

# Griffin

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of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations (ALTAFF), a division of the American Library Association. A bronze plaque will be dedicated in his honor Feb. 27 at the Mansfield Public Library.

But Mansfield has not always embraced its most famous resident.

In 1959, Griffin decided that to truly experience how blacks were treated, he would have to become one. He darkened his skin with medication, sun lamps and stains, then lived as a black man for seven weeks, traveling from New Orleans to Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. The way he was treated shocked and sickened him, he wrote in articles for *Sepia*, an African-American magazine based in Fort Worth.

The way that he was treated when he came home to his family in Mansfield was even worse. After appearing on a talk show to discuss his experience, Griffin and his family began receiving death threats and hate calls.

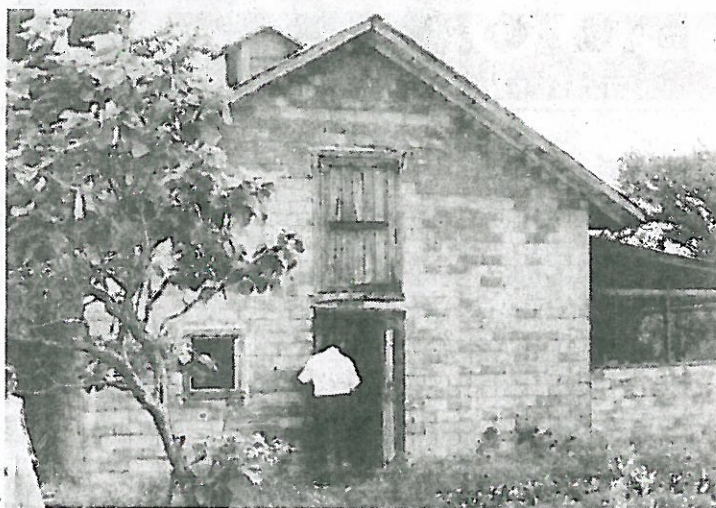
On April 2, 1960, he was hanged in effigy at the red light at Broad and Main streets. A few months later, his parents moved to Mexico and Griffin followed with his wife and three children. The family lived there for a year while Griffin wrote "Black Like Me."

Griffin knew that Mansfield would not approve. Only a few years before, when black activist T.M. Moody and three students tried to integrate the Mansfield schools, an angry mob formed and Texas Rangers were sent to keep the peace. The schools stayed segregated until 1965.

So why would Griffin take such a chance? Why would he risk his life to walk in another man's shoes?

"He said he was asked that question the most," said Robert Bonazzi, who wrote the Griffin biography "Man in the Mirror" and married Griffin's widow, Elizabeth. "He said only white people asked him that. His stock answer was that he didn't want his kids growing up to be racists. The motivation didn't matter."

Griffin's son Greg has another theory.



John Howard Griffin checks out his old writing workshop behind his parents' home on House Road as daughter Mandy looks on.

Courtesy of Alma Pressley

"I think it had a lot to do with him being blind," said Greg Griffin, 53, who still lives in Mansfield. "When you're blind, you're not really prejudiced."

This was not Griffin's first time to experience prejudice. Born in Dallas in 1920, he was raised in Fort Worth. At 15, he left to attend Lycee Descartes in Tours, France, before studying French and literature at the University of Poitiers and medicine at École de Médecine. By age 19, he was working with the French Resistance to help Austrian Jews escape the Nazis. When his own name turned up on a death list, he too escaped.

Griffin joined the U.S. Army Air Corps and was stationed for more than three years in the South Pacific, spending a year as the only white resident on one of the Solomon Islands. During an air raid, he was injured and soon began to lose his sight.

Returning to his parents' farm on House Road in Mansfield, Griffin went totally blind in 1947. Refusing to give in to darkness, he taught himself to use his other senses. Even after he regained his sight, he could still maneuver in complete darkness, said his son John Howard "Johnny" Griffin Jr.

"He could get around in the dark like only a blind man could," said Johnny Griffin, 55, who lives in Arlington.

While he was blind, Griffin fell in love with one of his mother's piano students, Elizabeth "Pie" Holland, who was 16 years younger than Griffin. Four days after she graduated from Mansfield High School, they married.

Griffin regained his sight in 1957 and saw the

prejudice against blacks. Now the father of three, he decided to truly understand he would have to be black.

In "Black Like Me," Griffin writes that after his wife's initial shock she was completely supportive of the project. Her family and friends agree.

"She was his cheerleader," said family friend Alma Pressley. "She just trusted him. She had a lot of respect for him."

Griffin never expected the experience to become so well-known, Bonazzi said.

"He and his publishers assumed it would be of interest to sociologists," he said. "They never thought it would become the best-seller it became."

After he appeared on television talk shows, including an interview with Mike Wallace, and in *Time* magazine, Griffin's experiment got national attention and attention at home.

"We weren't allowed to answer the telephone," said daughter Susan Campbell, 56, who lives in Arlington. "He received so many hate calls and death threats. One day when I was 4 or 5, it was ringing and I answered it. Some man said, 'Your daddy's a (racial slur) lover.' I said, 'No, he's a Negro lover.' Daddy thought that was the funniest thing. He said, 'Honey, you handled that really well!'"

A *Star-Telegram* reporter called to tell Griffin he had been hanged in effigy, a dummy with a half white, half black face and a yellow stripe down its back.

"He did say about the effigy that it wasn't a very good likeness," Campbell said.

A few months later,

Griffin's parents were frightened enough by the threats to sell their home and move to Mexico. Griffin and his family followed in August of 1960. He spent the next year writing "Black Like Me."

Even after the family returned to Mansfield a year later, Griffin would not send his four children to Mansfield schools. He got actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and lectured widely about "Black Like Me." His children remember visits from Civil Rights activist Dick Gregory and author/activist Louis "Studs" Terkel and calls from Coretta Scott King.

"We were surrounded by it," Campbell said. "It was a way of life."

Griffin, an insulin-dependent diabetic, died of complications of the disease in 1980. His wife married Robert Bonazzi in 1983, then passed away in 2000.

"Black Like Me" continues to sell about 50,000 copies every year, Bonazzi said. Griffin's children have all read the book multiple times.

"Some parts of it were hard for me to read," admitted Mandy Fenton, 44, who lives in The Colony and wasn't born until after her father wrote the book. "The way he writes is so vivid."

Their father's legacy is still being felt, the siblings say.

"He made a whole generation stop and think," Campbell said. "It changed people if for no longer than they read the book. A lot read it in high school or college and they're my age and they're still more open."

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