

Commandment Keeper Church

By Fayth M. Parks

In the approximately 42 minutes of black and white 16mm film footage, during an outdoor church service scene, Zora Neale Hurston waves her hand directing a church soloist to move closer to the microphone while staying in camera view. The film sound was recorded separately. So there's an additional 90 minutes audio recording of prayers, songs, and sermons. Congregants play instruments and Hurston joins them by playing a pair of rattles in another scene. She also joins congregates in common prayer and wrote in her field notes that common prayer creates a chamber of flowing chants. Hurston harmonizes with the singing, dancing, praying, and trance that she noted were the "more African form of expression" in Negro sacred service. Congregant Julia Jones goes into ecstasy. At other times, Sister Jones delivers prophecies aloud to the congregation or kneels to whisper in a member's ear. Regarding the Commandment Keeper Church, Hurston wrote: "Its keynote is rhythm. In this church they have two guitars, three symbols, two tambourines, one pair of rattle goers, and two washboards. Every song is rhythmic as are their prayers and sermons."¹

On Saturday, May 18 and Sunday, May 19, 1940, Zora Neale Hurston, acclaimed African American author and anthropologist, directed a movie crew from New York to capture religious services on film and recorded sound at the Commandment Keeper Church in Beaufort, South Carolina. They also captured scenes throughout the community. As South Carolina's second oldest city, Beaufort embodied the Jim Crow South fully formed. Hurston's talent for navigating its landscape to conduct ethnographic fieldwork amazes anyone fortunate enough to view the film footage, read field notes, books, and plays that were outcomes. It's documented that Hurston, who had preceded the film crew members Norman Chalfin, Lou Brandt, and Robert Lawrence by a few weeks, notified local authorities that her three Jewish associates would be arriving. They arrived days later in the dark night without incident.²

Located in the contrasting glamour of 1940's New York, The Jane Belo Foundation funded the Beaufort project. The project advanced the work of Margaret Meade who had filmed similar material on religious ecstasy and culture in Bali and Haiti. Jane Belo hired Hurston to direct the Beaufort project. Though dedicated to preserving the folk life and culture of southern Blacks, Hurston struggled with how much to re-



The film's director Zora Neale Hurston. Courtesy Library of Congress [Prints and Photographs Online Catalog](#).

veal about the hidden code and unique forms of cultural expression. As she famously said, the folk can "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." In a letter to a North Carolina colleague, Hurston expressed an urgent need to get her own recordings of the swell music and songs the people create before Belo's movie crew arrived. Hurston planned to lead them to "nice places," but intended to keep the "fattest and juiciest places" for her project. She was collaborating with her North Carolina colleague on a play where music and songs would set the tone and authenticity.³

More than a film about religious ecstasy, the Commandment Keeper Church documentary offers a glimpse inside African American religious rituals as well as habits of living that tell deeper stories of dignity, faith, and community. African American life flickers in the black and white images of a carpenter's woodworking talents, school children studying in a WPA Education Program, bright-faced children outdoors at play, and folks doing routine household chores. Black folks keep contemporary in fashion

and style too. Patterned fabrics, shoulder pad dresses and blouses, casual head scarf, hats, Mary Jane shoes, and men's suits made with sturdy fabric and simple detail are moments of 1940s style on display in "Sunday Best" attire.

In August 2006, Beaufort native Dr. Delo E. Washington and I screened the Commandment Keeper Church documentary at Beaufort Middle School. An assembly of approximately eighty middle-schoolers sat attentively while watching the silent black and white images. After the viewing, we facilitated a discussion on their reactions to the film. When asked the question: What did you like about the film? Many of the students liked the Reverend and watching the women and men play the music." Everyone seemed happy to be in church;" "The community enjoyed everyday daily life;" "Ms. Julia Jones dances and gets really into church service;" and "I really liked Rev. George" and "The little fellow [sic] was Rev Grandson."

Because students were familiar with Zora Neale Hurston's books, they expressed being proud that she had visited Beaufort. A few students even recognized Hurston in the film: "Zora is on the drums." Students also liked seeing the Old Beaufort community; identifying Grand Army Hall (now a historic site where Commandment Keeper Church was filmed), Boundary Street, and National Cemetery. When asked: What is community to you? Students repeated the same answer: "A place where different people live and do different things with those people." "A place where you live, where you can go and you have friends, "Where almost everyone knows you," A place where people live...and take care of each other," but others reflected a more somber view: "1940 was a ruff [sic] time." Though we didn't have sound, I imagine listening to the sound recordings and viewing the images together would have been an even more exciting experience. One student observed, "1940 the recording didn't let you record and do a video at the same time."

The 1940 Commandment Keeper Church documentary is about more than religious ecstasy. There are lessons about the era: types of community activities, how spirituality was used for emotional release and a hopeful mindset, and how people lived well despite hard circumstances. The master narrative of unintelligible Negro religious antics gives way to the counter-narrative of cultural values and life ways in the African American experience. We learn that not much is different in our daily lives. We work, we play, we love, we pray, and we relate to each other as family and community. What you see in the black and white flickering images are African American habits of living and expressions of grace.

¹ ZNH field notes, "Ritualistic Expression From the Lips of the Communicants of the Seventh Day Church of God, Beaufort, South Carolina." Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

² Norman Chafin, "Beaufort Odyssey" (ZNH subject file), Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress.

³ Carla Kaplan (Ed.), Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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