera.



They are black and white photos of Washington, DC, stark black and white echoes of a long-gone era now in our age of full color, in-your-face multiplex, big screen images from television, movies, websites, DVD screens, iPhones, Blackberries, Nintendo dual-screen wonders for kids, and all the rest.

There is a photo of Lucy Diggs Slowe, a formal portrait of the famous black woman educator, whose devotion to learning and improving lives inspired the powers that be to name a school after her – my first school, Lucy Slowe Elementary, at 14th and Jackson streets NE, the school I walked to on school days, four blocks down, four blocks back, from my family's two-story, green-shingled house at 14th and Franklin.

There is a photo of a 1963 Chevrolet Impala, much like the four-door blue Impala my mother had when I was 14 years old. This one in the photo, though, is on U Street, and behind it is a Jeep with soldiers in it, soldiers with rifles, and beside it, soldiers with rifles walk along the street. It is April 1968.

There is a photo of Fats Waller at the Howard Theatre, Fats smiling and handing over a check for the Boys and Girls Clubs. Fats to me was his hit song, "Your Feet Too Big," a fun-filled jazz tune that makes you laugh no matter how many times you hear it, and I first discovered it in my Dad's old record collection one lazy day at the Edgewood apartments in Northeast where my Dad lived in the '80s – one lazy summer day perfect for remembering Fats and his jazz tunes and old times in DC.

Capturing a Unique History

"The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise" exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has these and many other photos from the illustrious Scurlock family's photographic legacy on view through February.

The exhibit is the inaugural one in the National Museum of African American History and Culture Gallery at NMAH, a gallery that serves as a precursor to the actual museum of African-American history that is to be built on the Mall near the Washington Monument and scheduled to open in 2015.

"Beginning in the early 20th century and continuing into the 1990s, Addison Scurlock, followed by his sons, Robert and George, used their cameras to document and celebrate a community unique in the world," according to exhibit information.

Addison Scurlock, originally from Fayetteville, NC, moved with his family to Washington in the late 19th century and began his career in the early 1900s. In 1904, Scurlock started his own business at his parents' home on the 500 block of Florida Avenue and opened the Scurlock Studio at 900 U St. NW in 1911. Specializing in portraiture and general photography, the Scurlock name, through Addison and his sons, became well known and respected around Washington and beyond.

The uniqueness of African-American life in the 20th century in Washington, at least through the lenses of the



Marian Anderson performing at Lincoln Memorial, Easter Sunday, 1939.

Scurlocks, is a glossy picture of well-dressed and often well-appointed African-Americans working, learning and enjoying leisure time activities in fine establishments and parks. The Scurlocks “captured weddings, baptisms, graduations, sporting events, civil protests, high society affairs and visiting dignitaries,” according to exhibit information.

Paul Gardullo, the curator of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, said, “We thought, what better way to inaugurate our gallery then to collaborate with our host in bringing to life one of

Lucy Diggs Slowe, a formal portrait of the famous black woman educator.



American history’s most treasured collections. We also wanted to demonstrate how important our home community of Washington is and will continue to be to the NMAAHC and to display a story of national and local importance simultaneously. We feel that we succeeded with ‘Picturing the Promise.’”

Gardullo also intends for the exhibit to be a “living” and interactive one “... we really hope to open this show to the Washington community, who are in many ways the true owners of the Scurlock collection. Through a series of gatherings that used certain photographs to evoke the past for young and old Washington residents, we invited community members to respond and give voice to their memories of the subjects the Scurlocks photographed.

“This is a process that we intend to continue through the course of the exhibition – through programs and an interactive kiosk in the exhibition itself

known more for struggle and hard times, of being victims of hatred and lynchings, outright and subtle discrimination and rampant poverty, and a second- or third-class, back-of-the-bus existence.

And not so fitting for the same reason. The Scurlocks’ lenses reflected the best and brightest, those exemplifying W. E. B. DuBois’ “Talented Tenth,” that part of the race that would lead us to the promised land of social and economic progress, if not equality, for the betterment of our children’s children. As a representation then, the absence of more photos such as the homeless lady pushing a shopping basket of her possessions, render the exhibit as one looking through rose-colored glasses, of being somewhat one-dimensional.

The less well-to-do, those who were not doctors and lawyers or in government; those who were not im-

where people can write down their memories. ... Already, people are identifying family members and friends and are leaving the most wonderful memories that we will be posting on our website’s ‘Memory Book.’”

Promise vs. Reality

As the first exhibit of the museum dedicated to honoring and representing African-American history, the Scurlock display is fitting – and not so fitting.

Fitting because it provides a view many in the Washington area and elsewhere no doubt never saw, a historical slide show of the more promising and progressive subdivisions of a people

minences like Mary McLeod Bethune and E. Franklin Frazier, Sterling Brown, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Marian Anderson ... don’t seem to have a place in the exhibit. Those who were not able to frequent Highland Beach or Suburban Gardens might question the Scurlock legacy’s selective character.

But to the Scurlock exhibit’s credit, there are the photos of protest, against People’s Drug stores’ discriminatory policies and of the 1963 March on Washington. And there are gritty scenes from the riots in DC in 1968 in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, which give the exhibit more than a touch of reality.

To be fair, as the museum information points out, “It was for portraiture, however, that the Scurlocks became renowned; they continue to be recognized today by scholars and artists as among the very best of 20th century photographers who recorded the rapid changes in African-American urban communities nationwide.” Those changes brought us “up” from the vestiges of our star-crossed history – so that some of us could then appear in the polished Scurlock photos.

For Gardullo, one of his favorites in the exhibit, “is a beautiful panoramic photograph of Suburban Gardens Amusement Park, taken by Addison Scurlock sometime in the 1920s. Suburban Gardens was conceived and built by black-owned Universal Development and Loan Company. The popular park was built because during the era of segregation, African-Americans were excluded from entering and enjoying Glen Echo, the area’s amusement park for whites. Suburban Gardens was a destination for black folks in DC and included rides and games, swimming pools, picnic areas and a dance pavilion. It closed in 1940. This beautifully composed picture, ‘lost’ for a time, has a lot to teach contemporary audiences about the complexities and contradictions of segregation.”

George, Robert, and Addison Scurlock. ALL Images courtesy of the Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution



Indeed, as a child growing up in the 1950s and '60s, like many, I was shielded from discrimination's facts, only being steered by my parents to those places that allowed Negroes to shop or eat. (I didn't realize I was really black and what that meant until I went to Florida at the age of 16 in 1965 and was unable to enter a bowling alley.) And having lived for a time right off U Street, the street's black-owned businesses were very familiar to me as a part of our way of life then.

Role Models

Roy Lewis, a veteran photographer on the staff of the Washington Informer who has worked for many publications including Jet and Ebony, said in an interview in May of when he came to Washington from Chicago to live and work in the 1970s: "After I came here, I met George and Robert Jr., and I used to run into them on assignments. I didn't really know them, but I knew their work was impressive. The thing that impressed me was they were very much into the business of photography, and you need someone like that to be like a role model. As time went by, I had even more appreciation for their work."

Lewis was one of the photographers selected to work with the Smithsonian on the publishing of the book that is the companion piece to the exhibit, edited by Gardullo, Michelle Delaney, NMAAHC associate curator of photography, and others. In the book's analysis of the process of photography used by Robert Scurlock for events, for example, "Roy Lewis recognizes the actions Scurlock took to create his images; how Scurlock captured entire scenes, or the way he constantly moved to be able to photograph all aspects of the event. Lewis notes that Scurlock was not pinned down to one spot, which permitted him to shoot from multiple angles."

On the types of photos Scurlock specialized in, Lewis notes in the book, "He did not focus on money shots, those images of most interest to publishers ... Robert concentrated on portraying 'the inside of the day.'"

One such photo for me is the shot of a running back with the ball and a defender eyeing him in preparation for a tackle in the "Howard-Lincoln Classic at Griffith Stadium" picture from Thanksgiving Day, 1948.

Another such shot is the one of jazz singer Billie Holiday superimposed over a dark image of U Street at night, with glowing street lights and neon signs of places like the Howard Theatre and Harrison's Café evoking "the inside of the night" so to speak, where blacks, and some whites, enjoyed jazz and other music, movies, dance and other entertainment along DC's Black Broadway for generations ... until its decline as an entertainment and nightlife center, before its recent rebirth.

That recent rebirth, though, is much more cosmopolitan than the time of the Scurlocks – it is a rebirth made of people of all colors and backgrounds, which makes the Scurlocks' photographs even more precious, as a long ago African-American moment in time, likely never to be seen again.

"The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise" exhibit runs through Feb. 28, 2010, at the National Museum of American History, located at 14th Street and Constitution Avenue NW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit americanhistory.si.edu for more information. ★