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Rare Film Sells at African-Americana Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

Swann Galleries, New York City

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Photos courtesy Swann

More than five hours of original 16-millimeter moving pictures, offering a previously unseen view of prosperous African-Americans in the 1920's, sold on February 26 at Swann in New York City for $57,600 (including buyer's premium). The unprecedented silent-film record, together with the same images transferred digitally to DVD's, went to a dealer, said Swann's printed and manuscript African Americana department expert, Wyatt H. Day. Whether that dealer was bidding for an institution, Day couldn't reveal.

"Nobody's talking about it for the moment," he said.

A portion of the 1925-28 footage depicts Oklahoma's oil-wealthy Black townships, once widely advertised as new Edens to the Black community in search of peaceful places to settle during Reconstruction. Scenes include a cake-and-gown graduation ceremony at Langston University in Langston; the pumping oil wells of L.E. Ragsdale in Bristow that reportedly produced 1000 barrels a day; and construction of the Baptist church in Taft by building contractor A.W. Marchell and his sons.

Many of those towns no longer exist today. We can name the locations and some of the people pictured because the 29 metal film canisters were identified by typed labels and various film segments were introduced by onscreen titles.

The amateur filmmaker responsible for this remarkable trove was the Reverend Solomon Sir Jones (1869-1936), a "circuit preacher" who brought his camera along with him as he traveled from place to place in his ministry. On a sample disk of excerpts provided by Swann to serious bidders Jones is shown in an introductory cameo. It's less than a minute, but what's long enough to get a sense of his affability as he doffs his hat, then removes his glasses as he smiles and nods to his audience.

Jones shot film of other African-American communities while traveling around the United States during the same pre-Depression period. It's part of the package, on which can be seen Madam C.J. Walker's cosmetics factory in Indianapolis; a Sunday school in the same city; the Mariah Baptist congregation in Memphis; and lots more churchgoers in places like New Orleans, Nashville, and Dennison, Texas. There are also glimpses of African-American cowboys herding cattle; children in a parade along with a dozen decorated Packards; high school football players scrimmaging; a Masonic funeral, with women carrying the casket; and musicians in a symphony orchestra.

Obviously Jones was determined to show evidence of the good life. He favored proud, confident faces and poses. But he didn't sidestep other strata of society, including "boy prisoners" in long uniform coats being transferred by train from Boley to McAlester, Oklahoma.

He also traveled as a tourist to the Holy Land and Europe with his camera, but the rare African-American images are the ones to be cherished.

The consignor of the film was Currie Ballard of Coyle, Oklahoma, who traces his ancestry back to the two slave-authors of the song "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Ballard bought it in 2006 from a Tulsa antiques dealer, who is said to have found it in a building owned by his family. According to published reports, the dealer never viewed the film but called Ballard, then historian-in-residence at Langston University, because the labels on the canisters included the word "Negroes."

Almost immediately, Ballard tried to interest public institutions in buying the film. Day, a bookseller, archivist, and appraiser as well as Swann's one-man African-Americana department, worked with him. "I know a number of academics and so forth, but nothing could be worked out," said Day. What Swann could provide was an essential marketing tool in the seven-minute sample disk. "Without that, we couldn't have done it. The problem always was, how do [prospective buyers] see it?"

During previews, Swann had the entire film on view in the gallery. "People would sit down and just watch," said Day. Among those people were Mary N. Elliott and her sister, originally from Oklahoma. "They pretty much knew everybody in it; they were their ancestors. And they sat and watched and made identifications as the film went by. It was really quite extraordinary." The Elliott sisters were using the footage for the first time, although they had known the local legend about the filmmaking minister, said Day.

Of the sale's results in general, which brought $537,480 (est. $626,600/ 930,150), Day said: "I was certainly pleased, given what's been going on at auction. All my big, important lots did well. How could I not be happy?"

In fact, among the 346 unsold items in the 435-lot sale were only two with mega estimates. They were a collection of autograph signatures of 20 of the 24 African-American politicians elected to the U.S. Congress from 1868 to 1897 (est. $30,000/40,000) and a portfolio of photogravures by Roy DeCarava from 1996 (est. $50,000/70,000).

A circa 1981 gelatin silver print by DeCarava did sell, however, going to a collector at $10,200 (est. $9000/12,000). From 1960, it shows jazz greats John Coltrane and Elvin Jones performing.

An archive of correspondence between Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) and Charles H. Wesley (1891-1987), which they characterized as "tremendously important," was the second to top lot of the sale, going to a dealer at $21,600 (est. $4000/6000). The two men were instrumental in developing the once controversial academic discipline of African-American studies. Woodson, the son of former slaves who became the first Black to earn a Harvard Ph.D., established Negro History Week in 1926, which later evolved into Black History Month. Wesley was a historian, educator, and author of numerous scholarly books, including several that were groundbreaking.

The more than 100 typed letters written from 1925 to 1948 by Woodson to Wesley, along with carbons of Wesley's typed replies, came to the sale from the estate of Wesley's second wife, Dorothy Porter Wesley (1905-1995). An important figure in her own right, the librarian/curator built the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C., into what is considered one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of African-American history in the world.

Another item from the Wesley estate, selling at $18,000 (est. $6000/8000), was an archive relating to the Virginia Jubilee Singers organized by Orpheus McAdoo. Wesley had the material because she was a close friend of a McAdoo descendant. "It's a very nice provenance, just straight as an arrow," said Day.

Orpheus McAdoo (1858-1900), after being in the original Fisk Jubilee Singers for a season, formed this troupe of his own to perform spirituals, folk songs, minstrel shows, and dances. In the 1890's, the group toured South Africa, introducing musicians there to African-American music. This lot documents that journey among other events in the history of the singers and of the extended McAdoo family.

One of the earliest items in the sale, an archive relating to the 1814 capture of the Portuguese slave ship *Victoria*, sold to a dealer for $13,200. (est. $5000/7500). The ship, with 434 slaves aboard, was bound for Brazil when captured off the west coast of Africa by a British vessel. The captain's vellum-bound log book with 16 pages of text, some with English translations, comprises a "shopping list" from Brazilian planters —e.g., "C. Joaquin Antonio de Mattos. 5 men, 2 women, one boy, one girl."

Among other notable slavery-related items was an 1843 letter written by one Alabama brother to another, discussing what a good business prospect slave dealing was. The handwritten missive states "...a year old Negro boys likely are worth from five to seven hundred dollars...." The letter made $1320 (est. $800/1200).

An 1866 Freedmen's Bureau contract, with virtually all protections crossed out, fetched $9360 (est. $1200/1800). The Swann catalog called it "a clear example of the reprehensible manner in which plantation owners took advantage of ex-slaves who found themselves 'free' but with nothing to eat and no place to go."

The sale also featured an insurance policy for a slave ship, printed in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1795, that sold to a dealer for $10,200 (est. $4000/ 6000). "Contrary to popular belief, many slave dealers lived in the Northeast, and a good number in Newport," the catalog stated. These dealers were Samuel and William Vernon, and their ship was on the last of a three-leg journey from Port au Paix in Hispaniola (in the West Indies) to Charleston, South Carolina, with its human cargo.

One of the sale's most affecting objects was a simple white porcelain-covered metal drinking fountain. It would be worth perhaps five bucks in a salvage yard. This one, though, because it was marked with the word "Colored," sold at $15,600 (est. $2500/3500) to an institution.

Cataloged as southern United States, 1940's-50's, the fountain came to the sale from a consignor who said it was used in Tennessee, according to Day. Comparing its results to similar items he has had in past sales, Day added that knowing the specific provenance "really made a big difference in who was going to bid." Once again, however, he was not free to name the institutional buyer. "When they buy something big and splashy, they like to make their own announcement," he said.

We tend to revise or soften, sometimes inadvertently, the unsavory parts of history, but items like the fountain are "irrefutable fact," in Day's phrase. "That's what's so chilling about it, and why it's so important. We're a blink of an eye away from the steps of Little Rock High School. A blink of an eye away from the Pettus Bridge in Selma and axe handles being brought down on people's heads. We can't forget it."

For more information on this or next year's sale, which will take place as always during Black History Month, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or see (www.swanngalleries.com).

More than five hours of original 16-millimeter moving pictures sold to a dealer for $57,600 (est. $40,000/60,000). Swann's Wyatt Day said he knows of "no comparable film record of this size and scope" showing what life was like for working-class, middle-class, and wealthy African-Americans during the period of economic prosperity in America before the 1929 stock market crash. "There do exist batches here and there of footage from this era, but for the most part it usually concerns movies or jazz or both," said Day. "This is a rare 'time capsule.'" Included in the lot were the same images transferred digitally to six DVD's.

The filmmaker was the Reverend Solomon Sir Jones, seen here (far left) in a still photo taken from the footage. Besides being a Baptist minister, Jones was a successful local entrepreneur; as an amateur filmmaker, he also had a certain flair. He knew how to pan and get in for closeups. He understood the appeal of action. Above all, he had the ability to direct the people he wanted to film. It's easy to imagine him flattering the beauticians who filled out of a beauty salon for his handheld camera. In 2006, *American Heritage* wrote about this unprecedented silent-film record, and excerpts can still be viewed on the magazine's Web site (www.americanheritage.com).

A rare example of a slave dealer's "business card" sold for $2880 (est. $700/1000). "Blount & Dawson, General Brokers for the Purchase and Sale of Negroes and Other Property," had the card printed in Savannah in the 1850's.

***Heroes of the Colored Race*, a 21" x 28" chromolithograph proof, sold to an institution for $9600 (est. $5000/7500). The large center portrait is Frederick Douglass; he is flanked by Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, two of the first African-Americans elected to the U.S. Senate.**

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