

## Mixed Media

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### Doc Helm: Capturing Nearly 50 Years of Illinois History

*By Catheryne Popovitch, Deputy Coordinator, Illinois State Archives*



*Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm, 1962*

Eddie Winfred Helm was born on June 28, 1911, in Mt. Vernon, Illinois. Growing up, he tried his hand at woodworking and for a time worked with his father at the Mt. Vernon Car Manufacturing Company. He also worked as an assistant at the local pharmacy as a young man. Times being tough in the 1930s, he observed that many people in his community could not afford their prescriptions, and he often took it upon himself to pay for those prescriptions out of his own wages. This is how Eddie Helm came to be known as "Doc" Helm. In 1934, Helm moved to Springfield to work as a janitor for the State of Illinois. He later transferred to the State Library, where he stacked books, filed documents, and later microfilmed documents.

Helm also worked in his spare time as a photographer, providing Springfield with its only African American-owned photographic studio at the time. He became a leading photographer in central Illinois during the mid-twentieth century. Helm was not only interested in documenting the "greats," such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but he also endeavored to capture ordinary citizens setting about their daily routines. He provided services for weddings and became the official photographer for St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church and a number of fraternal organizations. He took photos at local night clubs, of African American businesses, of doctors and entrepreneurs, and of World War II soldiers home on leave.

His private sector work is featured in a permanent exhibit at the Central Illinois

African American Museum and has been featured in special exhibits at the Illinois State Museum and in *Illinois Heritage* magazine. Helm had a remarkable eye for composition and a great talent for getting a picture in just one shot, earning him the nickname "One-shot Doc." He has been quoted as saying, "If you don't get it right the first time, you're not going to get it the second. It's going to be the same shot."<sup>1</sup> Through his immense talent as a photographer and his community involvement with such organizations as Frontiers International and the Shriners, Doc Helm became a celebrated figure in Springfield and throughout Illinois.

#### Official Secretary of State Photographer

After 10 years serving in various positions with the state, Doc Helm was named the official secretary of state photographer in 1944. He served in that role until his retirement in 1992. Over the course of nearly half a century, he chronicled state government by photographing politicians, celebrities, government officials, important events, and the day-to-day operations of state government. He left behind a legacy of more than 30,000 photographic negatives, which are housed at the Illinois State Archives.



*Doc Helm photographed the Illinois Capitol Building in 1947.*

These photos provide a unique visual historical record of politics, government, and entertainment in the Midwest from the mid- to the late twentieth century. Spanning nearly 50 years, the Doc Helm Collection contains such diverse images as Governor Dwight Green addressing a joint session of the state legislature regarding wartime measures during World War II; US Archivist Wayne Grover and Illinois State Archives Director Margaret Cross Norton admiring the archives' card catalog in 1952; the first group photo of the newly created Black Legislative Caucus in 1967 during the height of the civil rights movement; demonstrators conducting a "smoke-in" on the capitol grounds in 1978; and Rosalynn Carter's visit to Springfield in 1980.

Included in the Doc Helm Collection are pictures of national political figures visiting Illinois, such as Thomas Dewey, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale, and Joe Biden. Also included are photos of Illinois political figures, such as Adlai Stevenson II, Chicago mayors Richard J. Daley and Harold Washington, and other state and local elected officials. Notable international figures photographed by Doc Helm include Pope John XXIII, the king of Belgium, and His Holiness from Bulgaria. Celebrities, such as Nat King Cole, Bob Hope, Roy Rogers, and Sammy Davis Jr., are featured in Helm's photos along with athletes Ken Norton, Josh Gibson, and Satchel Paige.

Alongside the celebrated figures and events, Helm photographed thousands of everyday activities and people, including school and scout groups visiting Springfield,



*President Eisenhower visits the Illinois State Fair, 1954.*



*Pope John XXIII and Illinois secretary of state Charles Carpentier, 1962*

swearing-in ceremonies, demonstrations in front of the Capitol, activities along Route 66, elected officials visiting locations throughout Illinois, the installation of new bookshelves in the basement of the archives building, holiday displays, and retirement and staff parties. Construction and maintenance of state buildings, groundbreaking ceremonies, and statue dedications are found throughout the collection, as are photos taken at most of the Illinois State Fairs at the time and at the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield.

This collection of photos was most successfully used for the book *The Illinois State House* by James Donelan and Steve Dyer as part of Arcadia's *Images of America* series. Many of Helm's photos have appeared in Illinois Blue Books. The State Architect has also extensively used the collection for architectural history. However, this broad and remarkable collection is generally unknown to the public.

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*Vice President Nixon's presidential campaign visit to Springfield, 1960*

### **Current State of the Collection**

As the depository of public records of Illinois state governmental agencies that possess permanent administrative, legal, or historical research values, the Illinois State Archives gained control over Doc Helm's work after his retirement in 1992. Having been housed in the humidity- and temperature-controlled stacks at the Illinois State Archives, the collection of some 30,000 negatives is in excellent condition. The collection consists of approximately 21,000 4-inch-by-5-inch negatives, 7,000 60mm negatives, 1,400 35mm negatives, 270 35mm color slides, and 100 8-inch-by-10-inch positive prints.

Most of the 4-inch-by-5-inch negatives are stored in envelopes in a metal cabinet, a banker's box, and Hollinger boxes. However, the smaller 60mm and 35mm negatives are still stored in old Kodak boxes with rare sleeve protection. The original envelopes used and written on by Doc Helm still house the 4-inch-by-5-inch negatives. While the information on the envelopes has proven invaluable for identifying the people and events portrayed in the photos, the acidic paper and overstuffed envelopes are far from ideal. Still, fewer than 10 negatives in the entire collection exhibit channeling, and this damage was most likely caused by exposure to high heat and humidity prior to the archives' acquisition of the collection. The few damaged negatives have been separated from the rest of the collection.

During their research in 2009 for the book *The Illinois State House*, authors James Donelan and Steve Dyer transcribed the notes on each of the envelopes, compiling

five spreadsheets of information on the photographs. The spreadsheets denote the drawer or box number of each envelope of negatives, the date that each photograph was taken, title or subject of each image as found on the envelope, and some additional comments regarding the individuals, buildings, and events in the photographs. No collection-level finding aid exists for the collection, and very few people outside of the Illinois State Archives know of its existence.

### **Future of the Collection**

The Illinois State Archives has set its sights on making this important collection accessible to the public. Such accessibility would initially involve the scanning of approximately 21,000 4-inch-by-5-inch acetate negatives from the collection. The negatives themselves would first be rehoused into individual, acid-free envelopes and transferred into Hollinger boxes. A collection-level finding aid would be created using the metadata produced with the photographs and made available via the archives' online descriptive inventory. The Illinois State Archives is currently in the planning phase of this project and hopes to be able to scan the negatives and make them available for viewing online. By bringing attention to this collection, the Illinois State Archives wishes to showcase the immense talent of Doc Helm and to connect his public work with his private achievements. Making this collection accessible would improve the public's knowledge of Illinois history and help cement the legacy of Eddie Winfred "Doc" Helm as a pioneer in photography.

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#### Note

1. Sill, Robert. "Doc's Legacy — A Selection of Photographs by Springfield Photographer Eddie Winfred 'Doc' Helm," Illinois State Museum, March 2, 1998, <http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/changing/helm/helmbio.html>.

### **ELECTRONIC CURRENTS**—Continued **Joanne Kaczmarek, Assistant Editor**

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5. COSA, "Resource Center," <http://www.statearchivists.org/resource-center/resource-library>.
6. NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Transforming Online Mail with Embedded Semantics (TOMES)," <https://www.ncdcr.gov/resources/records-management/tomes>.