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Doc Helm's Photographic Legacy

Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm left an important legacy that is vital to the community, particularly the African American community, of Springfield, and to the state of Illinois, for that matter. Through his work as official state and prolific freelance photographer, Helm captured the world around him. He took pictures of kids playing outside on a hot afternoon and people on the job, for example waitresses working at a restaurant. Doc Helm chronicled nightclub acts at work and servicemen home on leave. He devoted most of his life to photographing people at work and play. He found worthy photographic subjects during the ordinary moments of life, as well as in notable figures like Joe Louis and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Doc Helm was born in Mount Vernon, Illinois in 1911, one of eight children, to Richard and Sallie Helm. Helm earned the lifelong nickname of Doc at an early age while working as an assistant at Bonds Pharmacy in Mount Vernon. In the 1930s, Helm would deliver medicine to people at the end of his work day.

Doc Helm moved to Springfield in 1934 after an uncle helped find him a job for the State of Illinois as a janitor. One of his tasks was not for the faint of heart. His daughter Beverly Helm explains that it was his job to raise and lower the flag atop the Capitol dome. He made that daunting 360-stair climb and up a ladder, despite the lack of any safety features protecting him.

Realizing there was an unmet need in Springfield for a professional black photographic studio, Helm bought a professional quality camera, took a correspondence class to become professionally trained in photography, and established a

darkroom in his own home. As Beverly states, "he had a natural eye for photographing his subjects." In 1943, he opened a commercial studio at 809 East Washington. According to Beverly, the studio didn't last long because he was so busy taking freelance pictures for various organizations and events, including banquets, lodge events, and soldiers home on leave from World War II that he was never at his studio. Beverly says that over 200 pictures of black WWII soldiers taken by her father have

been discovered. She recalled that when it was necessary to travel to lodge events, banquets, or other photograph events, "it became a family affair." Her father would take along her mother Dorothy, Beverly and her brother James.

Doc Helm's day job had changed dramatically since his early days in Springfield. He worked as a janitor for eight years before taking a job filing documents at the State Library. He moved from book stack clerk to microfilming documents, before finding his dream job. Head Librarian Miss Helene D. Rodgers recognized Doc Helm's talent for photography and recommended him for the job of official state photographer in February of 1944. In this position, he was responsible for taking pictures at State receptions, State funerals, and portraits of politicians and dignitaries. A great deal of his work went into the Illinois Blue Books.

Beverly says that whenever he took pictures of famous people, her father always made sure his family was there. She recalled one particular time the family getting their picture taken with Gene Autry and his horse; his list of photographed celebrities also includes Rosa Parks, Doctor Martin Luther King Jr., Reverend Jesse Jackson, Mayor Harold Washington, B.B. King, and local musical legend



Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm in front of Archives Building - circa 1950's



Ladies Bridge Club started in the 1950s. Photograph taken by Doc Helm.

Peg-leg Bates. On a freelance basis, Doc photographed many local African American businesses, local doctors, dentists, and firemen. As Beverly has pored over the massive collection of pictures her father took over nearly 60 years, one thing that has caught her attention is the surprisingly large number of black doctors that lived and worked in Springfield during the 40's and 50's. She would like to see her father's photographic work preserved in some manner; in years past some interest has been expressed in publishing some of his photos in a book.



Dorothy, James, and Beverly Helm with Gene Autry - circa 1950s. Photograph taken by Doc Helm.

Doc took on many assignments in his off-hours. He was the official photographer for a couple of lodges and photographer for St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church where he was a member since 1934. Additionally, he took pictures for people involved in automobile accidents and for people requesting documentation for insurance purposes. During his lengthy tenure as a photographer, he came to earn the nickname "One-shot Doc." Beverly explains that her father believed that if you couldn't get the picture right the first time, then you probably won't get it the second time either. So he perfected the technique of getting the picture right on the very first try.

Doc retired in 1992 after 58 years as a state employee, and passed away two years later. Doc Helm's important contribution to our cultural heritage gained some well-deserved attention from the Illinois State Museum about five years ago. From January 18 through March 29, 1998, the Illinois State Museum displayed 75 of his black-and-white photographs, most of which were taken during the 40's, 50's, and 60's. The



Senator Fred J. Smith, Representative Corneal Davis, and Governor Adlai Stevenson, circa early 1950s. Photograph taken by Doc Helm.

exhibit, Doc's Legacy – A Selection of Photographs by Springfield Photographer Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm, was sponsored in part by a grant from the Springfield Area Arts Council and the "Doc" Helm Memorial Fund. At the Museum's Website, www.museum.state.il.us, visitors can click on a selection of his images, and read more biographical details about his life as a photographer. Beverly Helm says that several articles have also been written about her father, though none recently.

Both Doc's children have inherited their father's love of photography. Beverly's brother James works as a professional photographer, while Beverly does it as a hobby, taking pictures at family events, weddings, and anniversaries. They have organized shows of their father's work at churches, various organizations, and a couple of

universities. According to Beverly Helm, “We want to keep the history of Springfield and our father’s work alive.” At each show, they include three or more pictures containing people they have been unable to identify with the hope that somebody will be able to recognize the subjects of the pictures. Other people over the years have approached Beverly with pictures Doc has taken of them in the past.

Beverly Helm explains that they would like to provide scholarships in photojournalism with money from the “Doc” Helm Memorial Fund. The scholarships and shows go a long way toward keeping Doc Helm’s legacy alive. The cultural heritage of the African American community in Springfield during the last century has been preserved and promoted as a result of the thousands of pictures Doc Helm took. The impact of his photojournalistic career is far-reaching with future generations having the opportunity to develop a deeper appreciation of what life was like for this community in the last century.



*Rocky Marciano in the kitchen of Saputos Restaurant.
Photograph taken by Doc Helm.*

Governor Blagojevich Makes Education Focus of Second State of the State Address

Governor Blagojevich addressed a joint session of the General Assembly for his State of the State speech on Thursday, January 15th. Lasting almost 90 minutes, the Governor devoted much of his speech to pointing out what he perceives are critical failures in Illinois’ educational system. Initially, he reviewed areas where some reform or improvement had been accomplished within the last year, namely reforming state government by passing ethics legislation; streamlining state government by cutting payrolls and merging state agencies; and reforming healthcare in Illinois with the creation of the prescription buying club and expanding programs like FamilyCare and KidCare.

Governor Blagojevich reiterated that he in fact inherited the record \$5 billion budget deficit and reaffirmed his unwillingness to raise income or sales taxes as a possible solution. The Governor additionally noted that even with the record deficit, no cuts to education, health care, and public safety have resulted. He also promised to continue the fight to get consumers affordable access to prescription drugs, as well as the ability to import drugs safely and legally from Canada. According to Governor Blagojevich, improvements have been made in the areas of job creation, education, and public safety: the latter due to death penalty reforms and Illinois’ counter-terrorism efforts during the last year. His reflections on education provided the segue to the bulk of Governor Blagojevich’s speech, that is a strong critique of

the state agency governing education in Illinois. The speech was a litany of grievances against the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Governor Blagojevich likened the ISBE to an “old, Soviet style bureaucracy,” stating that it is clunky and inefficient, it issues mandates, it spends money, it dictates policy, and it isn’t accountable to anyone for anything.” Governor Blagojevich cited these statistics to illustrate his pessimistic view of the ISBE: “Illinois ranks 16th in the country in money spent per student, the state only ranks 40th in terms of seeing that the money is spent in the classroom.

While addressing the joint session of the General Assembly, Governor Blagojevich suggested sweeping changes to the State Board of Education including the creation of a new Department of Education, which would be under the Governor’s control. The ISBE would not be eliminated; doing so would require an amendment to the Illinois Constitution. The 1970 Illinois Constitution created the independent Illinois State Board of Education. Under the Governor’s plan, the ISBE would become a think tank of sorts, focusing on education policy, with the administering of education programs occurring in the new Department of Education, which would be accountable to the legislature and the governor. An estimated 40 percent reduction in ISBE’s 600 employee workforce would be a likely consequence of the Governor’s plan. The Governor estimates that \$1 billion could be saved over four years to be reinvested for classroom instruction. Aside from gutting the ISBE and suggesting a new agency, Governor Blagojevich outlined a number of other aspects of his education plan.

A few programs emphasized the importance the Governor places on reading. He would like to see a program

implemented in which all children in Illinois from birth to age five receive a free book each month, so that children will acquire a library of books by the time they reach school age. Each child would then receive a dictionary and a library card. Reading specialists would be placed in elementary schools failing to meet reading achievement standards; the estimated cost is \$15 million. Governor Blagojevich would ensure that teachers seeking certificate renewal must complete half of their requirements learning the latest teaching methods in the subject of reading.

The Governor's plan would reinstate a program instituted by Governor Jim Edgar. Project Success used schools to get families in touch with needed social services like substance abuse prevention and preventative health care. Furthermore, Blagojevich would seek passage of the Childhood Hunger Relief Act, which would require schools to provide breakfast to children. This would apply to schools with 40 percent of the student population eligible for free and reduced lunches and would cost an estimated \$1 million.

The Governor would like to end the practice of giving schools waivers from offering physical education classes, and wants high school students to be required to perform 40 hours of community service prior to graduation. The Governor would also like the General Assembly take action in response to a growing health problem in this country, namely the high number of overweight children. In response, he hopes to see legislation passed that bans junk food and soda from school vending machines by January 1, 2005. Another proposal, the GRADS (Getting Results Achieving Dreams and Success) Initiative, would target communities with a great potential for high school dropouts, particularly focusing on Latino and African American students to help them remain in school. Two million dollars would be used to implement the program, involving the coordination of resources among a number of state agencies.

Another area for potential cost savings, as specified in the Governor's State of the State, deals with administrative issues, rather than the classroom. The Governor would like an independent teacher certification board to

be formed, apart from ISBE to help eliminate some of the lengthy paperwork involved in the process. Purchases of school supplies would be consolidated with an estimated savings of \$550 million over four years. A \$550 million school construction program would be renewed – with a savings of \$160 million over four years. The Governor estimates between \$80 and \$180 million dollars could be saved each year by consolidating the purchase of employee benefits. He would like to see regional service centers created in which such functions as accounting, auditing, and accounts payable are pooled among schools. He estimates about \$12 to 20 million a year could be saved by pooling these resources.

Governor Blagojevich's complaints against ISBE are numerous. He believes the state agency lacks accountability, so the agency is able to be wasteful and inefficient because they answer to no one. The Governor estimates that nearly \$20 billion is spent every year on education in Illinois, but only 46 cents of every dollar spent on a child's education actually goes to classroom instruction. Another complaint raised concerns over 34,000 mistakes made on ISBE reports about schools, which affected about 75% of Illinois schools.

With a dramatic flourish, Governor Blagojevich displayed to his audience a stack of 2,800 pages of administrative rules relating to education. He stated that there were more pages than could be found in the Quran, King James Bible, and Torah combined and called it a "bureaucratic nightmare of biblical proportions."

Governor Blagojevich delivered his next address to both chambers on February 18, where he discussed part of the budget. The Governor focused specifically on the operating expenses portion of the budget in February which will be featured in the next *Cook-Witter Report*. Capital spending will be addressed in a speech to be given no later than March 23. The budget has traditionally been presented in one speech, but the General Assembly approved the Governor's request to delay the capital portion of the budget address. Last year the Governor sought and received permission to delay his budget address until April.



People In Transition

Former state Representative Mary K. O'Brien (D-Coal City) has been appointed to the Illinois Appellate Court in the Third Judicial District. She resigned from the House December 17, 2003. **Careen Gordon** will now serve in the House for the 75th District. She was a prosecutor in the Illinois Attorney General's criminal division from 2001 to 2003.



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