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State Archivist Jesse White and Illinois State Archives Receive \$60,000 Federal Grant to Digitize Photo Collection of Illinois' Historic African American Photographer Doc Helm

Secretary of State and State Archivist Jesse White announced that the Illinois State Archives has been awarded a \$60,178 federal grant to preserve, digitize and provide online access to 21,000 photographs taken by longtime state photographer Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm.

"Doc Helm served as the official state photographer for half a century, from the 1940s to 1992," said White. "During this time, he took pictures of presidents, governors, celebrities, citizens, notable events and the ordinary day-to-day operations of state government. He left behind a vast historical record, and this grant will allow the public to view and enjoy his work."

According to White, Helm's photographs were stored only as negatives, so they are not well known to researchers. Despite this, they have received use in some books, newspapers and magazine articles and, most recently, in the Hulu television program "Mrs. America."

Helm photographed at least three presidents, several presidential candidates and politicians, and celebrities including Nat King Cole, Bob Hope and Sammy Davis Jr. The collection includes diverse images such as the governor addressing a joint session of the state legislature during World War II, the first group photo of the newly created Black Legislative Caucus in 1967, and photos of capitol tour guides in the 1970s, dressed in uniforms like those worn by airline attendants at the time.

Along with serving as the state photographer, Doc Helm was also considered a leading photographer in central Illinois and arguably the most important African American photographer in the state during the mid-20th century.

His private sector work focused largely on Springfield's African American community and has been featured in exhibits at the Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum, Illinois State Museum and Bicentennial Plaza in Springfield, as well as in the pages of *Illinois Heritage* magazine.

The grant to the Illinois State Archives was part of almost \$2.9 million in grants that Archivist of the United States David Ferriero recently awarded to projects in 17 states. The grants are carried out with the advice and recommendations of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

The grant for the Doc Helm collection will be used to purchase a scanner to professionally scan, index and place online the photographic negatives. The funds will also be used to purchase archival quality envelopes to better preserve the negatives and to hire two University of Illinois at Springfield history students to assist in scanning and cataloguing the negatives. The projected completion of the project is set for October 1, 2021.

“The efforts of the National Archives and the NHPRC to provide funding for projects at the state and local levels are very important and necessary,” said White. “Those efforts are making a huge difference in preserving history across the country.”



Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm



Governor William Stratton (in white suit) with President Dwight Eisenhower (left) leaving the Governor's Mansion to go to the Illinois State Fair in 1954.