Author transforms himself to walk in black man's shoes

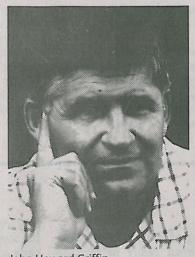
D John Howard Griffin changed his skin tone and found a different way of life.

By Paula Highfill President of the Friends of the Mansfield Public Library

"This began as a scientific research study of the Negro in the South, with careful compilation of data for analysis. But I filed the data, and here publish the journal of my own experience living as a Negro." This statement appears in the preface John Howard Griffin wrote for his groundbreaking book "Black Like Me." Griffin was letting us know this book was about a personal journev. He was aware that it would impact the entire country.

mentioned "the rise in suicide groes." He decided that the only gro in the South was to become one. The book begins on the day he makes this momentous decision, Oct. 28, 1959.

He went to Fort Worth to disthe owner of Sepia, "an internationally distributed Negro maga-



John Howard Griffin Courtesy of Robert Bonazzi

Griffin's expenses in exchange John Howard Griffin lived for the right to publish some arwith his wife and children in ticles about the journey. They Mansfield. He was working in his met with the magazine's editorioffice at his parents' farm when al director and the FBI and it was he came across a report that decided that Griffin would not near the French Market. He told change his name or identity, just the man he was a writer touring tendency among Southern Ne- the color of his skin. Griffin left the South to study living condifor New Orleans on Nov. 1. A tions, civil rights, etc. After testway he could learn the truth prominent dermotologist there ing his new appearance by riding about what it was like to be a Ne- consulted with his colleagues the trolley, checking into a "Neabout the best method of darkening the skin. Griffin would begin taking doses of an oral medication that was used for treatment of vitiligo (a disease that him what he was doing and asked cuss the project with George causes white spots on the skin) to stay and work with him for a Levitan, an old friend, who was followed by exposure to ultravio- few days. During the day he let rays. The treatment normally worked at the shoeshine stand, took six weeks to three months. zine with a format similar to that Since Griffin didn't have that cooked over a makeshift grill in a of Look." Levitan worried about much time, they accelerated the consequences such a story treatments with constant blood wandered around New Orleans would bring, but agreed to pay tests to monitor his toleration of looking for jobs and living as a ing phone call and Griffin asked his widow.

the medication. Griffin stayed at Negro for a week. the home of an old friend and for five days oriented himself to New sippi jury that refused to indict in Orleans and laid under a sun lamp. Even though the treatment had not worked as completely as they had hoped, he did have a darker pigmentation that could be touched up with stain. After Griffin shaved his head and applied several coats of stain, he was shocked and appalled when he looked at himself in the mirror the first time. His reaction to the completeness of the transformation was the first indication that pick him up. Griffin also visited April 11, but by August his parthis experience was going to be unlike anything he had imagined. That night he embarked on of stain and medication.

While wandering around New Orleans for the five days he underwent treatments, Griffin had visited an elderly shoeshine man gro" hotel and eating in a diner Mansfield. there, he returned to the shoeshrecognize him, he finally told eating a shared lunch of leftovers gallon can on the sidewalk. He

When he read about a Missisthe case of Mack Parker, Griffin decided to go to Mississippi. Parker had been accused of a that he had been hung in effigy crime, kidnapped and murdered by a lynch mob. After an eventful and harrowing bus trip he arrived in Hattiesburg where the political climate was much different than New Orleans. He spent an afternoon and evening there in what he called "hell" before calling his friend P.D. East to Mobile, Ala., Atlanta and Auburn, Ala.

his journey with a month supply scribes a different attitude. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s influence was obvious. Griffin said "the Negro's feeling of utter place, then moved his own family hopelessness is here replaced by a determined spirit of passive rewere everywhere.

Griffin resumed his white identi-

He spent weeks trying to corine stand. When the man did not relate statistics and write reports publish what had happened to him. He did a television interview that would air over two days. When the first program ended Griffin realized that now

the police for surveillance of his and his parents' homes.

On April 2, Griffin was awakened by a phone call from the Star-Telegram informing him on Main Street. At a red light in Mansfield a young man in a cowboy hat pulled up next to him in a pickup and told him that he had heard talk that "they" were planning to come and castrate him. That evening Griffin and his wife and children left Mansfield to stay in Dallas. They returned ents had decided to sell their home and move to Mexico. Not In Montgomery, Griffin de- wanting to let the bullies think they had gotten the best of him, Griffin stayed until after the planned attack, which never took to Mexico.

Griffin stayed in Mexico for a sistance." He talked of a superfi- year but came back to Mansfield cial calm but said at night police and published "Black Like Me" in November of 1961. It was re-After seven weeks, on Dec. 15, printed as a mass paperback in 1962. A second edition, which ty and flew home to his family in included Griffin's epilogue about what happened after the publication of the book, was published in 1976. Griffin died in but in the end decided to simply 1980 and in 2004 the Definitive Griffin Estate Edition was published. Corrected from original manuscripts, it contained a foreword by Griffin's friend Studs Terkel, historic photographs by everyone, including Mansfield, Don Rutledge and an afterword would know what he had done. by Robert Bonazzi, who was His mother received a threaten- Griffin's biographer and married