Preface

How All This Began

I moved from Detroit to Kansas City with my wife and four children in the summer of 1960 to assume my first tenure-track position as an Assistant Professor of American Literature at Kansas City University. The civil rights movement was gathering steam and I had made a couple of financial contributions to the Congress of Racial Equality while still in Detroit. CORE then asked if I were interested in becoming more socially active. I said yes, but I was moving to Kansas City. It took them months to catch up with me again in Kansas City and repeat their question. I again said yes.

A few weeks later a field representative was sent to Kansas City to organize those who had showed interest. He called the first meeting in our home. Most who attended were white except for Leon and Orchid Jordan and Larry and Opal Blankinship. Most of us did not know each other, except the Jordans and the Blankinships were well acquainted. The rep insisted we organize and elect officers. Someone nominated me to become chair, probably for little more reason than the meeting was taking place in our home. I declined, explaining we were new to Kansas City and I particularly did not know the African American community. At that point, Leon Jordan, smiled, and with a characteristic bit of challenge, said, “I’ll introduce you to the black community.”

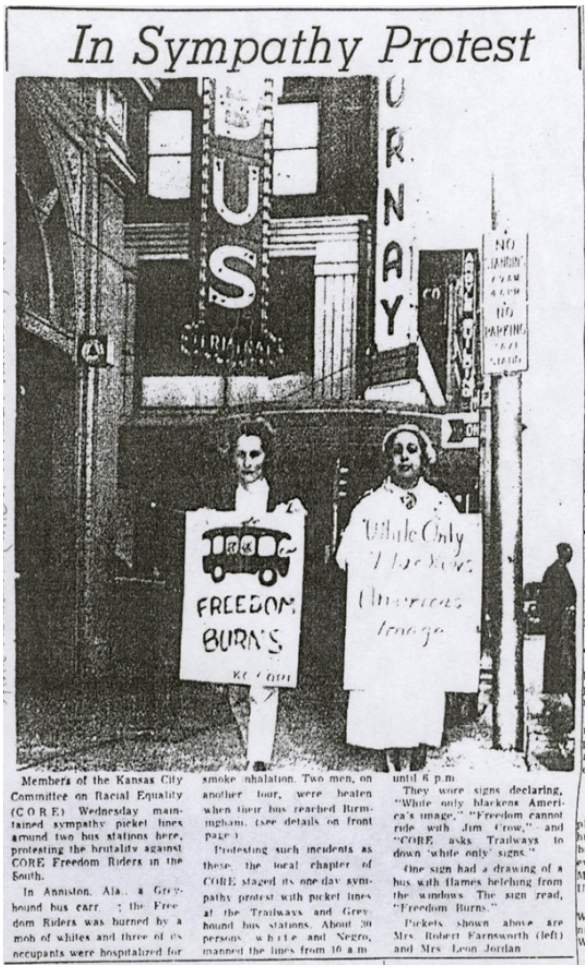
I became chairman of K.C. CORE, Leon Jordan became my mentor into the black community, and my life in Kansas City and at the university was extraordinarily changed from that moment.

Fast forward another four decades. It is 2005 and my wife, Sylvia, and I were invited to a book party celebrating the publication of Jim Olson's biography of Stuart Symington. At that party I looked carefully at Jim, who was 85 and undergoing dialysis once a week, and I marveled how this man's dedication to his academic profession during the last ten years, despite his obvious health problems, had enabled him to produce yet one more significant biography. His feat challenged me to return to biography.

I was 76 and had been retired for some time and had no serious thought of taking up another major writing project, but my biographies of Melvin Tolson and Edgar Snow had given me satisfactions that far outweighed the many frustrations that accompanied their research and writing. Maybe I had one more book in me. My mind turned quickly to Leon Jordan, who had played a significant role in my own life and whose public career over the years seemed at that time to be slipping from public awareness.

Jim Olson understood immediately, and whenever we saw each other during the final months of his life, he always asked encouragingly how my work on Jordan was coming along. For that reason, I dedicate this biography of Leon M. Jordan to James C. Olson, whose professional dedication inspired me to write it.

As I began researching Jordan's life and inevitably remembering my own associations with him and Kansas City at the time, this work gathered strong personal meaning for me. My experience chairing a CORE chapter in Kansas City in the early stages of the civil rights movement was a unique baptism into the life of a city. My first summer I was involved in a protest at Fairyland Park that took me to jail for the first time in my life. Although I didn't know it at the time, as I explain in the biography, I joined many of the future young leaders of Freedom, Inc. in jail.



In numerous social projects the injustice of racial segregation was regularly rubbed raw in my face, but I also saw how unconsciously it had worked its way into the daily habits of most of us. Back at the university, I began to question how much it had infected my professional training and the teaching of American Literature. Black American writers were notably excluded from the canon. I created and taught the first course in Black American Literature at the now University of Missouri—Kansas City in 1964. To prepare to teach that course I attended national seminars on Black American Literature and spent weeks at the Moorland Spingarn Research Room at Howard University. The focus of my professional research and teaching became significantly altered.

At the same time, seemingly unrelated, I was soon chairing a university-wide faculty and staff committee charged with making the governing rules of KCU compatible with our new status as UMKC, an urban campus of the University of Missouri. On reflection I realized that I had come to that position via my civil rights work. Early on Kansas City CORE had decided to focus on discrimination in health care in Kansas City. Research Hospital was then the most segregated hospital in the community. KCU was teaching nursing classes for the hospital. The federal contract supporting that teaching forbade racial discrimination. That led me to meet with Chancellor Carlton Schofield as well as the administrator of Research Hospital. We quickly

realized that the hospital administrator was a major problem. He blatantly misrepresented much of what the hospital was doing. Chancellor Schofield was sympathetic, but clearly felt while he was negotiating a major change in the status of the university he had to be careful in public.

One day in a group meeting at the hospital, I got into a quarrel with the hospital administrator and challenged what he told the group. In the heat of the argument I mentioned that I had just talked with Chancellor Schofield who had contradicted the administrator's position. I knew as soon as I had closed my mouth that I had violated my trust with the Chancellor. So the next day I marched into his office and told him what I had done. He looked me squarely in the eye for some long seconds and then very quietly denied saying what I had quoted him as saying. We both understood his words did not carry his full message. I apologized and withdrew. CORE, along with the Catholic Interracial Council, and some concerned black doctors eventually succeeded in persuading the Board of Research Hospital to dramatically change its racial policies in time for the new Research Hospital to open on Meyer Boulevard. I remember it as a major victory in providing wider health care opportunities for the black community.

But what is relevant here is that within a few weeks of my apology to Chancellor Schofield I received a message from him asking me to chair a three man committee with Dr. Whedon Bloch from Education and Dr. Norman Schwartz from Dentistry to edit UKC's governing practices to make them compatible with the governing rules of the University of Missouri. The three of us quickly realized that the governing regulations needed a substantial overhaul, not just an editing job. We recommended a much broader faculty and staff committee to stage consultations with all the campus organizations involved. I was then elected to chair that committee. I was a young and relatively new Assistant Professor of English. The only

reason I could see that Chancellor Schofield chose me to head the original committee was that he had come to know me through my work in civil rights.

When I came up for my first sabbatical in 1966-67, I was exhausted by the tasks I had assumed during the last five years in the community and at the university. Winning faculty and administrative approval for a radical change in governing practices was a demanding task. I was looking for a break faraway from both. I was awarded a Fulbright lectureship in American Literature in Nagpur, India. Taking five children--our fifth was delivered at Research Hospital by Dr. Samuel Rogers, who was invited to join Research's staff when they opened the new hospital--to India, along with my wife was another and very different cultural adventure. But while I was on the other side of the globe, the faculty senate we had created had trouble getting off the ground. Without asking or even notifying me, the senators had elected me to chair the senate when I returned. I learned of this when I arrived on campus and found a pink envelope commonly used for intracampus mail with a letter inviting me to attend a meeting of the Deans being called by John Weaver, the relatively new President of the University of Missouri.

I quickly called my friend, John Dowgray, then serving as the Provost of UMKC, and asked him what was going on. John was surprised at my news, but he then filled me in on much that had been happening. Randall M. Whaley, was then settling in as Chancellor of UMKC. He had replaced Scofield in 1965. But he and the more recent President of the University of Missouri, John Weaver, had clashed publicly over how much autonomy, the University of Missouri—Kansas City had retained. Dowgray then told me I was likely to hear something about the resignation of Chancellor Whaley, but he was as surprised as I that I had been invited to a meeting of the Deans. My colleagues and I immediately speculated that Weaver was

looking for faculty support in a decision that was not going to be popular in the Kansas City community.

Dowgray's forewarning proved accurate. Whaley had submitted a letter resigning in the coming February. Weaver accepted his resignation immediately. This conflict provoked much consternation both at the university and in the community, but most relevant here, is that Weaver's act put him most at odds with the Kansas City University Board of Governors, who had retained their corporate identity through the merger of the university into the state system as an important fund raising group for the campus.

How the next Chancellor of UMKC was to be chosen then became a key issue. It was customary for faculty to be given a voice on chancellor selection committees, but usually a minority voice. President Weaver wrote me asking that the university senate nominate five faculty members, from which he would choose three, to serve on a selection committee that would be initially called to order by Vice President Unklesbay, but who would then ask the committee to organize itself while he continued to serve as a liaison with the central administration. The committee would be made up of the three faculty members and one representative from the UMKC administration, and one representative from the Kansas City University Board of Governors.

Many of the same faculty members who had served with me on the committee to revise the campus governing practices were now elected to the Senate Committee on Committees, which we had designed to be the core faculty voice in the Senate. We discussed Weaver's request, and we decided to send Weaver the names of three faculty members for the Chancellor Selection Committee, implicitly asking him to accept our choices for faculty representation, and

not choose three from his requested five nominees. He accepted our request. As a result the faculty had a controlling vote on the selection committee for a new chancellor.

That committee chose James C. Olson to be our new chancellor. Olson was a popular choice with all the members of the committee as well as John Weaver, not just the three faculty members. James C. Olson, not only served as an effective and unifying Chancellor, he then went on to become a distinguished and effective President of the University of Missouri.

I do not want to claim any great personal or professional responsibility in the choice of Chancellor Olson, but I was fortunately placed in a key role in events leading to that selection, and I believe I came to that key role because of my civil rights activity resulting from Leon Jordan's announcing one night long ago, "I'll introduce you to the black community." This may seem a strained connection to others, but it makes me happy to think that I am completing some kind of almost fated circle in my life in dedicating this biography of Leon Jordan to James C. Olson. Jim Olson inspired me to begin the task of learning and telling the story of how deeply and consequentially Leon Jordan and his unique family shaped some of the most vital features of Kansas City history, particularly in creating Freedom, Inc., a political force that gave a telling political voice to Kansas City's black community.

Once I began to look at the task I had set for myself, I saw only a bleak set of resources. Orchid Jordan was dead. There were no acknowledged Jordan children. The family was fast disappearing from public view. Suspecting that the FBI had kept a file on Jordan, I applied for any information the agency had under the Freedom of Information act. I was pleased to find a few months later that I could get a substantial file for a cost of a little more than two hundred dollars. When I received it I learned that it dealt exclusively with the investigation of Jordan's murder. But it gave me much other vital information. I then began searching through the

records of the *Call* and other black newspapers as well as genealogy sources. Slowly I began to discover that Jordan came from a substantial family that was well recognized during its time, but only dimly remembered by Jordan's contemporaries, and by even fewer now.

Alvin Brooks, a close friend from our days together in CORE, and Fred Curls, the only surviving member of the original founders of Freedom, Inc. early became very helpful resources. As I was beginning to feel that I had substantial important historical family information as well as a reasonably informed picture of Freedom's work, I was nagged by the thought that I had little or no leads about the Jordans' years in Liberia. Richard Tolbert, who was like an adopted son to Leon, told me that he had seen some of Jordan's own papers in Leon's house, then for sale. I discovered that the granddaughter of Guy Hollis, the man Orchid Jordan had married some years after Leon's death, was the executor of the estate. I called her and told her what I was doing. She seemed sympathetic and said she thought there was a scrapbook of photos from Liberia that I might find of interest. She asked me to give her a couple of days and call back. I did, but she then refused to talk to me.

I stewed for several days before I received a most unexpected call from Special Collections at the Miller Nichols library saying that they had just purchased a cache of material that was originally part of the Jordan estate from a collector. This material seemed to be chiefly concerned with the Jordans' years in Liberia. Chuck Haddix had known I was working on Jordan, and he was a friend of the collector who brought the Jordan material to Special Collections. Haddix strongly recommended the purchase. Later I speculated that the granddaughter realized the Liberian scrapbook she had mentioned had been thrown away once she tried looking for it, and that was the reason she no longer wanted to talk to me. It had been rescued from the trash.

In any case it was a remarkable find and began what has become for me a most sustaining and rewarding relationship with Special Collections at the Miller Nichols Library. Rob Ray was then the director. He and his assistant, Kelly McEniry, were not only most helpful in sorting out this extraordinary collection and making it available to me, but also in assisting me in making several public presentations based on the collection. Stuart Hinds, eventually replaced Rob Ray, and has continued that generous support. From the beginning Kelly McEniry has been a frequent life saver, with his generous support and extraordinary professional competence. This presentation of the Jordan biography owes a great deal to his suggestions and management.

Roger Cunningham, a very insightful military historian, has been of great help in getting me access to the military records of Jordan's father, Leon H. Jordan, particularly Jordan's information-rich appeal of his denial of a pension for health reasons. Cunningham also pointed me to Gen. Benjamin Davis's papers, which provides valuable daily information about the inauguration celebration of President William V. Tubman that Jordan participated in.

In 2008 I made a presentation to the Liberian Studies Association in Toledo, Ohio. When I was sent the program, I noted that I was to share the podium with a Dorothy Davis. I quickly realized this was the same Dorothy Davis who was a God-child to Leon and Orchid Jordan. Dorothy, not only told me much about her father and his talents as a photographer, but she suggested that a figure I found mysterious in the Jordan photographs might be Pearl Primus. After examining the Primus papers at Duke University, I was able to confirm that identification. Regrettably, Primus's role in the Jordans' lives seems slight, but I was happy to learn much about this extraordinarily talented dancer and groundbreaking anthropologist. Leon Jordan photographed her at an important moment in her epochal career. Primus was one of many notable figures the Jordans brushed against, particularly in Liberia.

The Midwest Afro-American Genealogical Coalition, or MAGIC, with its various publications in Kansas City history has also been a very valuable resource. I am still amazed at how long and often I first viewed the photo of three belles in early Kansas City history before I finally realized that it was Mamie Jones, represented under her married name, who was pictured with Sally and Lena Jordan. And once that realization struck and that her married name revealed that she was the mother-in-law of the man who hired Jordan to lead the constabulary of Liberia, the story of the Jordan's family history's part in Jordan's appointment became clear.

Finally Mike McGraw's article in the *Kansas City Star* celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Jordan's murder proved another remarkable catalyst. It not only brought Leon Jordan prominently back into public view, but it prepared the public for Alvin Sykes's campaign to get the Kansas City Police Department to reinvestigate Leon Jordan's murder. Sykes has made a remarkable career of getting public authorities to reinvestigate significant unsolved murders from the civil rights era. His most notable, but by no means only, success is the Emmett Till case that riveted the nation's attention. In Jordan's case he once more prevailed against much public apathy and resistance. The searching no-holds-barred reinvestigation that followed clearly established who was responsible for Jordan's murder and made it possible for me to conclude my biography with a relatively clear narrative of the final days of Jordan's life.

Mike McGraw's personal and professional relation with Danny Centimano played a key role in the most revealing testimony of the son in the police report outlining the roles of Danny's father, Joe Centimano, and Doc Dearborn in Jordan's murder. Mike readily provided me with access to the information he learned as he learned it, and that was of immense help in shaping the conclusion of Jordan's story.

Mike was also one of two friends who gave my revised version of the biography a close and helpful reading. Dr. Beverlye Brown was the second. I am very grateful for their care and help with my story.

Biography is always an adventure into the world of another person. For it to be a meaningful journey one needs the help of many people, and often the lucky chance of events. There are many more than those I have here named who were very helpful. In most instances I have credited them in the text. My thanks to all. Predictably this journey has often been very frustrating, but my frustrations have all been trumped by little epiphanies along the way and by the unexpected good fortune that flowed from some public events.

Leon Jordan early impressed me as a very genuine friend, someone I could and did depend upon. I have come to learn much more about him than I ever imagined I would. He clearly had faults and weaknesses, yet I believe now more than ever he was essentially a great-hearted, powerfully effective political leader who made a transforming impact on the racial history of Kansas City.*

*This preface has been modestly revised from its first publication in August, 2012.

Robert M. Farnsworth, January, 2015.

"To Leon Jordan, a *politician* was one who worked for, with, and alongside people.

"People. . . not buildings. People. . . not monuments. People. . . not hydro-electric dams.

"Leon's business was people—a few powerful, many powerless. . .a few prosperous, many penniless. . .a few prideful, many pitiless.

"Whatever their financial status, whatever their background, to Leon people—all people—were creatures of God and thus entitled to the basic respect that one creature of God owes to another.

"Of course, the people Leon knew the best were his people—black people. He knew—as everyone here today knows—that despite the great legislative gains of recent years in terms of racial equality, this nation is still deeply divided by a racial chasm.

"He knew that the legislative victories of fair housing, public accommodations and equal employment opportunity merely established the legal framework to begin to change men's minds and men's hearts.

"He knew that America was but at the beginning of a long, tormented struggle to square its avowed principle of 'One Nation, Under God, Indivisible, With Liberty and Justice for All' with its day-to-day practice of discrimination."

Senator Thomas Eagleton at the funeral of Leon M. Jordan