IV

Captain Jordan Takes the Stage in Kansas City

The Autumn Leaf Club apparently was only one of many interests when Jordan returned from the Philippines to his life in Kansas City. He managed his father's OK Barber Shop and his father's farm near Horniff Station, about sixteen miles west of Kansas City, Kansas. He said he lived at home in Kansas City, Missouri, but went out to the farm regularly. Then during the summer of 1902, he became involved in a plan to establish a hospital to serve the black community of Kansas City, Missouri. It was to be named the John Lange Hospital, and Dr. Thomas Conrad Unthank, who directed the Frederick Douglass Hospital in Kansas City, Kansas, was to lead a comparable venture in Missouri. The hospital was to be housed at 1227 Michigan, one of "the most beautiful and accessible locations in the city." There were twenty-six rooms, all "sanitary in every respect." A school of nursing was also to be included. R. T. Coles originally headed the Board of Directors, but on August 15, 1902, Capt. Leon H. Jordan was elected to replace him. On November 14, Paul Laurence Dunbar gave a reading at the Second Baptist Church as a fundraiser for the hospital.

It was John Lange who recognized the extraordinary musical talent of Blind Boone while he was still playing on the streets of Columbia, Missouri, and who with unusual diligence and perseverance built Boone's career into such an extraordinary success that it made Lange one of the wealthiest African Americans in the state of Missouri. Lange and his wife had settled in Kansas City in 1895, and he had acquired extensive property in the city. He became notably generous in supporting schools, churches, and hospitals in various communities until his death in June, 1916, following an auto accident at Paseo and 18th St. Josephine Rivers, the woman who would become Leon M. Jordan's second mother and who was his father's sister-in-law, sang

with the Blind Boone Concert Group just before she married John Wright of Topeka in 1900. So it is not a complete surprise to see Jordan become the President of the Board of the John Lange Hospital.

Col. George T. Wassom, a lawyer in Kansas City, Kansas, was also a member of the Board. There is no indication how Wassom earned the title Colonel. But he and Jordan together opened a law office in Kansas City, Missouri, on the corner of 6th and Delaware. Jordan apparently began training in the law under Wassom's tutelage. This is apparently the source of the *Sun*'s claim for Jordan's study of the law. Just before Jordan persuaded Dr. Perry to move from Columbia to Kansas City, on February 27, 1903, the *Rising Son* announced that the John Lange Hospital "after heroic struggle," closed its doors. Dr. T. C. Unthank bought the hospital for $4,000, what it cost the committee. "He will use it as a homestead and will move his family in just as soon as the final papers are made out." In this announcement the Michigan address is seen as "an ideal location for a residence and will serve this purpose better." On a later page *Rising Son* notes: "Col. Geo. T. Wassom received a nice fee through the John Lange Hospital sale." Capt. Jordan dropped his law office that same year and began devoting much more of his time to the Autumn Leaf Club.[27]

Jordan also continued to be actively involved in politics. Since the 1880's the African American community had good reason to be impatient with its treatment by the Republican party, even though the party of Lincoln continued the party of choice. John Wright in Topeka and Nelson Crews in Kansas City expressed their frustration with the lack of respect with which the Republican party responded to regular black support. The truth of the matter was that as the Civil War and the issue of freedom from slavery became more distant, the issues of African

[27] Affidavit from Leon H. Jordan, Pension application, LJC; Minutes of the Board of the John Lange Hospital, Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City Public Library; *Kansas City Sun*, July 1, 1916; Gibson, *Mecca of the New Negro*, pp. 8-11; *Rising Son*, February 27, 1903.

Americans were taken less and less seriously by both parties. But in the national 1902 election the resentment of black voters clearly helped defeat the Republican party nationally. That made the local Republicans uneasy.

Mayor James A. Reed appointed Thomas J. Pendergast to a term as Superintendent of Streets that began in 1900 and ended in 1902. While so serving, Pendergast also began the Hasty and Hurry Messenger Service with Casimir Welsh. Welsh would become the boss of most of the heavily black wards. The Hasty and Hurry Messenger Service probably played a considerable role in developing the numbers trade. Jordan's Autumn Leaf Club likely became part of the trade and began to grow in profitability.

On February 6, 1903, the *Rising Son* noted that Capt. Jordan "left for Jefferson City last Monday night. The captain's acquaintances and good fellowship will go a long ways with the leaders and politicians. No Jim Crow cars for Missouri." For the next several years Jordan would regularly go to Jefferson City with black leaders from across the state and fight legislation to establish Jim Crow railway cars in Missouri. Nelson Crews probably wrote the tribute to Jordan on his death. He was a Republican leader, hence Jordan's rival, and he was also a frequent participant in these state protests against Jim Crow railway cars. So his praise for Jordan's central role on this matter merits considerable respect.[28]

On June 30, 1903, Captain Leon H. Jordan had the chance to demonstrate very publicly that he had now taken on the role of his father as head of the Jordan clan. He gave away his sister, Katie, in marriage to Frank Bufkin. It was described as "the most beautiful wedding in the history of St. Augustine Mission." While the church was different from that used in Sallie's marriage to Henry Booker, the splendid reception was held at 1112 Campbell, the same "palatial

[28] Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, pp. 43-45; *Rising Son*, February 6 & 27, 1903; *Kansas City Sun*, August 18, 1918.

residence." The elder Kate Jordan had not yet moved into the house on Vine Street that was being prepared for her following her husband's death. Again the guests with all their gifts were meticulously catalogued. John and Josephine Wright came from Topeka to attend. Katie had not earned the social eclat her sister Sallie had worn, but the Jordan family was clearly on very public display, but now with the eldest son in command.[29]

Leon H. Jordan became a father to Leon Mercer Jordan May 6, 1905. While there seems to have been little public celebration of this event, the naming of the son suggest a significant intention. It is common for fathers to name sons after themselves in an attempt to indicate the son's obligation to carry on the father's, and usually, the family's history. Leon H. probably was very mindful of all that he owed to the ambition and success of his father, Samuel. This was also a proud moment in his own career. Young Leon was slated to carry on the Jordan tradition of public success and leadership. He was given the middle name, Mercer, probably to honor and evoke the example of John Mercer Langston, one of the most famous black abolitionists of his time. Langston chaired the black National Convention in 1864 that Samuel Jordan attended as a delegate. He taught in the Law School at Howard University, became acting president of the school in 1872 and was passed over as a choice for President without reason being disclosed. He was the first black representative to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the state of Virginia. And his home in Oberlin, Ohio, became a national landmark. In 1905 Leon H. had grand ambitions for his son as he had for his own career.

In 1907 just before Leon H. had his fateful argument with his brother-in-law at the Autumn Leaf Club, he presided over the May Flower Ball as President of the May Flower Club, the Big 400. The prideful pun in the title says it all.

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[29] *Rising Son*, June 26 & July 3, 1903.

With the beginning of World War I Jordan is listed as a contractor in the Kansas City Directory. If the claims in the *Kansas City Sun* tribute have substance this must have been the period when he became involved in significant sewer construction in Kansas City and grain elevators in Atchison, Kansas.

The Kansas City Sun paid tribute to his leadership when it announced that Leon H. Jordan "will personally manage the new Criterion Theatre this season, which will insure its continued success." Almost immediately he brought in "Billy" King and his troupe, who in turn began their season with a tribute to the Ninth Cavalry and Eighth Regiment of Illinois with *First Call to War*, which was accompanied by King's greatest military musical comedy. But by June King's troupe was putting on *Within the Law*, a drama that drew a rave first page review from Charles A. Starks. And that review is headed by the announcement, "The Criterion Theatre Prospers Under New Management." Clearly the *Sun* felt its faith in Jordan's management skills was justified.

The play tells the story of a young department store worker falsely accused of stealing, who is sent to prison and there becomes sufficiently embittered to plot a devastating revenge against her employer and accuser, which includes as a first step marrying his son. Starks praises all the actors extravagantly, finds the economic and social issues significant, and revels in the play's popular appeal. He concludes: "The Criterion is scheduled for good shows only. The salaries paid, the high class performances and the absolute control by colored people compels at least the writer to observe that it is the foremost institution of its kind in the city. This paper will announce all shows." But this success in theater also does not merit mention in the *Kansas City Sun's* final tribute.[30]

[30] *Rising Son*, May 18, 1907; *Kansas City Sun*, April 24, May 22, June 19, 1915.

After Jordan's appeal for a medical pension was denied, the examiner summed up his evaluation of the plaintiff: "Leon H. Jordan, Clt, is a young colored man of this city of pleasing address and appearance. He is well educated, and has a good mind, and could be a leader of his race, were his lines cast in the right places. One of his principal occupations is the management of the Autumn Leaf Club at #706 East 12th St. This is an organization for the entertainment and amusement of colored males, and of course as it is not unusual in such clubs for both white and the colored, liquors are sold, and various games played. An effort has been made to close this club, and others of a similar character, but the Autumn Leaf is yet running, and perhaps some others.

"Leon H. Jordan, himself, is not a dissipated man, and is plainly quite temperate in all of his indulgences. He has some property here, and is considered well to do. His mother and family are apparently well off, live in great comfort and some luxury; and are refined, intelligent and capable people."

The Autumn Leaf Club continued to be Jordan's principal source of money and power until his death. As earlier mentioned it was a source of public controversy in 1904 the year before Leon Mercer was born, and again when Leon H. killed his brother-in-law, Sandy Edwards in 1907. Leon M. was too young to understand much of these events at the time. But in 1917, when Leon M. was twelve years old yet another controversy became public.

On January 18, 1917, the *Kansas City Star* prominently reported a delegation of Negro citizens appearing before the board of police commissioners requesting that Leon Jordan's notorious Autumn Leaf Club be shut down, and, if not, at least its liquor license be withdrawn. "Gray haired old deacons, hobbling on crooked, knotty canes, stood up before David A. Murphy, Mayor Edwards and Col. John F. Lumpkin and declared they were trying with all their might to

uplift their race, but had an awful job on their hands as long as 'that hole of hell' was allowed to run."

After complaining that their little girls, who were as dear to them as the girls of the commissioners were dear to the commissioners, were being enticed to their ruin, the petitioner drew a question from Commissioner Murphy: "What about the kind and ages of the women you saw in there, Mr. Hall?"

Mr. Hall described the young girls as tragically young, in short skirts, and drinking freely. At which point Commissioner Murphy pressed more pointedly: "Ever see any white girls drinking there with Negroes?"

Hall answered tactfully, but with purpose: "They were painted so brightly, sir, I couldn't say for sure whether they were white or black, all of them. But there wasn't any age limit."

Letters, endorsed by eighteen thousand Negroes, were read to the board requesting that the club be refused a liquor license for its bar on the first floor. The testimony indicated that the club at 18th and Vine was an extensive operation. There was a cabaret on the third floor in addition to the bar on the first and a buzzer system throughout the building could trigger the closing of doors to individual sections at any sign of danger.

The Star reported that Mayor Edwards appeared impressed. The matter would be put over for one week while the special investigator could do his job. The article closed rather smugly: "It looks at last as if the Autumn Leaf is about to fall."

Two days later, *The Kansas City Sun* vigorously answered *The Star* on its front page: "A great deal of comment has been aroused concerning the Star's vitriolic and vicious attack on Leon H. Jordan and the Autumn Leaf Club during the past two weeks and many people have asked the question—what is behind it? While it is a well known fact that the Star poses as a

synonym of virtue and a self appointed keeper of the public morals of the city and the state, yet it is well known among the thinking people of this city that the most implacable and vicious enemy the Negro has in this city is this self same Star. While the Sun does not attempt to defend Mr. Leon H. Jordan in any violation of the city ordinances, if he is guilty of any, or the Autumn Leaf Club, yet it believes in fair play and that the Star can use a little of its valuable space and eloquence in helping save some of the aristocratic white boys and girls that are being debauched in the gilded palaces of crime conducted by their own people in this city and furnishing such large patronage to the Maternity institutes scattered throughout the city. The Sun has no hesitancy in saying that the most cleanly kept and most orderly saloon for Negroes in this city is the Autumn Leaf Inn at Eighteenth and Vine streets, while some of the most vicious and notorious dives that ever infested the city are run by WHITE MEN for the debauchery and degradation of Negroes."

The *Sun* went on to describe Leon H. Jordan as "honest, upright, and courageous and [he] will resent an insult from any man, be he white or black." Late in 1915 or early 1916 Jordan had moved The Autumn Leaf Club from 710 E. 12th Street to 1518 E. 18th Street, the northwest corner of 18th and Vine, the very heart of what was to become the Kansas City Jazz District. While controversial, he clearly also commanded high public respect, and his son was now of an age to begin to absorb that public respect as well as something of the controversy it was based on.[31]

The white and black press saw the Autumn Leaf Club through very different lenses. That difference was compounded during the last months of Leon H. Jordan's life. On May 12, 1917, the *Sun* reported that Capt. Jordan was quite ill to the regret of many of his friends. On July 7th

[31] Leon H. Jordan's application for medical pension, JLC; *Kansas City Star*, January 18, 1917; *Kansas City Sun*, January 20, 1917.

the *Sun* carried a front page photo of Capt. Jordan and announced that he was taking treatment and getting a much needed rest at the State Sanitarium. Most of that same front page concerned the horrible slaughter of E. St. Louis Negroes by a white mob while police and national guardsmen did little or nothing to stop the killing. E. St. Louis was the center of a cluster of corporate towns created to avoid taxation. Its government was notoriously corrupt. The corporations were happy to encourage black workers from the South to immigrate. They used them as strike breakers. Ironically their interests coincided with the *Chicago Defender*'s successful national campaign to encourage black migration from the South to northern cities. In E. St. Louis, however, the result was an explosion of racial brutality. Harper Barnes observes that "The East St. Louis race riot was not only the first but officially the deadliest of a series of devastating racial battles that swept through American cities in the World War I era."

The juxtaposition of the riot and Jordan's illness is significant because after Jordan's death a little more than a year later, the *Sun* credited him with providing the money for hundreds of telegrams to U. S. Senators and Congressmen that eventually led to "the first investigation of race riots by the National Government." That investigation was of the East St. Louis riot.

The brutality that played out in E. St. Louis attracted nation-wide debate and interesting local repercussion as Leon H. Jordan became increasingly incapacitated. On July 6th former President Theodore Roosevelt got into a ferocious argument with Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor, at Carnegie Hall in Philadelphia. The clash was widely reported in the national press, and particularly in the black press. The Carnegie meeting was called to greet a delegation from the new revolutionary Provisional Government of Russia, but that became a sideshow with the American press to the debate on race and labor sparked by Roosevelt and Gompers over their different takes on the riots in E. St. Louis.

Barnes focuses the disagreement: "'Before we speak of justice for others,' said Roosevelt, 'it behooves us to do justice within our own household. Within a week there has been an appalling outbreak of savagery in a race riot at East St. Louis, a race riot for which, as far as we can see, there was no real provocation.' Gompers reacted to Roosevelt's remarks by insisting that there had been plenty of provocation. He blamed the violence on 'reactionary' employers who had imported black strikebreakers from the South. 'The luring of these colored men to East St. Louis is on a par with the behavior of the brutal, reactionary and tyrannous forces that existed in Old Russia,' he declared."

The audience at Carnegie Hall was vocal in support of both sides, and the *New York Times* later noted, "It was not a mere quarrel between Roosevelt and Gompers, it was a division in the crowd—a crowd gathered together from all the friends of new Russia—Socialists and workmen who saw chiefly the economic provocation of the riot, and members of other classes who had more feeling of the horror."

In September, Roosevelt spoke at a banquet in Kansas City attended by the business elite of the city. He was the guest of I. H. Kirkwood, William Rockhill Nelson's son-in-law. A delegation of prominent black citizens was invited to visit him at Kirkwood's palatial home, the site until recently of the Rockhill Tennis Club. Nelson Crews, Leon H. Jordan's political rival, but also good friend, was spokesman for the delegation, which included Dr. J. Edward Perry, Jordan's friend from the days of the Spanish American war.

Crews thanked Roosevelt for his "manly and courageous stand for the race in the recent controversy with Samuel Gompers. . . .when Abraham Lincoln uttered those splendid words in which he said, 'Government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from the earth,' he gave utterance to a lofty and magnificent sentiment, but when you, Colonel

Roosevelt, gave utterance to that stirring sentiment, 'All men up and no men down,' you forever endeared yourself to every Negro beneath whatever flag he may live in the civilized world."

Dr. William H. Thomas, pastor of Allen Chapel, then asked the former president for "a message of inspiration to carry to our people." Roosevelt told of having requested permission to organize a brigade of colored troops that he would have led in the nation's current war with all the other officers being colored officers. "I would have expected every man from that regiment to have measured up to the highest possible standing because I knew more would be expected of them than of other elements in my regiment, but as I was not permitted to organize that brigade, I can only say to you: 'Be brave, be not weary in well doing, be patient, but progressive; trust in God and respect your fellows; always remembering that all things which are possible are not always expedient."[32]

Jordan was in the state sanitarium and not in the delegation that met with Roosevelt. As an enthusiastic Democrat he may have chosen not to be a part of that delegation even if he were invited. But during his final days of conscious awareness he apparently contributed substantially to the civil rights of his people. If he indeed made such a large financial contribution it was with little thought to his approaching death and the financial security of his surviving wife and son.

[32] *Kansas City Sun*, May 12, July 7, September 29, 1917; August 10 & 17, 1918; Harper Barnes, *Never Been a Time*, pp. 2, 143-144, & 178-179.