

Author transforms himself to walk in black man's shoes

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

By Paula Highfill

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"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 journey. He was aware that it would impact the entire country.

John Howard Griffin lived with his wife and children in Mansfield. He was working in his office at his parents' farm when he came across a report that mentioned "the rise in suicide tendency among Southern Negroes." He decided that the only way he could learn the truth about what it was like to be a Negro 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 discuss the project with George Levitan, an old friend, who was the owner of *Sepia*, "an internationally distributed Negro magazine with a format similar to that of *Look!*" Levitan worried about the consequences such a story would bring, but agreed to pay



John Howard Griffin

Courtesy of Robert Bonazzi

Griffin's expenses in exchange for the right to publish some articles about the journey. They met with the magazine's editorial director and the FBI and it was decided that Griffin would not change his name or identity, just the color of his skin. Griffin left for New Orleans on Nov. 1. A prominent dermatologist there consulted with his colleagues about 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 causes white spots on the skin) followed by exposure to ultraviolet rays. The treatment normally took six weeks to three months. Since Griffin didn't have that much time, they accelerated treatments with constant blood tests to monitor his toleration of

the medication. Griffin stayed at the home of an old friend and for five days oriented himself to New 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 this experience was going to be unlike anything he had imagined. That night he embarked on his journey with a month supply of stain and medication.

While wandering around New Orleans for the five days he underwent treatments, Griffin had visited an elderly shoeshine man near the French Market. He told the man he was a writer touring the South to study living conditions, civil rights, etc. After testing his new appearance by riding the trolley, checking into a "Negro" hotel and eating in a diner there, he returned to the shoeshine stand. When the man did not recognize him, he finally told him what he was doing and asked to stay and work with him for a few days. During the day he worked at the shoeshine stand, eating a shared lunch of leftovers cooked over a makeshift grill in a gallon can on the sidewalk. He wandered around New Orleans looking for jobs and living as a

Negro for a week.

When he read about a Mississippi jury that refused to indict in the case of Mack Parker, Griffin decided to go to Mississippi. Parker had been accused of a 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 pick him up. Griffin also visited Mobile, Ala., Atlanta and Auburn, Ala.

In Montgomery, Griffin describes a different attitude. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s influence was obvious. Griffin said "the Negro's feeling of utter hopelessness is here replaced by a determined spirit of passive resistance." He talked of a superficial calm but said at night police were everywhere.

After seven weeks, on Dec. 15, Griffin resumed his white identity and flew home to his family in Mansfield.

He spent weeks trying to correlate statistics and write reports but in the end decided to simply 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 everyone, including Mansfield, would know what he had done. His mother received a threatening phone call and Griffin asked

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 that he had been hung in effigy 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 April 11, but by August his parents had decided to sell their home and move to Mexico. Not wanting to let the bullies think they had gotten the best of him, Griffin stayed until after the planned attack, which never took place, then moved his own family to Mexico.

Griffin stayed in Mexico for a year but came back to Mansfield and published "Black Like Me" in November of 1961. It was reprinted as a mass paperback in 1962. A second edition, which included Griffin's epilogue about what happened after the publication of the book, was published in 1976. Griffin died in 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 Don Rutledge and an afterword by Robert Bonazzi, who was Griffin's biographer and married his widow.