

Police Chief No, Chief Politician Yes

**The Life of Leon Mercer Jordan,
and the Shaping Memories of His Father and Grandfather**

By Robert M. Farnsworth

Dedicated to James C. Olson, whose professional dedication to history led him to complete his biography of Stuart Symington despite years of physical difficulty near the end of his life. His example challenged me in my elder years to tell the story of a remarkable man who made a significant difference in my life.

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.

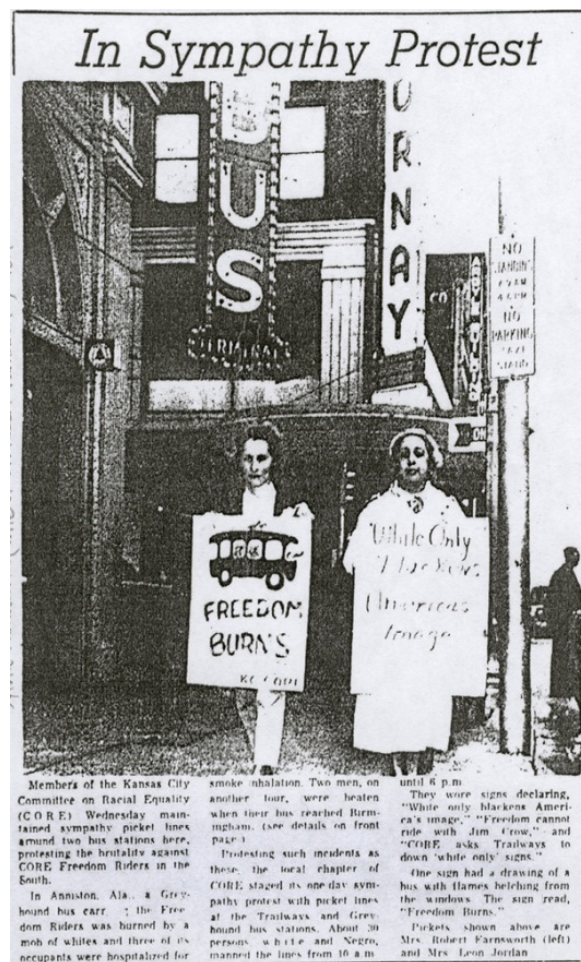
I was 76 and had been retired for some time and had no serious thought of taking up another major writing project, but my biographies of Melvin Tolson and Edgar Snow had given me satisfactions that far outweighed the many frustrations that accompanied their research and writing. Maybe I had one more 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

I

Kansas City's Loss

At approximately 1:15 in the morning of July 15, 1970, Leon M. Jordan, the founder of Freedom, Inc., was gunned down as he closed his Green Duck Tavern. His murder was headlined in the *Kansas City Star* later that day. The next morning the *Kansas City Times* spoke to the value of his public life:

“The death of Leon M. Jordan is a shattering blow to this community. He was one of the most effective and distinguished members of the Missouri House of Representatives and a political leader of power and influence with the highest motivations to do what was good and right. . . . Few men in Missouri government could call on the varied experience and skills that were in the background of Leon Jordan. . . . But it was as a black politician in an age of racial pride and the reaching by blacks for political power that Representative Jordan made his great contribution. Along with a few other men he moved into an area that had been dominated for years by white, factional politicians who treated the center city as a personal fief and the people as voting pawns to be exploited economically and politically. Leon Jordan helped make these days a relic of the past. He was a successful advocate of black power in its most efficient form. He could win at the polls. In a representative government, that is the way you influence events, and Leon Jordan did exactly that.”¹

A few days later the *Kansas City Call* expressed both the shock and tribute of the black community Jordan represented:

“Leon Jordan is dead—the victim of an assassin’s bullet—but the legacy that he leaves will keep his memory green.

¹ *Kansas City Times* and *Star*, July 15, 1970.

“Leon will never die because the things that he stood for and the organization that he founded and headed—Freedom, Inc.—will live on.

“Freedom, which grew from a tiny seed in the minds of Leon Jordan and Bruce Watkins a scant eight years ago, has become today the strongest black-controlled political organization this city and state have ever known. . . .”²

Leon Jordan’s funeral took place at the Watkins Funeral Home the following Saturday. It was the largest Kansas City had seen in recent years, attended by a host of political and social leaders of the city and state, including the governor and the mayor. Senator Thomas Eagleton spoke movingly of sharing political concerns with Jordan while sitting with him in the back room of the Green Duck Tavern. Eagleton crossed the state to recognize his debt to Leon Jordan and Kansas City’s Freedom, Inc.

Harold Holliday, Sr., a fellow Missouri legislator and leader of Freedom, Inc., extolled Jordan as a man of vision who turned an apathetic community around in 1964 when Kansas City passed a public accommodations act ahead of the national government’s action. Leon Jordan “led us to the polls to make certain that there was placed among the laws of this city the requirement that every public place be open to every man.”

Jordan’s assassination was a local echo to the all too recent assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968 commonly used to mark the ending of the Civil Rights era. Jordan founded Freedom, Inc. in 1962 and he fueled the local ambitions of Freedom with the aspirations of the larger national struggle. During the years of Jordan’s leadership, Freedom, Inc. won the loyalty of the people it represented. It gave their voice a political power the

² *Kansas City Call*, July 17, 1970.

community had never previously known, and its reach into state and national politics has not been matched since.³

Sixty-five years earlier, on May 6, 1905, his birth surprisingly brought no notice in the local press, *surprisingly* not because the press should have anticipated his later public importance, but because his family for two previous generations had already been much in the news. When Leon's grandfather, Samuel C. Jordan, moved his wife, Kate, and their four children, including Leon's father, also named Leon, to Kansas City in 1874, the family immediately attracted public notice. Samuel Jordan was a barber with enough capital to invest in property in Kansas City during its early rapid growth. He was already notable in Leavenworth,

³ Copies of Holliday and Eagleton eulogies are in the Leon M. Jordan Collection housed in the LaBudde Special Collections of the Miller Nichols Library at the University of Missouri—Kansas City. I shall be frequently referring to this collection in subsequent footnotes and noting these references simply as LJC.

The Leon M. Jordan Collection began to be assembled in January, 2006. I had begun my research on Jordan the previous year. I had been told there might be some private papers of Jordan's in his home that was for sale at the end of 2005. I learned that the legal executor of Jordan's estate was the granddaughter of Guy Hollis, whom Orchid Jordan married after Leon's death. I called and told her of my biographical interest. She told me there was a scrapbook of photos from Liberia that she thought might be of interest. She asked me to call back a few days later while she would try to locate it. When I called back she refused to accept my calls. About two weeks later I was informed that the LaBudde Special Collections at UMKC had purchased a cache of material from the Jordan estate that included a remarkable collection of over 900 photographs from Jordan's years in Liberia.

Chuck Haddix, Director of the Marr Sound Archives and noted Kansas City Jazz authority, knew that I was working on Jordan. When he learned that Brian Thurn, an antiques dealer and friend, had acquired significant Jordan material, he recommended that the LaBudde Special Collections consider purchasing the material. Special Collections made the purchase. Thurn then told me that he had acquired the material from Philip Banks, who in turn had rescued the material from being hauled away from the Jordan home.

The photos in the scrapbook were immediately recognizable as an archival treasure. They opened a hitherto unavailable window on the Jordans' years in Liberia. I was astonished and grateful. I could only speculate that the reason that Orchid's granddaughter refused my subsequent calls was that when she looked for the scrapbook she thought I might be interested in, she realized it had been thrown away and was subsequently embarrassed. There is a lesson here in how we recognize and value our history.

The Leon M. Jordan Collection has grown significantly from that moment. I have added the products of my research to the collection, including most importantly the FBI file I acquired through the Freedom of Information Act on the FBI's role in investigating Jordan's murder, the military record of Jordan's father, Leon H. Jordan, as a veteran of the Spanish-American War, and Leon Jordan's personnel record as a police officer of the Kansas City Police Department, and the collection of documents from the Kansas City Police Department's first investigation of Jordan's murder.

The Special Collections Department has done a remarkable job of cataloguing this information plus a host of related materials. It has made the entire collection of scrapbook photos available as well as a full catalogue of all its Jordan material online at <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col-collections/jordan>.

Kansas, where he lived for many years before moving to Kansas City. He was elected to the Kansas State Colored Convention in 1864.

That same year Confederate General Sterling “Old Pap” Price invaded Missouri and threatened Kansas. Samuel Jordan and two fellow barbers were recruited to become officers in Co. B. of the First Colored Militia Regiment organized in Leavenworth. Jordan was appointed 1st Lieutenant; James Woodland and William H. Burnham became Captains. Co. B. was ordered to move to Independence, Kansas, on Oct. 19, 1864, by boarding the steamer, *Benton*, and sailing for Kansas City. The company was later marched to the northern end of a twelve mile front from where the Big Blue joined the Missouri River in the north to Russell’s Ford near Hickman Mills in the south. Price feinted at this position Oct. 21, but then moved to the south. So Leon Jordan’s grandfather and his company played a minor role in this area’s well-remembered Battle of Westport. He was mustered out of service November 10th in Leavenworth. In 1871 he was paid eighty-eight dollars in Union military script for his service. But he had started a military tradition that influenced both his son and his grandson.

Samuel died in 1901, so Leon Mercer Jordan never personally knew his grandfather. But his grandmother Kate was living just a few doors from 1232 Vine Street where young Leon grew up. Captain Leon H. Jordan, Leon M.’s father, had become the leading male figure in the extensive Jordan family by the time of Leon’s birth. In Kansas City it was known that Leon H. Jordan had been brevetted Captain for bravery while serving in the American occupation forces in the Philippines. *The Rising Sun*, noted the improvements Captain Jordan made in his home on Vine and his mother’s move into her home two years before her grandson Leon’s birth.

More significantly in light of the young Leon’s later political career, his father, who ran the Autumn Leaf Club, was arrested just a year before Leon’s birth on a warrant charging him

with aiding and abetting false voter registration. He was released on \$1,000 bond. Republican canvassers found thirty-nine names registered at Jordan's Autumn Leaf Club, but were unable to find evidence that it was in any sense a residence. The judges and clerks went to the club. They were shown some doors which were said to lead to rooms where men stayed, but they found instead billiard tables, a bar, a room which "might be a reading room except for the absence of literature," and "large tables of the kind most convenient for a favorite negro game of craps." Jordan's club was described as a "sample of a good many clubs that are supporting anything Governor Dockery's machine wants."

In a gesture of balance, the *Star* also noted Captain Jordan has been a member of the board of managers of the Lincoln Institute, the state college for negroes, and "he has grown rich in his present business."

William Kemper, then a candidate for mayor, disavowed Jordan for the sake of his campaign and that of James Reed, then seeking the Democratic nomination for governor. Despite this embarrassing incident, the Democratic machines were then successfully siphoning the traditional black vote from the Republican party. Pendergast was just beginning his political career and had not yet acquired the sinister reputation now commonly associated with his name. With good reason he particularly enjoyed a favorable reputation in the black community. In 1906 the *Rising Son*, owned and edited by Nelson Crews, a notable Republican leader in the black community, would endorse only one white politician from either party. That politician was T. J. Pendergast of whom it asked its readers: "Where do the Negroes stand on this position and on this blunt and square man?" And it answered its own question, "Mr. Pendergast's term as marshall established a new era in penal progress. He stood for the Negro as well as for the white

man. No cruel treatment of prisoners. No jail scandals, but honest, intelligent. Let us try him again.”⁴

Captain Leon H. Jordan died after a lengthy illness when his son was only thirteen years of age. In what detail the son knew and understood his father’s life can only be inferred from a myriad of sketchy details. The father’s death certificate lists “General Paralysis of the Insane” as the cause of his death. He spent the last months of his life in the Topeka State Hospital. Young Leon and his mother, Lena Rivers Jordan, stayed with her sister, Josephine Wright and her husband, John. The Wrights were in the process of becoming a well-established middle-class family in Topeka. John Mercer Wright not only shared a middle name with his nephew, but he had a long and notable political career resulting in his often being referred to as “the dean of the county courthouse.” During the troubled adolescence that followed his father’s death, the Wrights became Leon’s closest and most effective family.

Leon M. Jordan had two notable public careers, the first as a Kansas City police officer that began in 1936 and culminated in his organizing and leading the police force of Monrovia, Liberia, from 1947-1952. While working in Liberia he was on leave from the Kansas City Police Department. Until 1950, he assumed his experience and achievements in Liberia would earn him a significant leadership role in the KCPD. However, when he put those assumptions to the test, he found what he could count on was in fact far beneath his expectations and he resigned in anger.

He returned to his post in Liberia for two more years and mulled over what kind of midlife career change he could possibly make upon his return to Kansas City. When his father

⁴ Clifford Naysmith, *History of the Negro Population of Kansas City, Missouri, 1870-1930*, Theodore A. Brown Collection, KC11, Western Missouri Archives, pp. 225-232.

died in 1918 it was headline news in the Kansas City black newspaper, foreshadowing the public recognition of his son's death sixty-two years later. The father, like son, was praised for his significant contributions to civil rights. He was praised for leading the battle in Jefferson City to keep the state legislature from passing Jim Crow legislation for railway cars and his money was credited for funding the telegram campaign that instigated a federal congressional investigation into the East St. Louis riots. He was also recognized for his achievements as a veteran of the Spanish American War, for the civil practice of law, and as a contractor and builder. Leon Jordan grew up in a prominently active political family. The grand public tribute to his father at his death could not help but impress the thirteen year old Leon, and that memory stayed strong in the son's memory, even into his final years in Liberia, almost forty years later, and helped him to decide to try to recreate a modern version of his father's political success.⁵

⁵ *Kansas City Sun*, July 2, 1917, LJC.

Samuel C. Jordan Md. Kate C. (Frazier) Jordan

1834-1901

1864-1927

Samuel D. 1865-97	Mary (Callie) 1866-1957	Sallie 1870-1950	Oliver T. 1873-	Kate A. 1876-1949	Alvin 1880-	Edna 1883-	Robert 1889-
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Md. Henry Booker
& John Love

Md. Frank Bufkin

Md. Henry Austin

Leon H.

1867-1918

Md. Lena Rivers

|
|
Leon M.

1905-1970

Md. Orchid Ramsey

II

The Family

Leon grew up with his grandmother, Kate, living just a few doors away on Vine Street. His aunt Sallie ended her first marriage and moved in with her mother. Sallie was early a very close friend of Leon's mother, Lena Rivers Jordan. Lena was born in Centralia, Missouri, June 24, 1873. Her father is not a very distinct figure in her life, but her mother eventually moved to Kansas City and plays a role in Leon's family history. Lena began spending summers in Kansas City at least as early as 1889, when she drew praise for her appearance in a temperance play, "The Last Loaf," while Leon's father, her eventual husband, played the lead as "handsome Harry Hanson." Lena was sixteen at the time.

Within a few years Lena became part of a well-recognized social trio, including Sallie Jordan and Mamie Jones. A photo of the three titled "Three Kansas City Belles" is preserved in *Your Kansas City and Mine*. Their visits to each other were frequently chronicled in *The American Citizen*. Sallie visited Mamie in Olathe in August, 1891. Mamie visited Sally in September. Lena stayed with Sallie after spending the summer in several Missouri towns in October. Lena was living in Centralia, but she was to stay the winter season of 91-92 in Kansas City. In November, 1891, Lena visited Mamie. The attendance of both was noted at the Music Hall in November. In June, 1892, Leon H. took a trip north, but stopped in Centralia on his way back to spend a few days with "his Lena." Sallie then spent a few weeks with Lena in Centralia in July and August.⁶

⁶ *The American Citizen*, Nov. 29, 1889; June 12, August 7, September 4, October 9, November 20, 1891; June 24, 1892.

Sallie attended Oberlin College's Preparatory Department from 1886-1889. She then transferred to Fisk University, graduating in 1891. Her brother, Leon, attended her graduation. When Sallie returned from Fisk she opened a class in music that began that September. *The American Citizen* noted and advised: "With Miss Jordan's musical attainments and ability to teach in this branch of fine arts, we are sure that success will crown her efforts. Young ladies don't fail to join this class." The following April Sallie gave a benefit concert at Allen Chapel. Again *The American Citizen* commended: "The programme was good and well received by the large audience which was present. Seventy-five dollars were the net receipts. Well done Miss Jordan." In July, 1893, Sallie performed a series of piano solos in Kansas City, which were greeted with "supreme pleasure" by *The American Citizen*. The notice went on to refer to her as the "accomplished daughter of Mr. Samuel Jordan, the 'Black Jay Gould of the West.'" She is then declared one of the "reigning belles in Kansas City's exclusive social circles and endowed as she is with rare gifts, both mental and physical, she may justly be styled Kansas City's Social Queen."

Sallie's wedding to Henry Booker, sponsored by her parents, probably marked the apex of Samuel Jordan's public recognition as the head of a large and prominent family. The elegant reception was described as "one of the most brilliant affairs witnessed in this city." Approximately 200 guests thronged "the parlors of the palatial residence of Mr. Samuel Jordan, who [this time] is accounted the Black Croesus of Western Missouri. Then came the beautiful repast, the table groaned beneath the weight of the most generous feast ever spread before Kansas Cityans of color. The floral garnitures were of the most ornate type, tastefully arranged and profusely distributed. The two happy principals, Mr. H. Booker and Miss S. Constance

Jordan, were king and queen of loveliness and the center of attraction.” Lena Rivers and Mamie Jones were stylish and attractive bridesmaids.⁷

Sallie’s marriage to Henry Booker lasted only a few years, so this grand event may not have figured prominently in the family conversations that swirled around Leon M.’s early years. But Sallie and Lena continued to be close and Sallie’s next marriage more certainly directly affected her nephew’s life. On August 3, 1910, Sallie Jordan married John Lorenzo Love at St. Augustine’s. Leon H. Jordan was a witness. Young Leon had just turned five. Love was teaching at Langston University at the time. He finished the next school year there before coming to Kansas City in 1911 and moving in with Sallie and her mother. For two years he taught at the Garrison School, where his nephew attended, and then moved on to Lincoln High School where he eventually headed the history department. Besides history he also often taught Latin. He was teaching at Lincoln during the years Leon M. attended, from 1922-26.

Love had a particularly impressive academic background. He was born in Ashville, North Carolina, and attended the parochial school of St. Matthias Episcopal church. He then attended St. Augustine’s Episcopal high school in Ashville to prepare him to attend Oberlin

⁷ Barbering was one of the professions that provided special opportunities for a number of African Americans in ante-bellum America. James Thomas was a notable contemporary of Samuel Jordan who became even wealthier. He describes the racial scene that caused wealthy whites to choose black barbers: “[Should] a white man attempt to wait on a southern country gentleman in the capacity of barber, he would go into spasms. If a white man came towards him to shave him, he would jump out of the chair. . . .It was not a *white* man’s place to play the part of serv’ t. The true white gentleman had no use for poor white people. The free Negro was tolerated around the gentleman’s home as his Barber, and frequently served as a good fellow to wait the table in case of a gathering, make music for a dance. He always had a friend in case of need if regarded as worthy.” *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur*, pp. 89-90. But being a black barber in the latter half of the nineteenth century also posed a racial conundrum. Almost all barber shops served either white customers or black customers, not both. The most successful black barbers served whites and became known as “color-line” barbers. Quincy Terrell Mills explores the dilemma of color-line barbers in Chapter Two of his dissertation, *Color-Line Barbers and the Emergence of a Black Public Space*, pp.75-154. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 temporarily made such segregation illegal, but that act was itself declared illegal in 1883 by the Supreme Court. While there was a particularly profitable opportunity for black barbers to cater to the white elite, and the white elite had a long established tradition of choosing the services of black barbers, the black barbers themselves often felt the need to find some means of balancing their desire for class mobility against their responsibility to the black man’s struggle for respectability and civil rights. *American Citizen*, July 24, 1891; April 29, 1892; July 21, 1893

College. He graduated from Oberlin in 1894 and then completed a Master's degree the following year there. He next taught at Lincoln University for several years before moving to Washington, D.C., to teach at the M Street High School, later renamed the Dunbar High School. While teaching there he studied law at Catholic University, graduating with both Bachelor's and Master's of Law degrees. He passed the bar examination, but never practiced. His interest in law was more scholarly than practical. After completing his law degrees he left teaching for two years to become the executive secretary of Ashville's YMCA, a recent impressive structure erected by George Washington Vanderbilt II when he built his estate in Ashville. Love left Ashville after two years to resume teaching in the public schools of Perry, Oklahoma, and then moved to Langston University before marrying Sallie Jordan and moving to Kansas City.

Love was a passionate supporter of the NAACP. For eleven years he was president and dominant spirit of the local chapter until poor health made necessary his retirement. He regularly attended the national association meetings. It was his idea to form the women's auxiliary to the local NAACP branch, and his wife, Sallie, headed that organization from its inception. He was active in YMCA activities, frequently serving as chair of the YMCA fund raising drive. He spent a summer studying history in Cologne, Germany and during the latter part of World War I, just before his nephew enlisted in the army, he volunteered to serve at Camp Funston never being assigned overseas. Love died July 20, 1933, just after Leon and Orchid Jordan began their married life in Kansas City.

Sallie Love died September 18, 1950, while the Jordans were in Liberia. During the summer following her death the Jordans sent a \$500 check to Lucile Bluford to purchase a life membership in the NAACP. They were the third party in Kansas City to take out a life membership. The Principals' Study club, made up of principals in the Kansas City school

system, was the first. Reuben H. Street, owner of the Street Hotel, was the second. Leon said of the purchase: “this culminates a life-long ambition which will give to me a bit more self-respect in my yearning for first-class American citizenship.” Then he added, the membership put “a strain on the family budget but thank God I’m able to make the grade.” It was also a likely tribute to his aunt and uncle’s long service to the Kansas City NAACP and a testimony that this remarkable couple was a vivid and socially positive presence during his young and teenage years that lingered long into his maturity.⁸

The Jordans had a rich and complicated family history in Kansas City. Samuel and Kate brought five children with them from Leavenworth when they moved to Kansas City in 1874 in the midst of a nationwide depression, and they had four more after they arrived. Leon Hart Jordan, Leon M’s father, was their third child. Samuel invested in property during Kansas City’s phenomenal growth after the first train crossed the Hannibal Bridge in July, 1869. Sometime during those early years he bought the property on Vine Street where his wife and his son were living when Leon M. was born. Leon H., who became the male head of the family after his father’s death, also invited Dr. J. Edward Perry to move from Columbia, Missouri, to Kansas City in 1903. He sold him a home at 1214 Vine, next door to Kate’s, that would become Perry’s Sanitarium, the forerunner of Provident-Wheatley Hospital. More about the history of the relationship between Perry and the elder Leon later, but it is evident that Leon M. Jordan’s early years were lived surrounded by reminders of the Jordan family’s history.

As mentioned above Samuel Jordan died in 1901. His eldest son, Samuel D., died even earlier, in 1897. Thus Leon H., the next oldest son, and one who had already established a vivid public presence, became the more or less accepted male head of the Jordan family. Leon H. had

⁸ Marriage license, John Lorenzo Love and Sallie Jordan, LJC; *Call*, August 4, 1933; *The Liberian Age*, May 7 & 14, 1951, LJC.

an older sister Mary, who later became better known as Callie, who also lived long and was a continuing presence in her nephew's life. Callie married Sandy Edwards, a barber, like his father-in-law, in 1891. The Edwards were married by Rev. John Turner, the same pastor who had married Samuel and Kate many years earlier in Leavenworth and in 1893 would also officiate at Sallie Jordan's grand wedding to John Booker in Kansas City. *The American Citizen* proclaimed, "There is not a minister in the west who stands higher and is better loved." Sandy and Callie became particularly close to this favored family pastor and his wife. Sandy worked for his father-in-law in the barber shop and helped manage a farm in nearby Kansas which Samuel had purchased before his move to Kansas City and continued to manage during his Kansas City years.

Thus Callie, a strong-minded woman, combined with her husband's closeness to her father, may in some sense have rivaled her brother for leading family affairs after their father's death. That rivalry may have erupted into a dramatic quarrel between Sandy Edwards and Leon H. in 1907, when Leon M. was only two years old. While it is not clear what the two argued about the quarrel led to blows. Apparently the elder Leon got the better of the fight, but after the two had ceased fighting and bystanders were trying to soothe Edwards into not pressing the issue further, the latter drew his revolver. Jordan, however, was again quicker, fired first, and killed Edwards. At Jordan's trial witnesses testified that Edwards had said he would kill any man who beat him in a fight. Jordan was acquitted. It was decided he acted in self-defense. *The Kansas City Star* noted that Jordan and Edwards were "both politicians and leaders among the negroes of the city."

Lena Jordan was in court and threw her arms around her husband's neck in relief. A crowd of sympathizers gathered around to shake his left hand. His right was still swollen from

the blow he gave his brother-in-law. The newspaper does not mention Callie's response or presence, but Sallie, who had been living with their mother the year before, moved after Sandy's death to live for a time with Callie at 1201 E. 14th street. Irene Marcus, long time Kansas City resident, remembers an enduring story in her family that Callie's hair turned white the day she heard the news of her husband's death. Callie does appear as white-haired in subsequent photos.⁹

The particular photo Irene Marcus pointed to was of a group meeting of the Inter-City Dames. While the Jordans' public history often seems dominated by charismatic male figures, the women in the family were part of an intricately connected social network which almost certainly influenced events and particularly young Leon's future in ways that were not always obvious. Around the turn of the century Miss Sallie Rogers called together a group of women to entertain a visiting artist, Madame Azalea Hackley, appearing in concert in Kansas City. The reception was such a success the women decided to meet regularly four times a year, and to meet on call whenever any prominent person came to the city. The women were from both Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas, so they named their organization the Inter-City Dames. The third Mrs. Booker T. Washington, Margaret Jansen Murray Washington, was a schoolmate at Fisk University of Mrs. Minnie Crosthwaite, one of the Dames founders. So when Mrs. Washington came for a visit she was entertained by the Inter-City Dames.

Callie Edwards, Sallie Booker, Mamie Jones, and Lena Rivers Jordan were founding members of the Inter-City Dames. The Dames perpetuated their club by giving preference to daughters whenever there was a vacancy. As late as 1927, Callie Edwards was elected President.

⁹ *Rising Son*, September 5, 1903; *American Citizen*, October 20, 1893, January 15 and April 15, 1892; *Kansas City Star*, June 20, 1907; Interview, Irene Marcus, January 25, 1905.

In the 1959 Anniversary issue of the *Call*, Orchid Jordan was listed as a member. Apparently being a daughter-in-law and niece of founding members was sufficient for her to qualify.¹⁰

Josephine Wright, Lena Jordan's sister, also played a notable role in her nephew's life. She was born, Dec. 15, 1876, three years after Lena arrived. But at a very young age she began performing publicly as a singer with considerable success. She toured Europe with the Black Swan Company and returning to the U. S. joined the Blind Boone Concert Company. Melissa Fuell, who also sang with Boone, later wrote appreciatively about Boone and his company. Of Josephine, Fuell said, "her glory was heightened by Boone's rare accompaniment to her rich selections. She remained with the work for two seasons—then married Hon. John M. Wright, for many years a county clerk of Topeka, Kansas. To say that the company felt a loss in the absence of Miss Rivers is but putting it mildly."

While in England, Josephine was baptized into the Episcopal Church by the Bishop of London, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury. When she returned to the United States she brought with her a young son, named Charles Jones. Since she then was named Josephine Jones, she may have married while in England, but her child's father did not appear in Kansas City. For a year after her return she and her son lived with her mother, now married to William Jacobs, in Kansas City. She married John M. Wright, September 6, 1900, in St. Augustine's church, which had become the church of choice for the Jordan family a few years earlier.

Josephine and Lena traveled frequently between Topeka and Kansas City to visit each other over the next few years, both before and after the birth of young Leon. Late in 1917 Leon H. Jordan entered the state hospital in Jefferson City. His family began to recognize that the affluence and high public visibility that he had won for his family were in jeopardy. Lena turned

¹⁰ *American Citizen*, October 20, 1893; *Call*, May 29, 1959; March 18, 1927; *Your Kansas City and Mine*, p. 90.

to her sister and brother-in-law for refuge and support. The Jordans became guests in the home of the Wrights in January, 1918. In May Sally Love came from Kansas City for a visit and her brother was moved to the Topeka State Hospital. Leon M. had become close friends with Dr. Perry's son. Young E. D. Perry came to visit Leon in June despite the fact that his own father had a serious operation that month at Provident Wheatley Hospital. Leon H. Jordan died August 3, 1918. His death certificate grimly listed the cause of his death, "General Paralysis of the Insane."¹¹

As he neared and reached his thirteenth birthday young Leon witnessed his bold and ambitious father descend into mental and physical helplessness. It was a searing experience that initiated a confused and complicated effort to find his own way to manhood. The privileged family life he had known since his birth quickly disintegrated. He literally did not know where to turn, but during the years of confusion that followed, the home of his aunt Josephine and Uncle John became a refuge that he could count on.

Back in Kansas City the *Sun* paid the following tribute to Leon M.'s father:

"Captain Leon H. Jordan, one of the best known men of the race in Missouri, passed away Saturday evening, August 3, at 7 o'clock at Topeka, Kansas. He was a man of unusual ability and of a striking personality. His highest ambition was to be a man; for this he lived, struggled and died. He was ambitious, and no matter how difficult might be any work in which he was engaged, he sought by ability and efficiency to lead. Passing rapidly through the grade and high schools of this city, he early evidenced those remarkable qualities of mind and heart that at once stamped him as a born leader of men. He loved politics, not for self, but as a weapon for the defense of his race. As a deputy United States marshal under the distinguished

¹¹ Melissa Fuell, *Blind Boone*, pp. 113-114; *Call*, January 14 & 28, 1955; September 9, 1963; *Blacks in Topeka, 1865-1915*, pp.102-178; *Kansas City Sun*, July 2, 1917; *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 18, May 3, June 14, 1918; Leon H. Jordan's death certificate, LJC; St. Augustine Church records, LJC.

Confederate General Jo Shelby, Assistant Recorder of Deeds under the famous first Negro Democrat of note, C.H.J. Taylor, Captain in the Spanish-American War, seeing service in the Philippine Islands, he made a record so brilliant that it will live in the minds of men for years to come. That he might be able to look after his large interests, he devoted years to the study of law, and was one of the best posted men of the race on "civil practice." He was a contractor and builder, constructing one of the great sewers of Kansas City and building grain elevators at Atchison and at Kansas City, Kansas, in all of which undertakings he won the confidence and respect of those for whom he labored. In all of the stirring activities in which the Negroes of Kansas City and the State of Missouri have been interested during the past quarter century, no man was more active than Leon H. Jordan. He gave freely his time, his money and his voice; and of the latter it may be truthfully said, he was one of the most eloquent men of his day. Years ago when a Democratic legislature sought to saddle an obnoxious "Jim Crow" upon the State of Missouri, it was Leon Jordan who called the leaders of the race together and hurried to Jefferson City to battle for the rights of his people, and his masterly effort before the legislature will never be forgotten. For nearly an hour, he poured out a torrent of eloquence before that august body that wrung from them the heartiest applause and turned the tide of sentiment in favor of the Negro. The bill was defeated and every Negro in Missouri owes him a debt of gratitude. With him on this memorable occasion was (*sic*) such distinguished men as Bishop Abram Grant, Hon. J. Milton Turner, Hon. Nelson C. Crews, Hon. George B. Vashon, Prof. J. Silas Harris and others whose names are familiar to the people of the Nation. Just a little while ago the news of the East St. Louis "horror" cast a gloom over all America. Strong men and women wept like infants as the news of this awful butchery of innocent and defenseless people swept over the land and a congressional investigation was demanded by the leading Negroes of Kansas City. It was Leon

Jordan's money that paid for hundreds of telegrams to members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives, and to his generosity the Negroes of the United States are indebted for the first investigation of race riots by the National Government. Leon Jordan lived in the most critical hour of our national life; an hour when the race, needed strong men, men of courage, men of vision, men willing to do and die for a principle, and no man who knew him will deny him membership in this group. His day is done and his worth to this community will grow in estimation as the years pass by. He leaves a wife, a son, a mother, four sisters, three brothers, and a host of friends to mourn his loss. The Sun exceedingly regrets his passing and extends to the family, and especially his dear old mother, one of the race's grandest women, its deepest sympathy."¹²

How could a son not be proud reading that of his father, and incidentally of the large Jordan family to which he belonged? Yet his father's long incapacity through illness must also have made him and his mother recognize that they would have to make drastic adjustments. His father was the economic and social engine of the family. Now he was gone and there was no one to take his place, although there is a strong hint that his thirteen year old son made a frantic, if futile, effort to try to do so. Almost exactly two years after the above tribute appeared publicly, Leon M. Jordan, without the knowledge of his family, enlisted in Co. E 4th Infantry. It was only after several months that the army realized he had lied about his age and was in fact too young to enlist. He was discharged the following year, but he was awarded the World War I Victory Medal and the bronze World War I Victory Button. While those awards are not explained, his service record in fact reads more creditably than his father's. Unlike Captain Leon Jordan he never drew attention to his awards or his military service.

¹² *Kansas City Sun*, August 17, 1918.

In the 1880's the Jordan Guards appeared in Kansas City. Both Samuel, Jr. and Leon H. participated. Leon H. claimed that service as part of his qualification to enlist in the Spanish American War as an officer in 1898. The name Jordan Guards suggests strongly some sponsorship by the elder Samuel Jordan and probably kept the memory of his Civil War army service alive both in the family and in the community. So the young Leon may have been preconditioned to think of military service as the route to success. His father had claimed great public credit for his military service. As late as two years before his death, Captain Leon H. Jordan's photo appeared on the front page of the *Kansas City Sun* with the following caption below: "Captain Leon H. Jordan, a veteran of the Cuban and Philippine Wars, who will be called upon if the occasion requires it to lead a Negro regiment into Mexico."¹³

Leon H. Jordan truly was a significant figure in Kansas City history, but the claims made for him in the public tribute published at his death needs to be read with much skepticism, and for our purposes hovering behind that question is always the consideration of how much of the truth did his son know about his father's life. Foremost is the question of Leon H's military service. He paraded it grandly after his return from the Philippines and there seems to have been no public challenge to the story he told, although there were at least some fellow citizens who served with him and almost certainly knew that his major claim was false. If members of his family knew better, they made no public comment. It seems most likely that his son never knew how false his claims were.

¹³ Leon M. Jordan's U. S. Army military record, LJC; *Kansas City Sun*, July 1, 1916.

III

Who Was Leon H. Jordan?

Samuel Jordan, Jr., Leon H.'s older brother, was the only young man in Lincoln High School's first graduating class of four in 1885. His brother Leon H. graduated from Lincoln two years later.¹⁴ In 1891 the alumni of Lincoln organized in support of the school and Leon H. Jordan became president of the alumni association. *The American Citizen* noted: "The young men of Kansas City are entitled to a great deal of credit for their energy and push. Mr. Leon Jordan is one of the leaders in keeping young men in the front." That same year Leon H., in addition to acting opposite his future bride in *The Last Loaf*, also acted as David Leslie in *Clouds and Sunshine*. Then he publicly played the violin for the benefit of *The American Citizen*. The next year the paper published an etching of the handsome young man and added:

Mr. Leon Jordan whose cut we present to our readers is the only choice the colored voters of this Congressional district have for delegate to the National Convention. Mr. Jordan is a strong man in the Republican party and highly deserves the place if a man from this

¹⁴ The school board made an interesting comment on this first graduation from a black Kansas City high school: "This graduating class marks a new era in the history of the colored schools of this city. If twenty-five years ago a man had dared to say that to-night a colored class would have been thus honored, he would have been declared a fit subject for the lunatic asylum. But the world moves. Freedom, education and industry will break down all hindrances and open the doors of labor to all alike in time. The Board pledges itself to the colored people of Kansas City to furnish them the same school advantages that it does to any other class of children under its charge. The rest remains for you."

district is to have it. He is by far in advance of any black man who up to date has come out for it.¹⁵

C. H. J. Taylor moved to Kansas City, Kansas, and became editor of *The American Citizen*, assuming part ownership of the paper that same year. Taylor was already a national black leader in the Democratic party. He had served as Minister to Liberia in the previous Cleveland administration. Although he was unhappy in that post and served only briefly, he did not hesitate repeatedly to remind his subsequent audiences that he had held that distinguished position. He was active in the second Cleveland campaign and once Cleveland was elected, began seeking the prestigious position of Register of Deeds in Washington, D.C., an office traditionally reserved for an eminent national black leader.

In Kansas City, Kansas, Taylor quickly became aware of the Jordan family. His paper recognized their achievements, their travels, their illnesses, and their marriages. The black communities of Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, then often were part of a single shared community. In November, 1893, after Cleveland was elected, Leon H. Jordan called on C. H. J. Taylor with a friend, Mr. Murry. The paper reported and in effect recruited: “Mr. Jordan is always a welcome visitor. The country is destined to learn some day that the most progressive Negro born in Missouri is this young man. Watch and see.” Taylor probably eventually shifted Jordan’s allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic party.¹⁶

Taylor’s struggle to be named Recorder of Deeds in Washington, although ultimately successful, was protracted and difficult. Meanwhile another high profile patronage battle worked its way to a successful conclusion. In February, 1894, the *Kansas City Star* announced General

¹⁵ *The American Citizen*, November 29, 1889; April 3 & May 15, 1891; February 23, 1894; February 20, 1891; April 15, 1892.

¹⁶ *American Citizen*, March 3, 1893, May 26, 1893, November 24, 1893, January 12, 1894; *Kansas City Star*, March 13, 1893, November 11, 1893.

Jo Shelby was appointed U.S. Marshall for Western Missouri. Shelby was immensely popular in Missouri at this time. He had been a distinguished Confederate Cavalry officer, often dubbed the only Confederate General that never lost a battle. He had been under Price's command at the Battle of Westport, but his troops probably did not confront Lt. Samuel Jordan. When the confederate cause was lost, Price led his troops to Mexico in a much celebrated romantic gesture offering his and his army's services there.

With his staunch confederate credentials, Shelby, upon appointment as U.S. Marshal, became a surprising force for racial reconciliation, even if he could not escape being a little paternalistic. One of his first deputy appointments was that of Lee Jackson, an African American. The appointment brought Shelby severe criticism from his white supporters, but Shelby responded: "The young man is competent to render effective service in lines where white men cannot do as well, perhaps, as he will do. I appointed him for efficiency, and have no patience with that sentiment that gropes among the tombstones instead of coming out into that bright light of existing life and conditions. The negro was always faithful to his people when a slave; he has been no less faithful to his friends since he has become a free man. He is becoming useful in ways never dreamed of before the war, and it is unmanly to deny him the right to do for himself everything that will improve and better his condition. I trust that this is the last I shall have to say in defense of my official action. I am right in what I have done, and by the right I propose to stand."

Jackson was not the last black appointed by Shelby. He also added Leon H. Jordan as a deputy soon after becoming U.S. Marshal. *The American Citizen* noted that Jordan in April, 1894, was making quite a record as Deputy Sheriff. But Jordan served in this position only a few months. In July that same year he left for Washington, D.C., to join Taylor's office as an

assistant Recorder of Deeds. He lived in Washington for about a year, first in a house on 10th St. NW, run by a widow, Mrs. Hill, later in a house run by another widow, Mrs. Thompson. Col. Shire, white, was deputy recorder. Daniel Brooks and a man named Johnson, both colored, were fellow clerks. Cora Nero, who later became Mrs. Cora Moton, a neighbor living at 1218 Vine street, was yet another clerk. Even later she moved to Jefferson City with her husband, who became a professor at Lincoln University.

In December, 1894, Jordan returned to Kansas City for the holidays, and *The American Citizen* reported him “looking well the very picture of health. Few young men have gained prominence and distinction in such a brief public career as this young man. He has in a few years stepped into the front ranks and of him the people expect the coming representative of the west.” Both Jordan’s mother and his sister Callie remembered that Taylor did not keep his end of the bargain that took Jordan to Washington. He himself remembers deciding rather suddenly while home on vacation during the summer of 1895 that he had had enough and did not return to Washington. He resumed working for his father in the barber shop and sometimes on his father’s farm near Horniff Station, Kansas.¹⁷

This is a realistic account of the first two claims made in the *Kansas City Sun* tribute to Leon H. Jordan: “As a deputy United States marshal under the distinguished Confederate General Jo Shelby, Assistant Recorder of Deeds under the famous first Negro Democrat of note, C.H.J. Taylor, Captain in the Spanish-American War, seeing service in the Philippine Islands, he made a record so brilliant that it will live in the minds of men for years to come.” An examination of his service in both the Spanish-American War and in the American occupation of the Philippines is far more damaging.

¹⁷ *Kansas City Star*, February 5, 1894; February 14, 1897; *American Citizen*, April 20, 1894; July 20, 1894; December 20, 1894; January 11, 1896; *Army and Navy Journal*, October 14, 1899; affidavits from Leon H. Jordan, Kate Jordan, and Callie Edwards in Jordan’s pension application, LJC.

But between leaving his employment by Taylor and enlisting in the Spanish-American War, Leon H. Jordan quietly married Lena Rivers. A more public wedding might have called attention to the fact there was no publicly acknowledged father to give the bride away. Early in 1895 *The American Citizen* had described Lena as one of Kansas City's prettiest girls. Besides her beauty she is also a very graceful dancer and a charming conversationalist." In April she was baptized at St. Augustine's and a year later, April 8, 1896, she married Leon H. Jordan at St. Augustine's. They took up residence in the home of her mother and stepfather at the beginning of their marriage.¹⁸

When the battleship *U.S.S. Maine* exploded in the harbor of Havana on February 15, 1898, it ignited a popular American fever for war. On March 9, Congress allocated fifty million dollars to build up military strength. On March 28, the U. S. Naval Court of Inquiry found that the *Maine* was blown up by a mine, presumably Spanish. Subsequent meticulous investigations have failed to confirm that finding, but belief in the original suspicion spread like wildfire with the considerable help of William Randolph Hearst. On April 21, President McKinley, who had assumed office a year earlier, ordered a blockade of Cuba and four days later the U. S. declared war on Spain.

The war on Spain and the sudden new need for troops again created a special opportunity for black Americans to serve in the military. That opportunity particularly appealed to Leon H. Jordan. He remembered drilling in the 1880's with the Jordan Guards. The commanding officer of the Guards was Capt. Louis Tompkins. Edward J. Young, who was well acquainted with Jordan, also remembered drilling with this group. He remembered *Captain* Tompkins being in charge, and he also remembered young Sam Jordan drilling, but not Leon H.

¹⁸ *American Citizen*, February 15, May 24, 1895; St. Augustine Church Records, LJC.

In May, 1898, Congress empowered President McKinley to organize “an additional volunteer force of not exceeding ten thousand enlisted men possessing immunity from diseases incident to tropical climates.” The resulting ten infantry regiments became popularly known as the “Immunes.” Six of these regiments were to be white, four black, the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th. African Americans were broadly and falsely assumed to be immune from “diseases incident to tropical climates.”

In June, Capt. E. A. Godwin passed through Kansas City on his way to Memphis where he was going to organize a regiment of immunes for the war in Cuba. His orders were to recruit men from Missouri, Arkansas, and Western Tennessee to make up the 7th Immunes. He was recruiting men “who have had the yellow fever, or have been exposed and escaped, or those who have been acclimated in tropical climates.” He offered this inducement: “We will go to Cuba as soon as we can organize, and will be the last ones to leave. Even after a declaration of peace, soldiers will be required for garrison duty on the island, and the Immunes will be the ones to remain behind. Men who enlist with us join the United States army, not the militia, and there will be no governors to despoil our organization with politics.”¹⁹

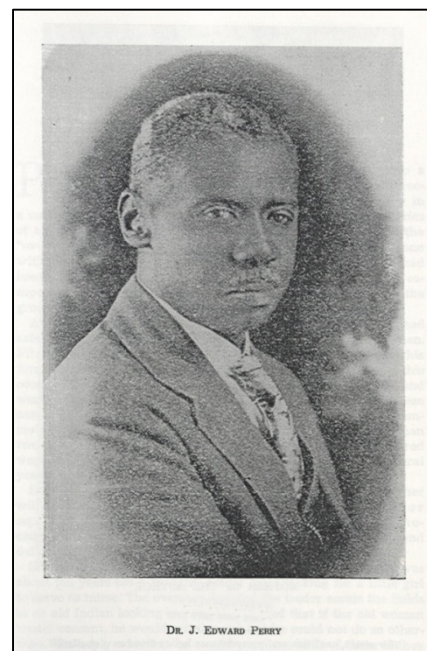
Jordan became a member of Co. K, 7th U. S. Voluntary Infantry Regiment, July 1, 1898. He remembered being examined with the whole company at the Post Office in Kansas City, and then going to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. St. Louis, rather than Memphis, became the organizing center for the 7th Immunes. He claimed on his army application to be a graduate of Oberlin College with two years of military training while at the college. On other documents he claimed to be a graduate of Lincoln Normal University in Jefferson City. Oberlin has no record of his enrollment there. John Rone, who graduated with Leon from Lincoln High School,

¹⁹ Edward D. Young’s affidavit for Leon H. Jordan’s application for a military pension, LJC; *Kansas City Star*, June 4, 1898.

remembered going with Leon to Lincoln, but there is no evidence that he graduated from there either. Jordan's mother remembered his only being away from Kansas City for a year or so at Jefferson City to attend Lincoln and for the time he was a clerk in the Register of Deeds Office in Washington, D. C. Claiming to be an Oberlin graduate would not be the last of Jordan's false claims. He was granted a commission as 1st Lieutenant, probably more for being a Jordan than any other achievement. Being African American was sufficient for his being considered immune from tropical diseases.

For Jordan the war provided an opportunity to prove his leadership capabilities and to receive good pay. He did not seem particularly interested in the international implications of the war. The war with Spain was essentially over almost as soon as he enlisted. Unexpectedly quick naval victories first in Manila Bay and later in Cuba proved decisive. By August 12, 1898, a Peace Protocol ended hostilities between Spain and the United States. The Spanish Cortes ratified the protocol September 13.

Meanwhile at Jefferson Barracks Jordan quickly came down with fever and there met Lt. J. Edward Perry, a medical doctor from Columbia, Missouri, who treated his illness. Perry later explained his own motives for enlisting: "I could assist in proving to my superior officers that there were some Negroes capable of holding positions of honor and trust, second, sufficient funds could be saved to go abroad and possibly satisfy my yearnings." Both officers would be disappointed that the promise of lengthy service Capt.



Godwin held out in Kansas City would soon be negated by the unexpected quick end to the war with Spain.²⁰

Perry wrote with pride of a parade the 7th Immunes performed while at Jefferson Barracks. A few days later he reported being told by a fellow officer, who almost certainly is Jordan, “I would like to see a man like you in Kansas City. You could do something for the people. I cannot. If you ever take a notion to come, remember I am friend number one and will do everything possible to assist you.’ That was my first thought of ever being a resident of Kansas City.” In another context Perry wrote that he and Jordan were close friends from the time they met at Jefferson Barracks until their discharge in Georgia. Five years later, in September, 1903, Dr. Perry moved from Columbia to Kansas City and purchased a home at 1214 Vine street, next door to Kate Jordan’s home, and just a few doors from her son’s at 1232 Vine. Perry’s home on Vine would later become Perry’s Sanitarium, which became the forerunner of Provident-Wheatley Hospital. Leon H. Jordan played a key role in Perry’s coming to Kansas City and becoming one of the most important doctors in its black community. That is a credit he deserved, but went unmentioned in the *Sun*’s tribute.

The 7th Immunes moved to Lexington, Kentucky, late in September. They traveled by train from St. Louis to Louisville. Jordan continued to suffer from a fever that was assumed to be malaria. Their camp in Lexington consisted of tents in an open field, and was not suitable for winter. Perry continued to treat Jordan privately, but Jordan was hospitalized in Lexington for 20 days. After he recovered he was given active command of his company from October 30 to December 6.²¹

²⁰ Leon H. Jordan’s military record; and affidavits of Leon H. Jordan, John Rone, Kate Jordan, and Dr. J. Edward Perry, for Leon H. Jordan’s application for a military pension, LJC; J. Edward Perry, *Forty Cords of Wood*, p. 226.

²¹ In *Forty Cords of Wood*, Dr. Perry describes two incidents of telling racial interest: 1. The black officers traveled from St. Louis to Louisville in plush Pullman cars. In Louisville, the Colonel from the 7th Immunes, a native

But by November the 7th Immunes were moved to Camp Haskell in Macon, Georgia. In January, 1899, Jordan was appointed to provost duty for S. O. #6, Headquarters 2nd Separate Brigade, 2nd Corps. Lena Jordan joined her husband at Camp Haskell. His health was good enough that he did not need more medical help from Perry, but Perry acknowledged treating Lena without specifying her need for treatment.

The racial scene in Georgia was in sharp contrast to that in Kentucky. Tension was high when the 7th Immunes arrived. The 6th Virginians had arrived a week earlier and reacted to the story of a man being recently lynched on a particular tree in a nearby park. The troops had given the keeper of the park a thrashing, chopped down the tree, cut it into pieces, and distributed the pieces among the men as mementos. As assistant quartermaster in charge of the first contingent of troops, Perry was proud of keeping them in order under the circumstances.

Early in January Perry noted an article in a cosmopolitan paper in the South announced the decision that the ratification of the treaty with Spain would signal the release of the colored troops of the Immunes. Their early release was bad enough news, but Perry and the other men found the disparaging comments on the performance of the Immune troops both wrong headed

Virginian, led his officers to an elegant hotel to register. There the Colonel was told, "Colonel, we have breakfast for you, your staff and captains but we cannot feed your lieutenants." Black officers were the of no higher rank than Lieutenant in the 7th Immunes. Dr. Perry describes what happened next: "The expression of surprise on the colonel's face was embarrassing, though he well controlled his emotions.

"He then slowly looked at the ceiling, then the beautiful furniture and finally said, 'You have a beautiful place here.'

"The clerk responded by saying, 'Yes, we have a nice place and take pride in keeping it that way.'

"The answer of the colonel would not look well in print, but he concluded his remarks by saying, 'I will not eat any place where my colored officers cannot eat. Come on boys, we will try to find a restaurant and if they will not feed us we will go back to the cars and eat 'hard tack' and drink coffee together.'

"Just a half block down the street, we entered a palatial restaurant where we were cordially received and sumptuously fed."

2. Apparently while Jordan was in active command of his company, the Immunes were ordered to take a march of nine miles out and nine miles back. Arriving at division headquarters they had to walk another mile and a half to find their assigned place. Perry describes what followed:

"When the 7th Immunes passed the reviewing officer, bedlam broke loose among the observers. Those Kentucky white women threw up their umbrellas, hats, flowers and everything in their grasp as an expression of appreciation for our music and perfect alignment. We were awarded the prize on this occasion, which, considering customs and traditions, we appreciated more than under ordinary circumstances." Pp. 221-222 & 224-225.

and a blow to their pride. He noted a bit of retaliatory humor. A private had artistically illustrated and framed the following statement and hung it on a post for the men's amusement: "Our Father, who art in Washington, William McKinley be thy name; thy kingdom has come with fife and drum, so to hades with the kingdom of Spain. Give us this day our daily rations of hard-tack and salt horse, and forgive us of our ill manners, as we forgive our commissary. Lead us not into battle, but take us home to our friends, for thine is the power over the 7th Immunes for the next two years, unless we are shot or discharged sooner."

The troops were given their final pay at discharge: regular salary, plus one extra month, and travel pay, computed as a day's pay for every twenty miles by direct line to the soldier's home. A soldier was then supposed to walk twenty miles per day. Perry probably spoke for Jordan as well as himself when he wrote, "Our hopes for foreign service were blasted and the desire for two years military contact as we anticipated had terminated. It was one of those disappointments in life which makes one wiser for the experience."²²

Perry returned to Columbia. Leon and Lena Jordan returned to Kansas City. After returning to Kansas City Jordan began managing the Autumn Leaf Club. The Club announced a Christmas reception at the Music Hall as early as 1899. During the nineties it sponsored other

²² *Library of Congress/Spanish-American War, Introduction* [website]; affidavits from Leon H. Jordan, Lena Jordan, Kate Jordan, Dr. Edwin Perry in Leon H. Jordan's application for a military pension, LJC; Leon H. Jordan's military service record, LJC; "Kansas City's African American 'Immunes' in the Spanish-American War," pp. 141-158; *Forty Cords of Wood*, pp. 236-241; These last pages also tells this revealing story: President McKinley came to review the troops in the middle of January, and the Macon papers praised the performance of the colored troops. All the white troops at Macon were discharged before the 7th was discharged on February 28. Just before the discharge two rowdy soldiers were intercepted by civil authorities. The private on post called the corporal of guards. Usually those arrested were turned over to military authorities. The corporal of the guards arrived and assumed the position of port of arms, gun diagonally across his chest. The civil authorities present considered his taking this position as drawing a gun on an officer and arrested the soldier. A thousand people surrounded the building where the guard was housed. "The captain of the guard who was white was not molested. The officer of the guard was placed in jail. Reasons were not given. Eight or ten men were incarcerated for first one excuse and then another. Finally, a trial was held. It was too ridiculous and humiliating to recite. Suffice it to say the fine aggregated \$750, paid by the officers of the regiment. Why the quick change in the attitude of the citizens was to us a conundrum."

well publicized dances and formal social occasions. At some point what started as a social club acquired a fixed address and began to host regular gambling and drinking as well as special celebrations. Jordan remembered hiring William J. Trusty, a longtime acquaintance, as steward for the club, then located at 706 E. 12th street, when he returned from Georgia. Trusty's memory seems more uncertain. He first agreed with Jordan, then corrected himself to say he began work for Jordan at the club while Jordan was in the Philippines. In any case Jordan began managing the club either between his two enlistments or during his second and it would become his economic mainstay for the rest of his life, although he would explore several other business and political ventures as well.²³

But the American defeat of Spain not only brought independence to Cuba, but brought American imperial ambitions into the South Pacific. Hawaii and Guam were annexed, and a curious charade in Manila marked the change of roles for American forces from liberators to new colonial governors. There was a spasm of protest from the American Anti-imperialist League, led by an extraordinary coalition of luminaries, Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, William James, David Starr Jordan, Samuel Gompers, and George S. Boutwell, but following the signing of a treaty in Paris, President McKinley's policy of "beneficent assimilation" prevailed. Now instead of troops to safeguard the independence of Cuba, America needed troops to quell the insurrection in the Philippines. The War Department, in the fall of 1899, decided to recruit black volunteers into the Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth infantry regiments for this purpose. Officers were to be selected from those who had distinguished themselves in Cuba or from state volunteer units with impressive service records.

Approximately six months after returning to Kansas City from Georgia, on September 9, 1899, Leon H. Jordan applied to become a 1st Lieutenant in the 49th Infantry regiment. His

²³ Affidavits from William J. Trusty and Leon H. Jordan in Jordan's Petition for Military Pension, LJC.

application was accepted September 13. Originally he was asked to recruit ex-members of the Band of the 23rd Kansas Regiment. Then he was sent again to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. Lafayette Tillman, another former barber from Kansas City and an old acquaintance of Jordan, who served in the 7th Immunes, was also appointed a 1st Lieutenant. Tillman also preceded Leon H.'s son, Leon M., as a member of the Kansas City Police Department. He traveled with Jordan to Jefferson Barracks, and then in the middle of October by train to San Francisco. Alvin Jordan, Leon's younger brother, was working for the railroads at the time and he remembers joining his brother on the train as far as Cheyenne, Wyoming. Tillman and Jordan were then at the Presidio together until they were sent to Manila on separate ships, Jordan leaving December 4th and Tillman a few days later.²⁴

Jordan's temper got him into trouble almost as soon as he arrived in Manila. When a sergeant began unloading his luggage from a wagon after he arrived at camp he objected strenuously, "I'll be damned if he would put anything of mine off that wagon."

Captain Gilbert C. Smith, then in command of the operation, rebuked him for using such language and informed him that if he had any unnecessary property on the wagon he would certainly put it off, such being his orders. With enlisted men present, Jordan then challenged Smith, by saying, "I don't know whether those are your orders or not."

Jordan was immediately arrested and began his stay in the Philippines facing a General Court Martial. Thus began a record of service far different from what he described after he returned to Kansas City. A trial was held on February 11, and Jordan was docked \$25 per month for four months from his salary. He then was returned to duty to participate in various scouting expeditions near Pamplona and Sanchez Mira. He briefly commanded his company from March

²⁴ *Library of Congress/Spanish-American War, Philippines* [website]; Affidavits from Leon H. Jordan, Lafayette A. Williams, Alvin Jordan, and William A. Brown in Leon H. Jordan's Petition for Military Pension, LJC.

24-28 in Abulug and then was placed on detached service April 11-25 in Pamplona. From July 26-December 30, he was in command of his company and commended for “honest and faithful” service.

But Jordan began his second year of service in the Philippines as he had his first, in a quarrel with a fellow officer. In this case the other officer was Capt. David J. Gilmer, who had recently been promoted from 1st Lieutenant. Gilmer said that when he had given Jordan an order, the latter “attempted to strike me with his fist & dared me with his fist drawn to open my mouth to him again saying if (*sic*) ‘I don’t give a dam for your rank.’” After Gilmer ordered Jordan arrested, Jordan supposedly said, “Dam you, and arrest too.” He then threatened Gilmer if he brought charges against him and stalked out of the quarters and into town for about three hours.



Gilmer immediately filed charges with Col. Beck, the regimental commander. Jordan was placed under close arrest. Gilmer, after a plea from Jordan was willing to withdraw his charge “for the sake of the regt.” But Jordan was arrested again in March and held for charges pending a court martial. On April 5, Capt. Woods wrote Col. Beck that Jordan was with him under arrest awaiting charges preferred by Gilmer, but “as time is so near at hand for the muster out of the regtl., kindly use your influence to settle this matter without a court martial. He had telegraphed Capt. Gilmer, but had received no reply. Jordan had preferred countercharges, but Woods would like to see the matter dropped. This time Gilmer would not sanction the

withdrawal of charges. In May, Jordan requested that Capt. William M. Hawkins represent him in the forthcoming court martial. Jordan's military record does not explicitly declare the result of the court martial. It is not clear when Jordan left the Philippines for San Francisco, but he was mustered out at the Presidio June 30, 1901.²⁵

Other than the capture of Emilio Aguinaldo on March 23, 1901, there was no great victory to celebrate the American troops coming home. The Philippine insurrection was gradually squashed by superior American military forces. President McKinley's policy of "benevolent assimilation" prevailed. Brigadier General Bell is credited with having said that "the army never had a more efficient organization than the 49th Infantry at the Presidio of San Francisco." There was no notice in the press of Jordan's return to Kansas City. Samuel Jordan, the patriarch of the Jordan family, was probably already suffering senility. He died July 30, 1901. Since Samuel Jordan, Jr. had passed earlier, Leon H. returned home to be present at his father's death and to become the head male of the Jordan family.

Perhaps feeling the need to stretch himself to step into the large shoes of his father, he brazenly lied about his service in the Philippines. He told of being cited for valor and consequently brevetted as Captain. This despite knowing that at least two of his fellow Kansas Citians, Lafayette A. Tillman, who served as a fellow officer in the 49th, and William A. Brown, who served as his company cook, knew better than the story he concocted. Neither publicly challenged his story. This probably can be attributed to the continuing power of the Jordan family in the community.

Leon H. Jordan was not only stepping into the shoes of his father, but he was creating the imposing bogus military figure his future son would come to know as his father. Leon M. Jordan probably never knew that Captain Leon H. Jordan, brevetted for bravery in the Philippines, was a

²⁵ Leon H. Jordan's military service record, Spanish-American War, LJC.

fraud. Only thirteen when his father died, it seems unlikely that either friend or family member would be cruel enough to tell the young boy the truth about his father. It seems far more likely that he took the public persona that Leon H. Jordan began to build from the moment he returned from the Philippines for its face value.

Leon H. did return home from the Philippines suffering from piles, an older term for what we now refer to as hemorrhoids. He suffered frequently from dyspepsia and for the rest of his life had to be careful of his diet. In 1902 he applied for a physical disability pension, and when his original application was denied, appealed that decision with the help of a Washington legal firm. This resulted in a rather extensive federal investigation of his claim with affidavits filed by friends, acquaintances, and family members. Tillman's affidavit makes it clear that he was well aware of Jordan's being twice court martialed. Brown's affidavit makes it clear that he was close to Jordan most of his stay in the Philippines. Jordan's application for pension was filed as a former 1st Lieutenant, and there is no indication in his record that he was ever considered for promotion to Captain. He had a more reasonable case for deserving a pension, although his application was ultimately denied because there was no evidence from army medical records at the time of his discharge supporting his claim.²⁶

²⁶ Samuel C. Jordan's death certificate, LJC; Affidavits from Lafayette A. Williams and William A. Brown in Leon H. Jordan's Petition for Military Pension, LJC.

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.

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.

V

What to Make of This Jordan Family

Captain Leon H. Jordan was a complicated man who played a major public role for a brief span of time, dying at a relatively young age. He ran a social gambling establishment, The Autumn Leaf Club, that involved a good deal of public deception. He used his wealth to further many civic causes that brought him considerable praise and prestige. He had a strong sense of family, yet he seemed in many ways a loner, making big decisions autocratically. He made much money, but it seems to have been used primarily to keep his public image prominent and protect his source of income. While involved with a large and notable family he must have been an enigma even to that family.

How well his adolescent son knew his father is even more enigmatic at this late date. The father did not seem to spend a lot of time with his son. A busy man, he ranged far afield geographically and socially to further his political and economic goals. He was ambitious from a very young age. He used his service in the Spanish American War to claim much public prestige, but his military record in fact gives the lie to that public persona. His real record in army service was probably not well known even to his family, let alone to his son who was only thirteen at his death.

Yet the lavish public recognition given to him at his death must have deeply impressed the son who was soon to feel very intimately what the father's loss meant to his own wellbeing. He seems likely to have known that his father was a very controversial figure. In his own public career Leon M. Jordan spoke of his father only distantly, coupling him with reference to his grandfather to express his pride in his family's long and significant history in Kansas City. But the memory of the public recognition his father received at his death seems very likely to have

been a vivid motivating force when the son at middle age had to make a key decision to abandon his ambitions in police administration and choose a new life path to return from Liberia and enter Kansas City politics.

When Leon Mercer Jordan was born on May 6, 1905, his grandfather Samuel had been dead for almost four years, but his grandmother Kate had just moved into an impressive new home just a few doors down the street from the house in which he lived. His aunt Sally, long a close friend to his mother, seems to have ended her first marriage and is living sometime with her mother, Kate, and sometime with her sister, Callie, nearby. Dr. J. Edward Perry, the family physician, lived next door to his grandmother. The Perrys' son, E. D., would become a close friend of the young Leon. His aunt and uncle, Callie and Sandy Edwards, had just built a new home on 2000 Olive Street. The house in which Leon was born had just been substantially rebuilt. His aunt Nellie, widow of Samuel Jr. and later wife of Alvin, seemed occasionally to live with his grandmother and with him and his parents. His aunt Josephine came frequently from Topeka to visit her nephew and her sister, and the latter in turn would often take her son to visit her sister in Topeka during young Leon's early years. There were other aunts and uncles living nearby. He was born into and lived his early years within a publicly influential family with substantial financial resources.

He was only two years old when his father shot his uncle Sandy Edwards. While there must have been considerable family pain over the event, the participation of his mother and his aunt Sally, in a weeks long public beauty contest for married women within a few weeks of the event suggests that the family carried on in such a fashion to minimize the event's effect on a young child.³³

³³ *Kansas City Directories, 1905 & 1906; The Rising Son, September 7 & November 20, 1907.*

In 1910 Leon became of age to enroll in nearby Garrison School. That year his aunt Nellie was recorded as living in his home, and Dr. Perry's home on Vine Street became Perry's Sanitarium. The remarkable John Love married his aunt Sally at St. Augustine's. Leon's father was a witness. But Love didn't move to Kansas City and into Leon's grandmother's home until the following year, when he then began teaching at Garrison where his nephew was already a student. He probably taught at Garrison for much of young Jordan's attendance. He began teaching at Lincoln High School before Jordan enrolled there in 1922. So Love was available as an influence in Jordan's grade school years and again in his troubled teens after the loss of his father.

In 1912 Dr. J. Edward Perry improved his social stature by marrying Fredericka Douglass, the granddaughter of Frederick Douglass. By the summer of 1914 grandmother Kate was living alone at 1212, and there was a much publicized family decision for her to sell the home. Mrs. Minerva Kirkpatrick, after spending ten months searching, decided to buy "the largest and most valuable piece of residential property ever sold to a Colored person in Kansas City." Kate Jordan was quoted as unsure that she wanted to sell the property, but finally agreed to do so on the advice of her son, Oliver, and the ultimatum of her daughter, Callie Edwards: "Mother is getting too old to have the care of such a large house." Despite the well-advertised sale it is not clear if Kate ever moved out of the house. She is registered as living there in later years until her death October 10, 1927. Surprisingly Capt. Leon Jordan's views on the matter are not quoted publicly.

Leon M.'s education at Garrison school apparently proceeded without incident while his father's activities blossomed in several directions, law, contractor, theater manager, but always primarily concerned with the Autumn Leaf Club. John R. Lange, the wealthy manager of Blind

Boone and the man for whom Capt. Jordan and friends wanted to name a hospital, died of a heart attack while driving his car on Paseo Boulevard in July, 1914. But that probably had no noticeable effect on Leon M., nor did any other public event, until the 1917 raid on the Autumn Leaf Club described above and then his father's succumbing to his final fatal illness.³⁴

That illness lasted long enough to have prompted Lena to at least begin to think about a future without her husband, yet that dread thought through most of that period must have seemed a remote possibility until near the end. When that end came there is little indication that either she or her son were certain of what to do. But just a little more than a year after her husband's death Lena acted decisively. She bought a new home at 2448 Paseo and moved into it with her son, mother, and stepfather. It was almost as if she was declaring her independence of the Jordans. It was large enough for her to have renters to share her costs, and it was a shrewd move in terms of the value of its location. Roy Wilkins came to Kansas City to work for the *Kansas City Call*, while young Leon attended Lincoln High School. Wilkins described the area around Lincoln High as "in a high-crime neighborhood bounded by 'Murder Street' on one side and rows of bootlegging joints and vice dens on the other." But he sharply contrasted the area where Lena had bought: "Society Row was up on the Paseo, a hill overlooking the great boulevard that ran the length of Kansas City. Joe Herriford had built a house there as had many black residents. The members of that little enclave of black people were well educated, intelligent, hardworking, successful people whose standard of living matched anything in the surrounding white community. Yet they were penned in those fine homes, barred from everything beyond them simply because their skins were not white." The home Lena established there continues to stand in rather lonely Victorian splendor overlooking where the freeway named after Bruce R. Watkins, Jordan's partner in founding Freedom, Inc., intersects Paseo Boulevard.

³⁴ *Kansas City Sun*, July 11, 1914, July 23, 1916.

When Lena died in 1930 her will listed her property: the home on Paseo she moved to after her husband's death, 1232 Vine St, the house she moved from, 1814 Vine St., and 1006-08 Paseo. She was not poor, but her husband had not left her abundant wealth. She had no skills with which to earn a living. She had grown up within a strong tradition that young girls were to marry the best they could and support their husbands and families. With her husband gone she consolidated her family with the mother and her stepfather that she knew and waited for her son to come of age. She was forty-five years old, young enough to marry again, but probably not for long.

Less than four years after her husband's death, she found that opportunity. According St. Augustine's records she married Arthur C. Dickerson, who was a renter in her Paseo home, and owned a cleaning establishment, on June 24, 1922. Her sister Josephine was present as a witness. Her son was not. Dickerson does not appear in any of Jordan's sparse, but sometimes revealing references to his family. In a tribute to Chester A. Franklin, the owner and founder of the *Kansas City Call*, written many years later, Leon reminisced briefly about his early years: "Like most every youngster, I cast around for my idol. Hero worship, I believe, is a large part of every lad's make-up and only a man can capture and hold this type of admiration in a young rebel. Maturity came hard and late. . . .The early '20's and '30's were lonely, hard years for me and I searched frantically for a friend in whom I could place trust. I can't say when it happened but before the '30's began, I counted "Chief" [Franklin] not only among my friends but as a father." In that same piece Jordan noted that his family, the Jordans, knew the Franklins in Denver and that his grandmother Kate had given Chester Franklin the nickname "Chief" which he carried the rest of his life. There is no reference to Dickerson, who was his stepfather from 1922-1930, when his mother died. But there is proud mention of his father and grandfather.

Dickerson's presence was apparently tolerated, but Jordan never emotionally accepted him as part of the Jordan family.³⁵

Dickerson did not measure up to young Jordan's memory of his father. Running a modest cleaning establishment was not likely to make him an object of public interest. Yet he lived responsibly with Leon's mother through the end of her life, paying for her final hospital and funeral expenses. For a couple of summers when Leon attended Lincoln High School and lived at home, he is listed as working for Dickerson. He was still living in the Paseo home when Leon brought his bride and adopted daughter to live there. It is not uncommon for nearly grown children to find it difficult to accept a new parent. Dickerson probably contributed more to Leon's adolescent rebellion and confusion than answered any of his then aroused emotional needs.

Franklin began publishing the *Kansas City Call* in 1919. In Jordan's tribute to him he remembers distributing papers with Franklin. That probably happened when Franklin first began the *Call* and just before Leon enlisted in the army. He also remembered selling the *Kansas City Sun* for Nelson Crews. His decision to enlist may well have been driven by a mix of motives: to remove himself as an expense from his mother, to get away from her impending decision to marry again, and to take a stab at a military career that seemed to mean so much to his father. At various times Jordan mentioned working at the Paseo Bathhouse and driving taxi for the old Blue Line Cab Company. These were likely to have been parttime jobs during or immediately following his high school years. He also sometimes told others he attended Morehouse High School and played football there, but Morehouse has no record of his attendance.

³⁵ Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, p. 77; Lena Rivers Jordan's will, LJC; St. Augustine church records, copy LJC; *Kansas City Call*, June 5, 1964.

However, his years at Lincoln were important for several reasons. His uncle, John Love, taught there during this time and he was then establishing his presence as the President of the local chapter of the NAACP. Lucile Bluford, who became famous for her editorial career at the *Kansas City Call* and her challenge to the University of Missouri School of Journalism, began her exemplary academic record at Lincoln while Leon was also there. She was a journalist of great respect when Leon Jordan was assassinated, and she wrote a long and personal tribute to him, recognizing how much he had accomplished. Her father, like Leon's uncle, was a member of the faculty. Bluford's deep friendship, begun at Lincoln, lasted throughout Jordan's life.

There was another fellow student at Lincoln who never achieved Bluford's public recognition, but who had long relations to the Jordan family and who would prove important in Jordan's future. Muriel Stewart was the daughter of Mamie Jones Stewart. Mamie Jones was one of the trio of belles made up of Leon's mother, Lena Rivers, his aunt, Sallie Jordan Love, and Mamie Jones, who became Mamie Jones Stewart by marriage. Roy Wilkins coincidentally tells a good story about Muriel Stewart. Wilkins pointed out that Kansas City police were particularly hostile to seeing black men in the company of white women. To illustrate his point he told of Muriel Stewart, "a Negro high school girl who looked white [who] went riding with a black kid who had borrowed his father's car." In the 1926 Yearbook, she is listed as a member of the National Honor Society. In Wilkins's story Muriel and her boyfriend were taken to the police station and threatened with arrest on a minor charge despite Muriel's tearful protest. At the station her mother appeared. "She, too, was light-skinned and normally as proper as any lady from Boston, but she stormed into the station shouting all the cusswords she had ever heard. She gave those police officers a quick lecture on the reason some Negroes look white, and abashed, they let Muriel and her boyfriend go." Muriel later married John West, who would hire Leon to

head the police force in Liberia. Jordan did not acknowledge the role his family relation with West had in his appointment to head the police force of Liberia, but it is hard to believe that this long standing family connection was unimportant.³⁶

Jordan's Lincoln years seems likely to have been preoccupied by another event that is not well known. He probably fathered a child. When he applied for a position in the Kansas City Police Department, he listed an adopted child living with him and Orchid. The 1940 census lists Lavira Smith, an adopted daughter, living with the Jordans. Jackie Rhodes, a longtime friend of Leon's, also remembered a Lavira Smith living not very happily with the Jordans. Lavira Smith was born in Topeka in 1925. There are photos including a young girl who is probably Lavira Smith taken at Leon's wedding with Orchid. More will be discussed when that wedding and its significance is described. But if Lavira Smith is Leon Jordan's natural child she would have been conceived when he was nineteen or twenty. This seems to be the most likely explanation for their later adoption of this child.

This would explain why the gregarious Leon Jordan is not well represented in the extracurricular activities pictured in Lincoln's yearbooks while he attended. He was only an average student, but he attended class regularly enough to graduate. It is not clear whether he ever knew that his uncle Samuel was a member of Lincoln's first graduating class, or that his father was the first President of its alumni organization. But these were also important years for John Love, Jordan's uncle and teacher. Love was then President of the local NAACP chapter, with his wife, Sallie, serving as the head of the companion women's organization. When Jordan later made a substantial lifetime contribution to the NAACP, he sent his check to Lucille Bluford, who became a lifelong friend after they met at Lincoln. And while at Lincoln, he

³⁶ Jordan listed as working for Dickerson in 1926 and 1927 Kansas City Directories; *Call*, June 5, 1864; Roy Wilkins, *Standing Tall*, pp. 53-56.

renewed a family connection begun by his mother with Mamie Jones that would later prove important to his eventual leading the Liberian police force.

Gwen Calderon, who knew Leon and Orchid Jordan over many years, remembers that her parents taught at the Kansas Vocational School in Topeka, Kansas, when they got married in 1927. They moved to Kansas City in 1928. Her parents talked about Leon and Girard Bryant, who later became President of Penn Valley College, both appearing at their door in Topeka frequently looking for a home cooked meal. Bryant was a revered and respected educator when Jordan was assassinated. Like Lucille Bluford, he too wrote a long and personal tribute to his good friend, Leon Jordan after his assassination. Calderon thought both Jordan and Bryant were students at the vocational school. In the 1940's as a policeman in Kansas City, Jordan had to deal with a jewelry robbery that began in Topeka. He wrote in a report about introducing himself to two young boys from Topeka whom a fellow officer had befriended. He told the boys that at one time he had "worked with children as playground director in Topeka," and "had charge of the City Park Playgrounds, which accommodates a number of Topeka children from North Topeka." One of the young men he was talking to was from North Topeka. This position as playground director seems like one his uncle John Wright might have helped arrange for him. After graduating from Lincoln, Jordan went to live with the Wright family with whom he now seemed more at home than with his mother and stepfather, and quite probably to develop or continue a relation with his acknowledged daughter.

Among papers Orchid left to the Bruce Watkins Cultural Center there is a handwritten memorial statement about her husband that indicates she first met him on the playground in Topeka when she came out of an ice cream store "to ask if any one would like a lick." Her

memorial ends with the poignant thought that on the night of his murder she was “waiting for him to come home to eat some ice cream with me.”³⁷

³⁷Interview with Jackie Rhodes, February 16, 2008; Interview with Gwen Calderon, June 25, 19007; Leon Jordan’s KCPD file, LJC; Hand written note, Archives, Bruce Watkins Cultural Center, copy LJC.

VI

College and Marriage

Leon enrolled in Washburn College in Topeka in 1928 and completed 48 hours of credit there before transferring to Wilberforce, where Orchid had enrolled a few months earlier. She was probably his reason for enrolling. Wilberforce University, the nation's oldest private historically black university, was clearly a congenial experience for Jordan. Besides a wife he found a life there that he remembered with pleasure for years to come. Most of the extent records of Jordan's tenure at Wilberforce are from his private papers. The official records have been severely depleted by floods and administrative changes between Wilberforce and Central State University. But fortunately the Jordans kept a variety of ephemera to remind them of their undergraduate days as well as a transcript of Leon's academic record. Among these papers is a column Leon once wrote for the school newspaper about the basketball team under the byline, "Sweetie" Jordan.

The beginning and close of this column reveals how easily and colorfully Jordan embraced the language Wilberforce students developed to mark their distinctive loyalty to each other and the university:

Well, the boys made a go of the Detroit game. Things looked bad from the start, but they tell me when Scurry and "Sis" got going the cake was all dough. Scurry has sure got an eye this year. His middle name should be "string music." The squad as a whole has begun to look much better. There seems to be some sort of "jinx" on them, but I believe they'll get going yet....I have noticed that some people get a fiendish delight in the result of a defeat to the team. This evidently is motivated by a selfish thought. Now,

this is not what I should term the proper spirit to be shown when the success or failure of the team depends on the whole-hearted support of every one. We are all here striving for intellect. Intellect denotes superior intelligence which, in turn, can only be had through broadness. Let us all come out of our shells and work together on this construction gang.

Don't be a wrecker.

The column was written by "Sweetie Jordan."³⁸

Jordan enrolled at Wilberforce a little more than a year before the death of his mother. But his relationship with Orchid by then was becoming serious. She was to become his wife and partner for the rest of his life. Orchid Irene Ramsey was born in Clay Center, Kansas, August 17, 1910. She was four years younger than Leon. But like Leon she had lost her father early. Maraman Harve Ramsey, usually referred to as M. H., was born in Clay County, Kansas, in



1878 and died unexpectedly February 20, 1924, at the age of forty-five. He was thought to be suffering from tonsillitis when suddenly "his heart went back on him" and he died quietly at his home in Clay Center. He left a wife, a son, Harvey, born in 1906, and two daughters, Florence, born in 1908, and Orchid, born in 1910. The oldest daughter, Gladys Marie, died in infancy.

M. H. lived all his life in Clay County, growing up near Wakefield. He was part of a large family, having four brothers and four sisters. His father and mother were alive at his death. Harvey Ramsey, M. H.'s father, fled slavery in Missouri to fight for his freedom in 1862. He

³⁸ In 1963 the Rev. A. Cecil Williams and I co-chaired Kansas City CORE. There was a CORE conference being held in Cincinnati. We wanted to attend, but were a little short on funds to cover staying in a hotel. When Leon heard of our difficulty, he called a former classmate from Wilberforce who lived in Cincinnati and arranged for the two of us to stay in his home. He took me aside and said now when you meet my friends from Wilberforce don't be surprised when they refer to me as "Sweetie" Jordan. That was my football name.

probably joined the 10th Regiment of the US Colored Infantry, a regiment that supported General Benjamin Butler's actions in the siege of Petersburg and Richmond in 1864, coming to Kansas after the war. African Americans were a small and scattered minority in that part of Kansas. An obituary notice for M. H. says that he married Maude Eyre of Wakefield October 24, 1893. An obituary notice for Maude indicates they married October 29, 1902. The latter seems more plausible. Orchid's mother was white, of English extraction, and her father of mixed Indian and African descent.

Susan Maude Ramsey, Orchid's mother, was born in Jewell County, Kansas, August 7, 1880. Her family moved to Superior, Nebraska, during Maude's early girlhood. The family returned to Kansas, living in Wakefield during Maude's teen years. M. H. and Maude moved to Clay Center two years after their marriage. According to his obituary M. H. was an industrious blacksmith, who believed strongly in education as a path to the best for his children. Orchid remembers her father as a mechanic and both her parents running a laundry out of their home. After his death Orchid moved to Kansas City, Kansas, to live with an uncle and attend high school there. But she found going to an all black high school scary after being used to the relative integration of Clay Center. Her sister Florence, two years older than Orchid, died in 1925, just a year after the death of their father. Orchid then returned to Clay Center to live with her mother. She completed her final two years at Clay County Community High School and graduated in 1928. She stayed some time with an aunt in Topeka, where she first met Leon tasting an ice cream cone.

She was at Wilberforce studying for a degree in elementary education when Leon arrived. It seems likely Orchid was a principal attraction. He began his course work in March during the third quarter of the 1928-1929 academic year. In his second year at Wilberforce Leon's mother

died at Wheatley Provident Hospital in Kansas City, June 3rd, 1930, of an Adeno-Cystoma of the ovary. Dr. J. Edward Perry operated to save her life, but the operation was unsuccessful. Her husband, Arthur C. Dickerson, took care of her funeral expenses at Watkins Funeral Home. There is no public record of her son's response to her death.

In her will Lena indicated that she owned property at 1006-08 Woodland, 1814 Vine Street, the home she and her family lived in for many years at 1232 Vine Street, and the home she presently was living in, 2448 Paseo. The income from 1006-08 Paseo was to be given to her mother, Mary Jacobs, as long as she lived. At the death of Mary Jacobs and her husband, Arthur C. Dickerson, this property was to be inherited by her son, Leon. So presumably Arthur Dickerson was to manage this property with the income going to her mother during the mother's life and after her death to him. The two Vine Street houses and 2448 Paseo were to go directly to Leon. In case of Leon's death without issue, the entire estate was to be divided between Lena's mother, Mary Jacobs, and her sister, Josephine Wright. Mary Jacobs moved to Topeka to live with her daughter, Josephine Wright, and her husband. She lived there until the ripe age of ninety-two, dying October 1, 1954.³⁹

Orchid's dance program for the prom of 1931 is filled with names other than Leon or Sweetie. But her dance program for 1932 has only two names. Sweetie fills the first line and John Howard is entered on the seventh line. Leon Jordan is listed as a member of the Aleph Chapter of the Razac Crescent Club in programs for 1931 and 1932, and in the 1932 program he

³⁹ Obituary notice for Maraman Harve Ramsey, *Clay Center Times*, 1924, and for Mrs. Claude Ramsey, *Dispatch*, October 12, 1962, originals in Clay County Historical Museum, copies LJC; "Generations of Achievement: The Family and Early Life of Orchid Jordan in Clay Center, Kansas, 1910-1928," pp. 2-3; undated taped interview of Orchid Jordan, Kansas City Black Archives; Wilberforce ephemera, Leon Jordan's transcript, and Leon and Orchid Jordan's marriage certificate, LJC.

is listed as a member of a quartet that sang "A Song to Mother." When he graduated in 1933, he was also listed as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Reserved Officers Training Corps.

During the first quarter of 1931, Leon apparently left Wilberforce to enroll in the Law School of Howard University. Registration records there say he was enrolled for the complete academic year. However, his academic transcript from Wilberforce indicates that he took classes at Wilberforce during the second and third quarters of that academic year. So it seems likely that Leon's attendance at Howard was brief, but it was significant for a personal contact that proved important in his later professional career.

Name in Full		Jordan, Leon M.		Date	19		
Born	Month	Day	Year	Home Address	2448 Paseo, Kansas City, Mo		
Admitted	March	19	29	to the	Commerce-- B. S. Commerce		
Intelligence Test Record	Year	Form No.	Raw Score	Percentile Rank			
Attended	102 weeks	ending	XXXXX Mar 19 33	Graduated	Mar 19 33		
Degree	B. S. Commerce		Diploma	Left School	19		
Reason for Leaving	XXXXXXXXXXXX		Classification				
ENTRANCE RECORD:	Lincoln High School, Kansas City, Mo		Location	Date of Graduation			
SUBJECTS	UNITS	SUBJECTS	UNITS	SUBJECTS	UNITS		
History	3	Sociology	1				
English	3	Physiography	1				
Algebra	1	Military	1				
Plane Geometry	1	Machine Shop	1				
Physics	1	Typewriting	1				
Zoology	1	Economics	1				
Botany	1	Mechanical Drawing	1				
				TOTAL UNITS	16 1/2		
ADVANCED STANDING:	Credits transferred from Washburn College, Topeka, Kansas		Date and location of School				
Date Admitted			Classification of Applicant				
NAME OF COURSE	No.	Hrs.	Cr.	NAME OF COURSE	No.	Hrs.	Cr.
Sociology		5					
History		10					
English		15					
Gen. Psychology		4					
Economic History		4					
Economics		4					
School Management		4					
				Total Credits Advanced	48		
COLLEGE OR DEPARTMENTAL CREDITS:	Total quarter-hours required for graduation 180						
DEPARTMENT AND CATALOG NUMBER	DESCRIPTIVE TITLE OF COURSE	Year	Qr.	Hours Cr.	Grade		
Com. 305	Economic Geography	29-30	3	5	D		
Psy 305	Abnormal Psychology			5	F-		
Phys Ed	Physical Education			3	C		
Span. 101	Spanish	30-31	1	5	B		
Soc 203	Crime & Punishment			5	B		
Span Ed	Physical Education			5	C		
Span 102	Spanish	30-31	2	5	B		
Hist	State & County Government			5	A-		
Ec. 102	Economics			5	B		
Phys Ed	Physical Education			5	C		
DEPARTMENT AND CATALOG NUMBER	DESCRIPTIVE TITLE OF COURSE	Year	Qr.	Hours Cr.	Grade		
Ethics 408	Ethics	30-31	3	5	B		
Ec 204	Jurisprudence			5	B		
Ec 303	Advanced Economics			5	B		
Span 103	Spanish			5	B		
Com. 305	Retailing	31-32	2	3	B		
Com 305	Finance			5	B		
Com 311	Insurance			5	C		
Com 121	Accounting			5	B		
Math 103	College Algebra	31-32	3	5	D		
Phys Ed	Physical Ed.			5	B		
Eng. 203	English Literature			5	C		
Com 122	Accounting			5	B		
Com 305	Salesmanship			5	B		
Biol 101	General Biology	1932	Sum	5	B		
Com 411	Statistics	1932	Sum	5	C		
Com 411	Business Law	32-33	1	5	B		
Com 303	Accounting			5	C		
Com 305	Business English			5	B		
Com 430	Mathematics of Finance			3	C		
Biol 107	Equational Biology			5	B		
Hist 301	History of American Negro	32-33	2	5	B		
Com. 413	Business Law			5	B		
				Adv. Standing	137 qtr hrs		
				Total credit	185 qtr hrs		
One quarter-hour credit represents work of 1 hour per week for 1 quarter (11 weeks). Laboratory courses require double time for credit.							
KEY TO GRADING SYSTEM: A (90-100), A- (80-89), B (70-79), B- (60-69), C (50-59), D (40-49), E (30-39), F (20-29), W (withdrew).							
I certify that the preceding information is correct.	Howard D. Gregg, Superintendent.						
Every student is entitled to one copy of his record without charge. For each additional copy a fee of one dollar will be charged.							

Leon said he met a medical student there, John B. West, whose father was a Professor of Anatomy at Howard. He and West were probably introduced by Muriel Stewart, who would later marry West, and was the daughter of the former Mamie Jones, close friend of Leon's mother and his aunt Sallie. West would go on to become a Colonel in the U.S. Public Health Mission in Liberia. He then had the authority to contact Leon Jordan by radio in 1947 and offer

him a contract to leave the Kansas City Police Department to organize and head the national Liberian constabulary in Monrovia. That would prove to be a very significant career opportunity that eventually led to a fateful career change in the lives of Leon and Orchid Jordan.

Orchid graduated in June, 1932, and she and Leon were married August 15 in Clay Center by Probate Judge James F. Jarns. It was a quiet office marriage.



There are family photos that seem

likely to have been taken on the occasion of the wedding. John and Josephine Wright are present in the photos along with Orchid's mother. They appear to have been taken outside the Ramsey home. Leon still had a year to finish at Wilberforce. The married couple returned to the Wilberforce campus.⁴⁰



⁴⁰ Obituary notice for Maraman Harve Ramsey, *Clay Center Times*, 1924, and for Mrs. Claude Ramsey, *Dispatch*, October 12, 1962, originals in Clay County Historical Museum, copies LJC; undated taped interview of Orchid Jordan, Kansas City Black Archives; Wilberforce ephemera, Leon Jordan's transcript, and Leon and Orchid Jordan's marriage certificate, LJC.

There are also other photos of this wedding with two small girls in them. One of these shows the Wrights with Leon and Orchid and the two small girls. The second shows an unidentified couple and the same two small girls. Harvey Ramsey, Orchid's brother, and his wife seem the most likely candidate for the other couple. Charles Jones, the son of Josephine who was adopted by John Wright, had died before Leon and Orchid were married. That leads to the likely possibility that the girl in arms is Ramsey's and the other is Lavira Smith, the young girl named as an adopted daughter of the Jordans in the 1940 census. There is another photo in the collection showing the same two girls a couple of years older. It appears to be taken outside the Jordans' home in Kansas City. Jordan listed an adopted daughter on his application to the Kansas City Police Department in 1936. If Lavira was living with the Jordans in 1936 it seems likely that she is the young girl in the photo when they married and again a few years after they moved to Kansas City.



This leads to the suggestion that Leon acknowledged his parental responsibility for Lavira to Orchid and his family before his marriage and that as a couple they agreed to raise Lavira as their own. Such a possibility could readily have been suggested by the example of the Wrights' raising Charles Jones as their son. John and Josephine Wright were strong and endearing models to Leon, and the middle class success of their family easily could have carried significant weight with Orchid.

Lavira Smith left no public record after the 1940 census. Jackie Rhodes said that Orchid mistreated her because she was too dark. Leon had another girl friend in the late thirties whom

Orchid was aware of and whom Jackie told me about. Orchid told an FBI agent of this woman after Leon's death. It is likely that if Orchid began the marriage by forgiving and supporting Leon's effort to make the best of the situation, Lavira became too painful a reminder of the sexual freedom Leon continued to claim.⁴¹

After his graduation in 1933 Leon brought his bride of one year to the home on W. Paseo that his mother had purchased in 1919. His stepfather, Arthur Dickerson, was still living there. They probably arrived shortly before his uncle John L. Love died on July 30. Love's legacy as a teacher at Lincoln and as an NAACP leader was much celebrated in the press following his passing. The country was still sinking deeper and deeper into economic depression. It was not the greatest time to be looking for a job. Leon found a minimum position teaching at Western Baptist Seminary during his first year home. He also briefly worked for Roy Wilkins' brother, Earl, in the Advertising Department of *The Call*. Then for the next two years he became a case worker for the Men's Bureau of the Jackson County Relief Agency.

One of Leon's coworkers at the relief agency became a friend to both Leon and Orchid for the rest of their lives. In 1975 Orchid wrote Reed Hoover and asked him for a contribution to a memorial tribute she was planning for her late husband. Hoover told of meeting Leon in 1935 when contact between the races wasn't all that encouraged. Hoover grew up in Independence with little knowledge of black people, but he was immediately drawn to Leon by his "magnificent personality, striking appearance, sense of humor, intelligence and friendliness." Leon didn't invite or encourage questions on race, but he was always willing to answer Hoover's questions with unfailing logic and honesty.

⁴¹ Photos from Jordan Scrapbook, LJC; 1940 U. S. census; Jordan's Police file, LJC; Interview with Jackie Rhodes, March 3, 2008.

Very early in their relationship Hoover tells of being on his way to the apartment of the woman who was to become his wife. He was driving his mother's Plymouth on U. S. 40 when it broke down about three miles east of Van Brunt. He had only \$1.50 in his pocket so calling a garage was out of the question. He hitch-hiked to the bus stop and took the bus to his girl friend's apartment. Leon was the only friend he could think of likely to be of help. When he called Leon, the latter was dressed for a night on the town. But in about ten minutes Leon came to the apartment and drove Hoover to his stalled car and pushed it to the apartment near Troost and Linwood.

The next morning Leon pushed the Plymouth into an alley somewhere on 18th Street and found a mechanic who figured out the cause of the car's problem. He left Orchid to watch Hoover's mother's car and took Hoover to the Western Auto where they bought the necessary parts. They returned to the car and Leon waited until the mechanic got the car running. Leon claimed to be paying for the service himself to get a better price for Hoover. Hoover concluded: "it seemed no big deal to him that he'd shot most of a Friday evening and all of a Saturday afternoon for a friend, and I'm pretty sure he loaned me funds for the parts and mechanic." Leon's quick and thoughtful generosity is legendary among his many friends and acquaintances.⁴²

⁴² *Call*, July 20, 1947, June 5, 1964; Leon Jordan's application to the K.C. Police Department, LJC; copy of Reed Hoover's response to Orchid Jordan, LJC.

VII

First Career: Becomes a Policeman

In 1936 Jordan finally found a job that promised him decent pay and a chance for the future. He probably met Boss Tom Pendergast personally in his office, as recruits for the Kansas City Police Department were commonly required to do. He later acknowledged Pendergast remembered his father, and that probably won him a job on the police department. He would be a member of the department for the next sixteen years, although the last five of those years were spent on leave while he headed the constabulary of Liberia. It was the beginning of a long and deep commitment to police work.



He filled out his application on Dec. 14, 1936, and was hired, Dec. 21. He was six feet two inches tall and weighed 215 pounds, a weight he carried easily. He listed his army service, described himself as married, but under “No. of children” he wrote an “Adopted girl”. On two other personnel documents in his file during the next two years, after “dependents,” he lists two. As mentioned above, Jackie Rhodes, who met Leon in Denver, where she grew up, and whose parents knew Leon’s parents from Kansas City days, remembers a quick, bright, young girl named Lavira living with the Jordans. But Rhodes thought she didn’t live with the Jordans for very long. When asked why, she thought the girl was too dark skinned to suit Orchid. She

thought the latter treated the young girl like a maid. The 1940 census confirms Lavira Smith, living with the Jordans as an adopted daughter.

In an interview with an FBI agent after her husband's death, Orchid Jordan said that Leon had a relationship with an Edith Massey Thomas which began prior to their marriage and continued while Leon was on the police force. She said that it was "rumored" that there was a child as a product of this relationship. While insisting she was not certain this was so, she named the child, Dorothy Louise Massey, and described her as living in Kansas City at the time of the interview. She seemed to know a good deal about Thomas, whom she described as having married while the Jordans were in Liberia. Orchid understood Thomas was in the military, and that her marriage did not last long. She was employed by the Internal Revenue Service in Kansas City, but subsequently moved to Los Angeles where she worked for the Goldring Company, located in the 8000 block of Sunset Boulevard. Orchid indicated that she had discussed this relationship with her husband many times and believed that the relationship had ended years ago.

Jackie Rhodes remembers Edith Massey clearly. She was a tall good looking woman, whom Leon was very fond of. Jackie remembers riding on occasion in the patrol car with Leon and Cliff Warren, and then being taken to the Chez Paris to sit with Edith. She also remembers that when she was teaching physical education at Lincoln University in the early forties Leon would come to Lincoln with Chester McAfee on Sundays to see Edith. She felt sure that Leon was paying for Edith's education at Lincoln.

Rhodes remembers that Leon was also close friends with Ethalyn Richardson, who performed at the Chez Paris with her husband Bill as part of a dance team. Later Ethalyn would occasionally meet Leon when he traveled to Denver. Ethalyn Richardson divorced Bill, but

remained good friends with him even after remarrying. On the night of Leon's murder, Ethalyn Stevenson Gordon had just flown into Kansas City. She called Leon that evening. As he exited the Green Duck, he was carrying a bottle of brandy on his way to meet her, when his life was ended by blasts from a shot gun. A photo of Ethalyn as a very attractive young woman with an inscription addressed to "Sister Orchid, Luck and Success Always. from Lil Sis, Ethalyn," survives as part of the Jordan Collection. Orchid acknowledged to the FBI that Ethalyn was a longtime friend, chiefly of her husband's.

Orchid makes no mention of Lavira Smith. She seems in fact by suggesting that it was rumored that Leon had a child before their marriage and that the mother was probably Edith Massey to be leading the agent away from any knowledge of Lavira. That Lavira lived with the Jordans from the 1940 census through Jordan's early years on the police force is almost certain. Immediately after Leon's death, and not completely certain what kind of estate Leon had left her, Orchid would not like to draw public attention to someone who might have a claim on whatever that estate might be. Yet Orchid's acknowledgement of the rumor that Leon had fathered a child before their marriage, even though she was leading the agent from any awareness that that child might be Lavira Smith, seems a semi-conscious acknowledgement.

Listening to Rhodes tell me of these women in Jordan's life in such a matter of fact manner I could not help also being struck by the warmth and affection with which she remembered Leon. At one point she drifted back into her memories for a long pause, and just as I thought of repeating a question, she awoke, shook her head, and smiled, "That man sure could dance." She made it very clear that despite his carrying on with other women she liked this man. It was an attitude I would find repeated in other instances.⁴³

⁴³ Physical Examination for Employment and 1935-36 Employment Records, KCPD Personnel File, LJC; Interview with Orchid Jordan, August 6, 1970, FBI file, LJC; Interview with Jackie Rhodes, March 3, 2008.

The year Jordan joined the police department Tom Pendergast was at the height of his power in Kansas City and in the state of Missouri. Indeed his power at this point reached into the White House through Jim Farley, and into the U.S. Senate with Harry Truman. During the early thirties there was a widespread belief among all classes that the Pendergast organization had steered Kansas City through the depression with minimum business anxiety and unemployment. Pendergast was then seen by many as a successful businessman as well as a political leader and many prominent figures in the community were happy to be recognized as his friends. Lloyd C. Stark became governor of the state with the essential support of Pendergast. Then in 1936, the same year Jordan joined the police department, despite many promises of loyalty, Stark turned against Pendergast and began to use all the powers of his office to bring the political leader down.

In 1932 the Democrats with much support from the local business community had brought the police department under home rule. Not only was Pendergast happy, but the black community at first greeted the move with relief. Chester A. Franklin, generally considered a strong Republican, noted in *The Call* about the first election after home rule had been established: "The 'boss' issue raised by the Republicans is downright puerile. It is not how much power T. J. Pendergast has but what he does with it, that concerns the people. . . .If the Pendergast organization had done nothing more than remove the menace of brutal and unfriendly police from us, putting a stop to the clubbing and imprisonment of innocent Negroes, it would deserve our thanks. Coming on the heels of the Field-Behrendt [former Police commissioners], when official outrages reached their highest, the difference is marked."

Regrettably several spectacular crimes gave the wider public a sharply different perspective on the police department: the Union Station Massacre, the machine-gun killing of

Johnny Lazia, the 1934 election day massacre, which left four people dead, and the kidnappings of Mary McElroy, the daughter of city manager, Henry Mc Elroy, and that of Nell Donnelly, prominent local businesswoman.

The police department in fact became the underbelly of the Pendergast organization. Kansas City became a wide open city for gambling and prostitution. Crime leaders in trouble elsewhere thought of Kansas City as a safe haven. The police were often well paid to look the other way and were warned to be careful about whom they arrested. This wide open night life had its positives. It was the heyday of Kansas City jazz. The clubs of Kansas City, open for long hours into the morning, featured some of the best music in the land then adding a new dimension to jazz, America's signature music tradition.⁴⁴

Reed Hoover remembered another Leon Jordan incident that catches some of the flavor of those days in Kansas City. Hoover and his wife with three other white couples went to Felix Payne's Eastside Musicians' Sunset Club on a Saturday night. They were the only whites in the club and by 1:30 a.m. they were rather drunk. One of the men of their party, whom Jordan knew and disliked, began to mimic the other dancers on the floor. He was too drunk to realize the resentment he created or to respond to his friends' efforts to straighten him out. The atmosphere grew tense. Hoover, knowing Jordan was a friend of Payne's, phoned Jordan to see if he could talk to someone in the club to cool things off. Jordan listened to Hoover's story, told him to go back to the table, hobble the show-off, and sit still.

In about ten minutes Jordan burst through the front door. He knew everybody in the place and was immediately greeted enthusiastically by all. "Suddenly he seemed to discover our lily-white table. 'Hey Kelse,' he shouted, 'What in hell you doin' here?'" He ran across, greeted

⁴⁴ Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, pp. 118-137; *The Call*, October 14, 1932.

Beth and me, sat down and ordered a round of drinks. The atmosphere turned from hostile to neutral. He had doubtless saved a stupid friend from a most unpleasant experience.”

By the 1930's and 1940's Felix Payne was a legendary figure. Born in Marshall, Missouri, in 1884, he came to Kansas City a year before Leon M. Jordan was born. He began his career as—what else—a barber on Fourth Street. By 1906 he operated a tavern called the Twin City Club within the western edge of the downtown district. He bought real estate, ran gambling operations, and eventually opened at least three other nightclubs, the Subway at 18th and Vine, the same East Side Musicians Club that Reed Hoover and his friends visited, and the Chauffeurs Club. He became coowner of the Kansas City, Kansas, Giants baseball team. He went into business with both Thomas “Big Piney” Brown and his brother, Walter “Little Piney” Brown, who was immortalized in Big Joe Turner's “Piney Brown Blues.” He was also a very gifted amateur tennis player who often represented Kansas City in team matches with St. Louis. He was an electrifying speaker, who worked diligently for the Democratic Party, and was often invited to speak to white as well as black audiences. With Dr. William Thompkins he began the *Kansas City American* newspaper to rival the *Call*, whose politics were staunchly Republican.

In Robert Altman's film *Kansas City*, Harry Belafonte plays a jazz era hoodlum named Seldom Seen. Seldom Seen is a nickname for a small timer named Ivory Johnson. But many believe the darker side of Felix Payne provided much of the historical basis for the character Belafonte played. At any rate Payne worked closely with Tom Pendergast, and he almost certainly knew Leon H. Jordan, Leon M's father. There is a photo of Leon M. Jordan with Felix Payne, and Everett P. O'Neal as members of the leading men's social club, the Beau Brummel

Club, taken in 1942. Felix Payne was likely a frequent reminder to the younger Leon Jordan of the political and social success his father had once achieved.⁴⁵

Federal District Attorney Maurice Milligan began damaging investigations of the 1936 local elections soon after they were completed. His successful prosecution gained momentum over the next two years. By 1938 Gov. Lloyd Stark saw his opportunity to challenge Pendergast's power in the state by portraying himself as a reform candidate. In the 1938 elections Pendergast and his machine still did very well in the Kansas City election, but Milligan and Stark had now gained the ear of the Roosevelt administration. They sparked a federal investigation of Pendergast's evasion of taxes which eventually brought the boss down.

Stark knew that the Kansas City Police Department protected the illegal sale of liquor and gambling. He had his attorney general try to enforce the state laws governing these activities. He then used his power as governor successfully to urge the state legislature to return the Kansas City police department to state control. In July, 1939 ex-FBI man, Lear B. Reed, was installed as the new Chief of Police and a drastic effort to reform the department was begun.

In an interview in New York City on his way to Liberia in 1947, Leon Jordan remembered his early days in the Kansas City Police Department. In 1936 when he enlisted they had about 13 or 14 Negroes on the force, "and Kansas City was one of the worst police forces in the country. In 1938 when the state and federal governments stepped in to clean up things less than 150 of the 800 strong police force was able to survive the probe into departmental corruption. . . .Every mother's son had to take a mental and physical examination. I was busted from uniformed sergeant to a class "A" patrolman, but I regained my sergeant's post eight months later."

⁴⁵ Reed Hoover to Orchid Jordan, May 20, 1975, LJC; David Conrad's *Biography of Felix Payne, 1884-1962*, KCPL Local History website; Glenn E. Rice on Altman's film, *Kansas City Star*, June 6, 1996.



In the 1930's J. Edgar Hoover became a national hero, and the FBI was replacing the cowboy in the white hat as the popular answer to corruption in story and film. But Hoover and the FBI were also creating a new mythical aura for fighting crime. Their methods were "scientific." Fingerprinting was then a new and exciting crime fighting tool, much as DNA is today. Lear Reed was chosen for his job because he was an FBI agent. He paid tribute to Hoover and mentioned his FBI training over and over again as he transformed the Kansas City Police Department into a straight-laced, earnest, technologically competent police force. Jordan learned and participated in this transformation. He would take many of the lessons he learned from this transformation into his effort to organize the Monrovia police force in Liberia many years later.

But Jordan's view of crime and its source was not the same as that of J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover thought those who explained crime as rising from environmental causes were weak-kneed liberals. In contrast Jordan always believed that "prevention of crime is better than punishing the criminal; that a bad environment produces the criminal, and that 'third degree' methods should have no place in police activity." Jordan's own troubled early years gave him empathy for young people in trouble. "I like to get back to a lad's early life, his family, his likes and dislikes. . . .I may talk to a boy, for example, about the last time he went fishing. You've got to have a case history of the individual, and understand his relation to his environment. You know the effect. You've got to find the cause that brings him to the police before you can deal with him." He admitted, however, that he had not yet won over all his colleagues to his methods.⁴⁶

Remembering his early police experiences, Jordan acknowledged the early training he received in police work from veterans Robert W. Lee and John W. Burns. He also praised the training he received in detective work from Les W. Kircher. But the 1939 transformation of the police department also brought him a new and significant partner, Clifford Warren. Warren and Jordan not only worked closely together as detectives, but they became lifelong family friends.

In 1939 Jordan also made a significant residential move. He and Orchid moved from their substantial home on 2448 W. Paseo to 2745 Garfield. At that time 27th Street was considered the dividing line between the white and black community. So the



⁴⁶ Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, pp. 91-117; Ferrell, *Truman and Pendergast*, pp. 31-61; Larsen, *Pendergast!*; Lear B. Reed, *Human Wolves*, p. 179; *The Voice of the People*, NYC, Dec. 6, 1947; Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, pp. 189-219.

Jordans' move south of 27th Street, like Leon's mother's move to 2448 Paseo, was a racial adventure. Their new home was a duplex, so it again provided the possibility of rental income.

Early on Jordan and Warren were among four officers who received special praise from F. S. Smith, Executive Secretary of the Paseo YMCA, for their work in bringing in new members to the Y's Boys' Club. Theodore Pugh, Coordinator of the Negro Playgrounds of Kansas City, praised Jordan and Warren's work during the summer 1940 season, when the large crowds reached an all time high of over 10,000 on Aug. 1. Such a "safe and sane season" would not have been possible without the able assistance of these officers.

On May 12, 1941, Jordan was designated director of the American Youth Club and directed to report to Capt. Frank F. Dobbs. Dobbs would keep in touch with Jordan the rest of his life. He called Jordan from California the day before he was murdered. In July, 1941, Thomas Webster, Director of the Urban League, requested Jordan be given leave to attend the annual Urban League Conference at Camp Green Pastures, forty miles outside Detroit. Acting Chief Harold Anderson granted the leave.

In July, 1942, Jordan and Warren's work as Class A patrolmen in the burglary and robbery unit paid off. They were both promoted to Detectives and given a \$25 a month raise. Jordan received Badge No. 33, Warren No. 44. They were given a 1942 model car to ride in, fully equipped with a long distance rifle, riot gun, two way radio and other standard police car equipment. They were heralded by *The Call* as "the first Negro detectives on the force since the police department went under state control in 1939."

Jordan and Warren's achievements shared the *Call*'s attention with the arrival in Kansas City of Corporal Joe Louis, enormously popular heavyweight boxing champion of the world, on his way to Fort Riley. Louis's enlistment in the army soon after Pearl Harbor, along with his

decisive defeat of Max Schmeling, who somewhat unfairly got tagged as representing Nazi Germany, promoted him to iconic status in America for both white and black citizens. Soon after his arrival at Fort Riley, Louis competed in the Hope of America golf tourney in Kansas City, finishing second to De Arthur Gray. A week later, with characteristic grand generosity, he gave a party for all the troops in the Ft. Riley area. Over 2,500 attended.

These events give context to a story Tom Webster later told in a talk commemorating the heritage of 18th Street and Vine in 1984: “I remember one afternoon when Leon Jordan, Joe Lewis [sic] and Satchel Paige congregated on the corner. Joe had just been inducted in the army and was stationed at Fort Riley. Satchel was pleading with Leon to spare Joe of the ‘wuppin’ he would give him if he kept on challenging him to a game of pool in Jones’ billiard parlor. Satchel said, ‘Tell the man I got my name in the record book. In the big book at that.’ Joe inquired what he was talking about when Satchel informed him that his name was in the Bible which said that he was known as ‘John, the pooler.’ Satchel then proceeded to give Joe the lesson and the whipping he had promised him.”⁴⁷

The work Jordan and Warren did together over the years had a few lumps as well as their many notable victories. There are two contrasting cases very close together in time which give revealing glimpses of their work. On October 28, 1943, Arthur M. Florence was shot after he was robbed. Jordan and Warren were off duty at the time, but were called at their homes and immediately came to the scene. They had been looking for David Lee Saffold, 14 years of age, for other recent burglaries. They soon found and arrested Saffold. He readily admitted two other

⁴⁷ Undated Orchid Jordan interview, Black Archives of Mid-America; F. S. Smith to Chief L. B. Reed, Nov. 16, 1940; Theodore Puge to Chief L. B. Reed, Sept. 27, 1940; Memo from Chief L. B. Reed, May 12, 1941; Thomas A. Webster, to Sergeant Dobbs, July 18, 1941; Harold Anderson to Thomas Webster, Aug. 27, 1941, KCPD Police File, LJC; *Call*, July 3, 17, 24, 31, 1942; Thomas A. Webster Address at 2nd Annual 18th and Vine Streets Heritage observance, July 5, 1984, Black Archives.

burglaries and named Warnell Calvin Bruce as an accomplice, but he denied any knowledge of the robbery and shooting of Florence.

A warrant was issued for Bruce's arrest. Meanwhile the police received a tip that they might find something that would assist in the Florence murder at 13th and Euclid. An officer went there and returned with a man's leather jacket. After Bruce was arrested he was asked if he recognized the jacket. He identified it as belonging to Saffold. Jordan and Warren took the jacket to other friends of Saffold who confirmed the jacket belonged to Saffold. Saffold was then brought into police custody from the Parental Home where he had been detained and questioned by Jordan and Warren. Within an hour he admitted the crime and then led them to where he had thrown the murder weapon away. It was found. A complete and conclusive statement was then taken.

Chief of Detectives, E. L. Kellerstrass then wrote to Chief of Police, Richard R. Foster: "This is not the first time these two detectives' work has been outstanding. On one occasion, July 13, 1942, they were both cited before the Board of Police Commissioners for their efficiency in the solving of a murder committed in Johnson County, Kansas, which occurred July 4, 1942. I have several other letters in their personnel file commending their good work. Therefore, I heartily recommend these officers receive a letter of commendation from you personally, as well as from the Board of Police Commissioners; also an increase in salary."

Kellerstrass made his recommendation on Nov. 2, and on Nov. 19 Jordan and Warren were given letters of commendation and a \$10 raise per month. That same day their letters of commendation and raises were rescinded because of an investigation into another incident that began Oct. 23, just a few days prior to Florence's murder.

Patrolman Emmett Walls, who lived in a flat at 2818 Highland, a floor below Cliff Warren and his family, ran into a young man, Louis Buggs, whom Walls had known while he was a coach at Bubbles Klyce's Gateway Club. According to Walls's statement, Buggs hailed Walls and regretted he hadn't seen Walls sooner, for he had just pawned a ring that he would rather have left with Walls for the same amount of money. After some conversation Walls agreed to help the young man by having him redeem the pawned ring, then giving him some money while Walls held the ring. Buggs introduced Walls to James Riley Barber, with whom he had come to Kansas City from Topeka. About the same time Walls spotted Detectives Jordan and Warren driving by and hailed them requesting a ride to the pawn shop where Buggs had pawned the ring.

Jordan and Warren readily agreed. Barber looked familiar to Jordan. He thought he knew his father from the days Jordan was in charge of a playground in Topeka. When Jordan named the man, the young men knew the family, but they were not related. However, Jordan and the young men quickly recognized that they knew others in common and Jordan gave the boys his card, identifying his present position in the Kansas City Police Department. Walls and Buggs redeemed the ring from the pawnbroker. Jordan looked at the redeemed ring and agreed it must be worth the money Walls was giving the young man to hold even though he considered it of no special value.

According to the statements of the police officers, the boys were then left and the officers returned to their regular duties. But that was not the story told by Buggs and Barber. The latter were arrested a few days later for a jewelry robbery in Topeka, which they readily confessed to. They told of then driving with two other young men to Kansas City on the 23rd and meeting Walls. But they accused Walls of shaking them down for some of the stolen jewelry. They

agreed Warren and Jordan did not witness the shake down. But they said the officers took them to police headquarters and threatened them with arrest before finally deciding to be lenient and telling them to get out of town. Buggs and Barber, however, had returned to Topeka with a great deal of jewelry that they had hidden on their persons. Their inability to explain how or why they were able to retain so much jewelry after Walls had shaken them down damaged the credibility of their story.

Jordan insisted he had known Walls all his life and couldn't believe that he had any suspicion the ring he redeemed from the pawn shop was stolen. Jordan's loyalty to his friend may have been stronger than his better judgment. But that was not cited in his reprimand. He was cited for conduct unbecoming an officer in that "you did at request of Officer Emmett Walls. . .use police equipment for personal and private business." The pay increase and commendation that had been recommended for both Warren and Jordan in the Florence murder case were then cancelled.

Nevertheless, Thomas Webster wrote to Chief Richard B. Foster on Nov. 1, 1943: "I have had occasion several times to send to your predecessors letters praising the performance by Detective Leon Jordan and Detective Clifford Warren. Again during this past week these two detectives, with hardly any clues, were able to quickly solve a crime which might have engendered considerable feeling in the community if it had not been solved quickly. The manner in which these detectives have performed their services, confirmed long standing opinion and belief that Negro policemen are qualified and competent to handle most of the problems, particularly racial involvements, in the Negro community.

"They can elicit both respect of their fellow officers, as well as respect on the part of the citizens of the community in the enforcement of the law. Many metropolitan communities have seen fit

to elevate Negro policemen to positions of commanding officers. Again, as I have expressed to your predecessors, I believe either of these two men are qualified to act as commanding officers of Flora Avenue Station and that such consideration should be given to Negro policemen who can perform in such a fashion as the two above mentioned have rendered service.”⁴⁸

Late in 1945 Jordan and Warren broke another case that the community enjoyed reading about. For many months there were a string of robberies in the Coleman Heights area that went unsolved. Then a stolen watch was pawned and identified. White detectives arrested Winfred Mitchell and accused him of the robberies. But he indignantly protested his innocence, insisting he had pawned the watch for his brother, Edward. After considerable questioning Jordan and Warren were brought in on the case. Learning that Edward had served time for burglary, they quickly shifted their suspicions. Edward then tried to give them another suspect, Yancey Allen, by telling them all the fine points that Allen had taught him about burglary. Despite the fact that Edward indicated Allen could not be found, they located Allen and brought him in to confront his accuser.

Allen was indignant that Edward had tried to finger him. Edward quickly confessed to being the Barefoot Bandit. Jordan and Warden took Edward on a tour of the neighborhood, and Edward soon warmed up to give them a detailed commentary on the 26 homes he had robbed, even though only 21 had been reported, in some instances pointing to the garage roofs where emptied wallets could still be found. He had robbed for the fun of it. He spent the cash he stole quickly to have a good time. But it was his method that was intriguing. Once the robberies

⁴⁸ Interdepartment communication, Oct. 23, 1943, fr Lt. Rex L. Witka to Chief of Detectives, E. L. Kellerstrass; letter fr. Kellerstrass to Chief Richard B. Foster, Nov. 2, 1943; Statements recorded Nov. 4, 1943, from Lewis C. Bugs, James R. Barber, Joseph Krashin, Manford Rogers, George Nowak, Ray B. Minnick, Robert L. Jones, William Kenner, Dominic S. DeFeo, and George Mall; and on Nov. 5 from Leon Jordan, Emmett Harold Walls, and Clifford Warren; Investigative report, Nov. 13, 1943, from E. L. Willoughby to Chief Kellerstrass; letter from Thomas Webster to Chief Foster, Nov. 1, 1943; all from KCPD file, LJC.

became known people in the neighborhood began carefully to keep their homes well lighted, but this proved a mistake. The Barefoot Bandit targeted only well lighted homes where he could see the people inside. He made sure which rooms they were in before he slipped quietly into other parts of their homes and made off quickly with what jewelry and valuables he could obtain. The neighborhood was happy the bandit was caught and that the genial, but persistent questioning of the detectives had given them a story that would be told and retold for some time.

Albert Reddick was one of many police recruits trained by Leon Jordan. Jordan later invited Reddick to accompany him to Liberia to help train the Monrovia police force. Reddick told a story about a Jordan who was not always so congenial. He remembered sitting in a liquor store, one of Leon's favorite spots, when a man came in, bought a bottle and left rather hurriedly. Leon asked if Reddick noticed anything peculiar. He had only noted the man's haste. Leon then told him the man was carrying a gun and ordered him to take the guy and get the gun. He told Reddick he would back him up. Reddick went after the guy and as he caught up with him held his police badge in his left hand while holding his drawn gun with the other. He shoved the badge in the man's face and arrested him without serious problem. But after the arrest Leon took him to a nearby field where they could be alone and gave him hell for having one hand occupied with his badge. That was dangerous. Keep both hands free when confronting an armed man. Identify yourself as a policeman with words, *but keep both hands free*. Nevermind doing it like the movies. Your own life is too important. He told him he would personally shoot him if he ever saw him do that again. Leon was about twenty years older than Reddick.

While the detective work of Jordan and Warren drew much praise and was celebrated in the black press, it is clear they had to work within an environment severely restricted by racial segregation. A black officer could not arrest a white citizen. He had to refer the matter to a

white officer. Both Jordan and Warren were designated to work with black youth. Their work with young people was constructive and they clearly learned from it. But it was also a way of racially pigeon holing their activities. When Tom Webster recommended that both officers were capable of greater administrative authority, he suggested that either was qualified to head the Flora station, a station whose work was largely confined to the black community. He was deliberately challenging the assumption that black policemen had to be supervised by white officers.⁴⁹

In early 1947, as Jordan's actual police work in Kansas City was coming to a close, his marriage also was in trouble. On January 14th he named his aunt Josephine Wright beneficiary for his retirement package. On March 4th, Leon Jordan, plaintiff, was granted a divorce from Orchid Jordan for "allegations not specified in the record." Since the Jordans were quietly remarried June 5, their divorce and remarriage was known only to a few who were then close friends.

Jackie Rhodes remembers an incident that seems likely to have been the particular trigger for the divorce. Orchid had a friend in Denver, John Kigh, from an old and respected family. During one of their visits there, Leon overheard a telephone conversation between Kigh and Orchid and became furiously angry. He apparently held a deeply ingrained double standard of sexual behavior. He literally beat up Orchid. Alene Walker also remembered that the Jordans had divorced and that Leon had beaten Orchid. Neither Rhodes nor Walker were very clear on dates, but the divorce is a matter of public record.

It was during this brief period of divorce that Leon was contacted by Malcolm B. Magers of Plattwood, Missouri, at the request of Col. John B. West of the U. S. Public Health Mission in

⁴⁹ *Kansas City Call*, Nov. 30, 1945; *Kansas City Star*, Nov. 26, 1945; Phone interview with Albert Reddick, Sept. 24, 2004.

Liberia. Jordan told the *Star* that he had met West at Howard University when he was in law school and West in medical school. He added that Mrs. West was a native of Kansas City. This only hints at the significance of Mrs. West's relation to the Jordans. As noted earlier, Col. John West married Muriel Stewart, the daughter of Mayme [or Mamie] Jones Stewart, who in turn was the close friend of Leon's mother, Lena Rivers, and his aunt Sallie Jordan in the 1890's. All three were founding members of the Inter-City Dames. Orchid Jordan later became a member. Muriel Stewart West probably did as well. It seems likely that West, prior to her husband's choice of Jordan for the Liberian position, had a more significant relation to the Jordans than her husband did. In addition John West's brother, Dr. Charles West did his internship at Kansas City's General Hospital, so West had many ties to Kansas City and Leon was probably much better known to him than Jordan's public comments indicate.

Jordan negotiated with West a two year contract to reorganize and train Liberia's police force. The contract was signed and dated June 3, two days before Leon and Orchid quietly remarried in Olathe with Orchid's brother, Ramsey, as witness. Leon's contract indicated he was to begin work in Liberia, January 1, 1948. In addition to salary he was offered passage to Liberia for both him and his wife, free living quarters and medical service. The Liberian contract apparently offered not only a new career opportunity, but an opportunity to restore the marriage between Leon and Orchid. Leon's physical abuse of Orchid seems to have been an impulsive uncharacteristic event. After returning to Kansas City from Liberia, Leon resumed his early philandering, but consistently managed to remain on friendly terms with the women in his life as well as his wife even after his various romantic relations were ended. There seems to have been no other instance of physical abuse.

On May 7, 1947, Jordan requested two years leave of absence. In his request he expressed some urgency because the Liberian Centennial celebration was to be held July 26, and it had been suggested that he fly to Liberia as soon as possible. Apparently this was before his final contract indicating a January 1 start was worked out. Chief J. W. Johnson made a recommendation to the board on May 2, even before Jordan's written request, that Jordan be granted leave. In his report to the board he also indicated that Detective Jordan had been selected from a group of six officers throughout the country who had applied for this position.

On August 29 Jordan was named an Acting Sergeant, effective September 1, 1947, and advised to take the next Sergeant's examination. He was to be promoted to Detective Sergeant upon completing that exam with a satisfactory grade. The Board of Police Commissioners granted Jordan one year's leave, the maximum by rule at the time, beginning December 15, 1947. There seemed to be both an implicit understanding that his leave could be extended, but that he would at some future time return to the department..

Late in November the local NAACP sponsored a going-away party for the Jordans at the Street Hotel. More than a hundred people, including many public officials, attended. The *Call* described it as "a farewell tribute to a well known and well liked police officer." But, "It accomplished more than that. It offered a rare occasion for an evaluation of the merits of the present police administration, a review of the mistakes of the past administrations, and an opportunity to offer suggestions for the improvement of future administrations.

"It was also a graphic demonstration, unparalleled in the history of Kansas City, of friendly relations between police officers and members of a minority group.

"That a testimonial to Leon Jordan should embrace all these aspects was not out of harmony with the intended purpose of the affair. The honoree himself had become symbolic of the transition of

the police force from a mere ‘political football’ to one of the most modern and efficient departments in the country.”

Chief Johnson “credited Jordan with much of the improvement in race-relations and recounted the story of Jordan’s development as a police detective.” Leon was presented with a pen and pencil set and Orchid fittingly presented with an orchid. Three of Leon’s aunts were present, Mrs. John Wright, Mrs. Callie Edwards, and Mrs. Sallie Love. The previous night the Jordans were given a party by their fellow police officers at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Allen. Mrs. Allen was a policewoman. The Jordans were given a pair of binoculars as a gift.⁵⁰

This was a significant and adventuresome moment in Leon Jordan’s career as a policeman. Neither he nor the police department knew what this venture portended for his career, but it is clear that at this point he started with both hearty good will and healthy cooperation and support from the department. The black community of Kansas City was proud of his achievements and looking forward to hearing more of his adventures in distant Liberia. He was walking the walk of his father and grandfather, but with his own distinctive gait.

⁵⁰ Divorce and marriage records, LJC; Interview with Jackie Rhodes, March 3, 2007; interview with Alene Walker, Sept. 15, 2004; KCPD file, LJC; *Your Kansas City and Mine*, p. 90; clipping from the *Kansas City Star*, circa June, 1947, LJC; *Kansas City Call*, July 20, 1947 and Nov. 28, 1947.

VIII

Liberia

Soon after the United States entered World War II, Liberia became strategically important to our war effort. By that time Germany controlled much of Europe and northern Africa. The Japanese had aggressively driven south to gain control of the sources of rubber in the Asian and Pacific region. Hence Firestone's productive Liberian rubber plantation became a significant resource for a valuable war commodity. President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited Monrovia on his return from an important wartime conference at Casablanca in 1943, highlighting Liberia's importance. An airfield started by the Firestone Company to serve its rubber plantation, was soon turned into Roberts Field by the U. S. Army Air Force. It became one of the largest and most important airports in a string of trans-Atlantic international bases on the vital transit route from America via Brazil and Monrovia to the middle and far East. Pan-American Airways established a base there during the war and Orchid Jordan worked for Pan-Am during the Jordans' final years in Liberia.

Several important agreements were reached between the Liberian and American governments during the war period, including a Mutual Defense Agreement, signed June 8, 1943. U. S. troops entered Liberia soon after Pearl Harbor. Liberia declared war against the Axis powers January 28, 1944. America agreed to develop the port of Monrovia, and in 1944 a Lend-Lease agreement was signed providing for a Foreign Economic Assistance Administration to be sent to Liberia. Col. John West, who married Muriel Stewart and hired Leon Jordan to head Liberia's police force, was part of that administration.

The war years made a huge difference in Liberia's economy. Before the war Liberia suffered under the burden of large obligations to the Financial Corporation of America, which was controlled by the Firestone Company. With the extraordinary demand for Firestone's rubber the financial position of Liberia improved markedly. From 1940-1945 exports increased from 2 million dollars to over 6 million dollars. Liberia's bonded indebtedness decreased notably.

On January 3, 1944, President William V. S. Tubman began a presidential rule that would last for more than twenty-seven years. He was the choice of President Edwin J. Barclay who had held office for the previous thirteen years. Attorney General, C. Abayomi Cassell, who signed Leon Jordan's contract, was one of Tubman's closest advisors from the beginning. There was a rich interplay of American and Liberian governmental institutions already set up when Leon and Orchid Jordan arrived in Liberia December 11, 1947.⁵¹

While Jordan was still negotiating his new position, Liberia celebrated one hundred years of its existence as a nation during Centennial Week, beginning July 21, 1947. When Jordan first requested leave from the Kansas City Police Department, he expressed some urgency, indicating that the Liberian government wanted him to fly to Monrovia to be present for the Centennial Week. It didn't happen because Jordan feared flying.

The Jordans made their way to New York late in 1947, stayed in the Theresa Hotel, and sailed for Monrovia November 26 on board the *African Grove*. Before sailing, however, Jordan gave an interview to *The Voice of the People* in which he describes his early adult life and police service. The theory behind his police work "is that prevention of crime is better than punishing the criminal; that a bad environment produces the criminal, and that 'third degree' methods should have no place in police activity." He was proud of having founded American Youth

⁵¹ J. H. Mowrer, "The Republic of Liberia," pp. 299-301; Tuan Wreh, *The Love of Liberty*, p. 11.

Clubs in Kansas City as early as 1939 that sponsored sports, dancing, and other recreational events for young people.

By letter Jordan told his former partner, Cliff Warren, that he and his wife arrived in Monrovia, December 11. After visiting Dakar and Freetown, Jordan described Liberia as more “Americanized” than the other African nations he had visited. He found a former Wilberforce classmate now a wealthy rubber plantation owner in Cape Palmas. He was learning the Bassa and



Kru languages so as not to be misunderstood, and the men of these tribes should make good policemen because of their fearlessness. When he ventured into the hinterlands, he wanted “someone with me who can whip a leopard with a switch.”

Noting the elaborate rules of protocol, he said he had been officially presented to His Excellency, William V. S. Tubman, President of Liberia, and The Honorable C. V. O. King, acting secretary of state. He was impressed with the political knowledge of the cabinet members and the business-like manner in which the government is run. He was also very pleasantly surprised that white Americans “are quite congenial and display no resentment to the dark-skinned rulers. . . .you would never believe Bilbo lived in America.”

In March former American Secretary of State, Edward R. Stettinius, arrived in Monrovia with a grandly ambitious economic development plan. Stettinius had accompanied Roosevelt to Yalta and was impressed with Tubman when he met him on the presidential stop in Monrovia.

He became the Administrator of the various Lend-Lease programs and directly involved in the construction of the harbor of Monrovia. On this visit to Monrovia he came with an ambitious Statement of Understanding embodying an idea for developing Liberian resources that would benefit the Liberian people and still be attractive to American investors. The Liberian Company was set up with representatives from the Liberian government and business and social leaders from the U. S. It was modeled on the success of the Firestone Plantation, but designed with more safeguards for the Liberians and more input from social leaders who were not just interested in economic profits. Regrettably a little more than a year and a half later, Oct. 31, 1949, Stettinius suffered a heart attack and died suddenly at his sister's home in Connecticut. He was only 49 years old. Without his leadership his plan slowly disintegrated. Jordan worked very hard on the March state dinner and was rewarded by an invitation to dine privately with President Tubman at the Executive Mansion.

That same month back in Kansas City, Jordan was among 23 Negro residents honored by the Urban League for "outstanding contributions to racial advancement in 1947." Jordan contacted the KCPD about supplies he had ordered and the next night spoke with his brother-in-law, Harvey Ramsey. His uncle, John Wright remembered Jordan's birthday with a radiogram May 5: "Anniversary congratulations family well." St. Augustine church recorded that Jordan's aunt, Kate Jordan Bufkin, died August 4th. Apparently she had married into the Bufkin family even as her older sister had done.⁵²

On September 19, President Tubman married Antoinette Padmore, granddaughter of the late President Arthur Barclay. It was to be a vividly celebrated event and guests were invited from around the world. A plane carrying the French High Commissioner of West Africa and

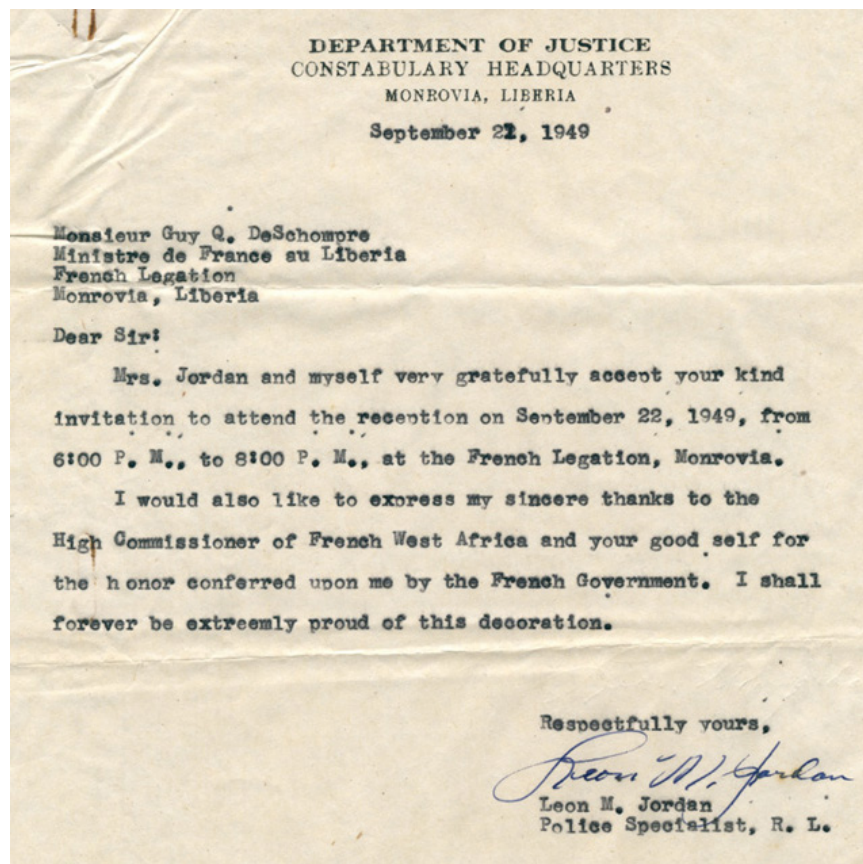
⁵² May 7, 1947 request for leave of absence, KCPD file, LJC; Dec. 6, 1947 *The Voice of the People*; Jan. 30, 1948, *Kansas City Call*; R. Earle Anderson, *Liberia, America's African Friend*, pp. 255-259; President's invitation, March 30, 1948, LJC; March 20, 1948, *Kansas City Times*; March 12, 1948, *Kansas City Call*.

sixteen other French officials made a forced landing in the vicinity of Little Bassa on their way to Roberts Field. A distress call went out, and a combined rescue attempt was organized by French officials, Firestone specialists, and Jordan's police. After a day of frustrating difficulties all of the plane's passengers were eventually rescued.

Jordan singled out three of his men and one woman for special praise, but recommended letters of commendation for each member of the rescue mission. On December 8, 1948, President Tubman conferred on Jordan the distinction of the Chevalier

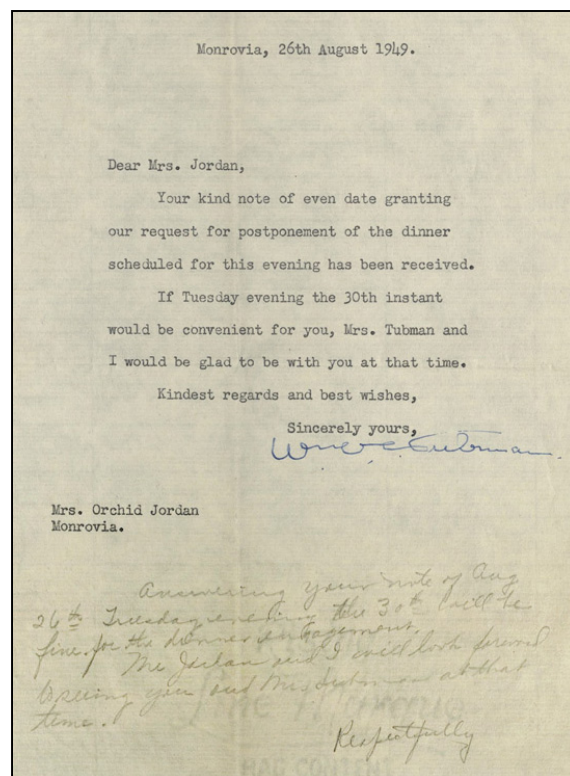


of the Star of Africa in the Parlors of the Executive Mansion. France showed its gratitude to Jordan a year later when she awarded him *la croix d'OFFICIER de l'ordre de l'Etoile Noire du Benin*, in the presence of President William V. S. Tubman at a reception at the French Legation, September 22, 1949. Attorney General Cassell then gave a garden party in Jordan's honor, November 25, 1949, at the Government Square. Jordan was presented with photos of the occasion by T. W. Dupigny-Leigh, Sr., Social Secretary to President Tubman.



A card saved by the Jordans indicates that President Tubman and his new wife sent the Jordans two pieces of their wedding cake. Almost a year after their marriage the Tubmans agreed to dine at the Jordans' home with Attorney General Cassell's wife. The dinner was originally set for August 26, 1949, but the Tubmans then requested it be postponed until August 30. Orchid agreed.

Not all Jordan's new job concerns were so high profile. Among the Jordan papers are numerous plaintive requests for jobs and money



from local citizens in need. But on Jordan's forty-second birthday, Sgt. J. W. Yates, brought him a few eggs "for you are sick, and know that you need them." Another of his men prefaced his request with a colorful personal story: "Sir, I am very sorry to say that my wife takes all my clothes, pots, and ran away with it. A cousin of mine told me that she is to Saniquellia with one man. So I wish to say please give me a pass for two or three weeks to go there and come back. I hope there will be no objection. As my happiness depends upon your favorable reply. Thanks yours obedient servant, Africa Bull."⁵³

A month after the rescue of the downed French officials, Jordan gave a talk before the Montserrado Sunday School Union at Saint Thomas Church. He noted that the police reorganization he was presently engaged in was a program "conceived and sponsored by the Department of Justice under the Honorable C. Abayomi Cassell." A Departmental Order issued February 4, 1948, gave Jordan sweeping powers as Police Specialist to reorganize the police, reporting directly to Attorney General Cassell and subject only to his authority. He was attempting to bring the Bureau up to accepted modern standards. The examples he chose to illustrate his goals reveal the influence of his experience during the reorganization of the Kansas City Police Department following the fall of Pendergast. "The science of fingerprinting, firearms identification, photography and other advanced scientific methods of enforcement agencies are goals toward which we are daily working."

He listed four goals for his Bureau: (1) Protection of life and property, (2) Preservation of the Peace, (3) Apprehension of offenders, and (4) Prevention of crime. The last he described as "one of the newer responsibilities of the police. It is more and more clearly recognized that a

⁵³ Jordan's report to Cassell, September 18, 1948, letter to Jordan from French Minister Guy De Schompre, French, December 8, 1948, letter to Jordan from J. Emory Knight, Secretary to President Tubman, September 16, 1949, letter from F. W. Dupigny-Leigh, Sr., note from Dupigny-Leigh regarding Tubmans' accepting dinner invitation, August 15, 1949, Sgt. Yates' letter, May 15, 1948, Africa Bull letter, October 6, 1948, LJC.

constructive approach to the crime problem must go to its very roots. That is, factors in the community life which create the criminal and lead him to indulge in anti-social behavior.” The mix of international diplomats and business people then working in Monrovia seems to have been a



particularly congenial lot. On August 31, 1948, Helen Mayer invited Orchid Jordan to a lunch for Muriel West. Col. West’s wife, with her strong ties through her mother to the Jordan family, was already an established part of this society and almost certainly helped provide entrée for the Jordans. They were quickly invited to cocktails, bridge, farewell and welcoming parties. Orchid seemed to blossom in this trans-racial society. But she also did yeoman’s service as her husband’s right hand in organizing the police force. She was soon to head the photography department of the Bureau, and Attorney General Cassell presented her with an award of \$500 for organizing the police-work in fingerprinting. While she now had a significant role of her own to play, both socially and economically, she and her husband seemed a functioning team, their marriage once again a source of mutual satisfaction.

On Nov. 15, 1948, Jordan requested an additional fourteen months leave, twelve months to



complete his contract with Liberia and two months leave to return home. "I have been fortunate in receiving an invitation from French Minister Guy de Schompre, Monrovia, to visit the French Police in Conakry, Dakar, and Paris. I also have hope of visiting one or two other English Colonial Police and London before my return home."⁵⁴

The Jordans's second year in Liberia apparently was a continuing building process for his police force capped by the recognition I have already mentioned by the French Minister and the Jordans' growing friendship with President Tubman and his wife. But another notable American arrived in Monrovia late in November, and a scrapbook of extraordinary photographs that the Jordans kept of their years in Liberia reveals a significant record of her later visit.

Pearl Primus was already attracting considerable praise as a dancer when she appeared as a guest soloist on the "African Dance Festival" program held at Carnegie Hall, December 13, 1943. It was the first dance project of the African Academy of Arts and Research. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune spoke during the intermission in support of the project. After a summer of travel and research in the American South--Primus was a student of anthropology as well as dance--she made her Broadway debut on October 4, 1944, featuring by then her well known solos, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *Strange Fruit*, *Hard Time Blues*, and *African Ceremonial*. Almost four years later while dancing at Fisk University, Dr. Edwin Embree, President of the Rosenwald Foundation gave Primus the very last grant of the foundation to study in Africa for nine months. Embree had also been a board member of the Liberia Company that was to grow out of the Stettinius plan.

⁵⁴ Motterrado School Union talk, Oct. 22, 1948, Departmental Order, February 4, 1948, Woody L. Taylor's column, *The Afro-American*; Letter from Jordan to Chief Johnson, November 15, 1948, KCPD file; all in LJC.

On her first trip to Africa, Primus traveled to Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Angola, Cameroons, Liberia, Senegal, and the Belgian Congo. Among the Primus papers archived at the American Dance Festival at Duke University is a typescript of what was her diary. It describes her leaving the S.S. Delmundo, which had carried her from Lagos, on September 5, 1949, in the company of Ida George bound for Ida's home in Monrovia, a home that seemed very comfortable "to one whose eyes have grown used to mud huts and thatched roofs." That day "white as pale milk," the rain "poured, tumbled and galloped from the sky." It grew feet and ran in sharp diagonals.

After meeting John George, Ida's husband and Carl Mebane, she was to be taken to the home of Loyce Woodford, where she was questioned about her trip. "In the muddle which their faces represented I remember Loyce, Ambassador and Mrs. D[udley], Orchid [Jordan], John and Ida George. John and Ida George were good friends of the Jordans. There are photos of them in the Jordan scrapbook.

The Jordan scrapbook also contains a number of remarkable photos of Primus dancing for and with native Liberians while she records their music and movements with camera and recording equipment. While the Jordans left no written record of their association with Primus, the remarkable photographic record suggests that Leon Jordan was assigned to guide Primus into the interior to meet local leaders and that he recorded her activities with his own camera.



In 1948 Primus published an account in *Vogue* of her beginning travels and research in western Africa. Of Liberia she describes the women of Zor, “their heads covered with tremendous headdresses of sheepskin, their ankles rounded with tiny bells, turning and stamping the earth to greet me.” They sing and dance her into the village, where the talking drums herald her arrival. Then a new sight: “Giants in skirts of raffia, faces masked, legs as long as the trunks of palms, come whirling down the path. These are the fearsome Devils. These are the country Devils, the greatest dance figures in Liberia. I am honoured above all men, for they have come to greet me. They will dance me before the chief.”

“Chief Mongru sits quietly smiling. His teeth are red from chewing the Kola nut. He parts his lips. . . ‘Anything you ask is yours, since you are my daughter.’ And so, again I have become part of a village. . . a village with round houses lying like mushrooms in the clearing. Tonight there will be no sleep. The Devils will sing, the drums will play, and I shall join the circle of the dance. . .swaying and chanting till morning comes.” Chief Mongru is probably the conspicuous chieftain in the inauguration photos in the scrapbook. He was a leading political figure in Liberia as well as a sponsor of Primus. The Jordans’ scrapbook also contains many photos of devil dancers.

After her visits to the tribal areas, Primus gave a command performance for President Tubman at the Executive Pavilion, November 25, just before she left Liberia. President Tubman congratulated Primus on “the grandeur, magnificence, sublimity, beauty and perfection with which you performed and executed your program last night.” He thought it noteworthy that in such short space of time she was able “to make yourself the possessor of those of our Liberian culture with which you have come in contact and reproduce them on the stage in such artistic style.” On December 2nd, he decorated her with The Star of Africa.⁵⁵

Shortly after Primus gave her command performance, the Jordans took a leave from their duties in Liberia and returned to Kansas City to work with the police department to enhance their skills for police work in Liberia. While they were still in Kansas City Pearl Primus and her

⁵⁵ Richard C. Greene, “(Up)Staging the Primitive, Pearl Primus and ‘the Negro Problem’ in American Dance,” included in Thomas F. De Frantz, *Dancing Many Drums*, pp. 113, 115-117, 120; John O. Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance*, pp. 113-114; John Martin, “The Dance in Liberia,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1960, sec. 2, p.6; Typescript from Box 2, Writings—Africa, and copy of letter from Tubman to Primus, Box 3, Printed Materials, 1850, Primus Papers, American Dance Festival, Duke University; “In Africa,” *Vogue*, Oct. 15, 1948, p. 99. See prints numbered, 1801, 1901-1912, 2001-2012, & 2201-2212, Jordan Scrapbook, LJC. The first hint that the dancer in the Jordan scrapbook was Pearl Primus came to me from Dorothy Madelin Davis. Leon and Orchid became godparents to Davis in Monrovia in 1953. Her parents, Griff and Muriel Davis, were close friends to the Jordans. Griff Davis was an internationally known photographer hired by the American Embassy in Monrovia. Among the collection of her father’s photos that Dorothy still holds is a photograph of Orchid giving Pearl Primus a congratulatory kiss.

troupe of dancers gave a performance titled, “Dark Rhythms” at the University of Kansas City Playhouse. One of the dances she performed was titled, “Fanga,” an authentic dance from the interior of Liberia, originally done to honor a chief. “Fanga” became an iconic dance for Primus and a much repeated and reinterpreted dance by others in subsequent years. It seems highly likely that the Jordans were involved in arranging that appearance. But surprisingly there is no notice in the *Kansas City Call* of the performance. There are, however, notices of the coming performance in the *Kansas City Star* and the university student newspaper, and the *Star* also noted that the performance was attended by a near capacity crowd. Miss Primus also “explained the significance of the movements and related some of her own experiences while in Africa.”

The Jordans became avid collectors of African art early in their Liberian residence. There are many photos of them with their collection in their scrapbook. After they returned to Kansas City in 1956 they showed their collection at special events and at their church. They loaned a pair of carved elephant tusks to an African art exhibit at the Kansas City Public Library, and eventually Orchid opened a shop selling African art next to the Green Duck Tavern on Prospect. There is no hard evidence that Pearl Primus, with her enormous enthusiasm for the African roots of human culture, influenced the Jordans’ interest in collecting, but it seems likely. The Jordans’ interest in African culture, however, is relatively modest compared to the intense historical and spiritual enthusiasm Pearl Primus felt for Africa as the root culture of all humanity.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ University of Kansas City Playhouse program, Box 3, Printed Materials, Primus Papers; April 23, 1950, *Kansas City Star*; *The Dance Claimed Me*, pp. 88-93.



The Jordans left Liberia by ship, arriving in Kansas City late in December, 1949.

Meanwhile Jacob Browne wrote: “No longer can the label that the Monrovia police force is incompetent and inefficient apply. Today, the Monrovia Police constabulary conforms to all modern police forces, and there is a marked and rapid change of improvements seen daily.”

Jordan is credited with effecting the change. “When Jordan took over, persons looked down on the police force, and policemen were scoffed at and termed in local parlance ‘ballah.’ Today, we see college graduates, high school graduates, women, as well as school boys as part of an efficient police force. The Monrovia force comprises 180 men and 12 women.” A police academy has been established where fingerprint identification and classification, lifting and preservation of fingerprints, first aid, criminal law with evidence, ballistics and fire arm instructions, and traffic control are taught.

Browne refers to the police role in the rescue of the passengers of the downed French plane and gives Orchid credit for her role in teaching finger printing. He also notes the award Orchid received from Attorney General Cassell on behalf of President Tubman.⁵⁷

The Jordans remained in Kansas City from late December, 1949, until May 20, 1950. Leon officially returned to duty in Kansas City February 15, and his salary was raised to \$260

⁵⁷ A copy of Brown’s article is in LJC.

per month. But it was clear both in Kansas City and Monrovia that he would be returning to Liberia. In March Ambassador Edward R. Dudley had requested the Kansas City Police Board give Jordan another year's leave: "In addition to the splendid quality of Mr. Jordan's work, we at the Embassy feel that such an assignment will add immeasurably to the prestige of our Government here, and also strengthen the friendship between the two countries." On March 27 the Board informed Attorney General Cassell that Jordan had been granted two years of leave and if his work there was then not completed, another two years would probably be considered. This in spite of the fact that legally Jordan could only be granted one year's leave at a time.

In Kansas City Leon overcame his fear of flying and began taking lessons. Orchid trained in the police school of photography. Under the instruction of Al Wilson at Municipal Airport, Leon soloed May 10th. After he returned to Liberia a plane was purchased for his use and he became an adventurous and efficient pilot, quickly beginning to instruct his police officers there in all



the skills they needed to allow the department to extend its authority into areas of Liberia where land roads were scarce and undependable.

In 1975 Ambassador Dudley wrote to Orchid remembering Leon's flying career: "We became such good friends, (not good enough for me to get in his airplane) that he used to call me

‘Junior.’ He was truly my senior, being older, taller, and louder. Almost daily he would fly his plane over what then had become the American Embassy compound and invariably we would be in conference or meeting with scores of persons who visited the Embassy for business reasons or visitors out of sheer curiosity as to what an Embassy looked like. . . .Upon these occasions, when we were being buzzed at an altitude, I am sure of not over 150 feet, we would hear the engine of the plane go dead, then a booming voice from up above would call out, ‘Junior,’ what’s happening, then the motor would again be turned on and the plane would soar away to whatever mission awaited it.”

Flying above the American embassy, talking down to the American ambassador, no matter the obvious good humor of the occasion, must have been an exhilarating experience for Jordan. He had come far from the segregated police work he had endured in Kansas City. He not only had conquered his personal fear of flying, but now had real power and considerable personal freedom. He was feeling confident and strong. He was in deed flying high.

While the Jordans were still in Kansas City, Leon was commended for a talk he had given in March to the Association of Community Councils by Mrs. J. J. Butler, a Commissioner of the Association: “Mr. Jordan is a fine representative of the Police Force, and I think everyone there was proud that he had this



opportunity in Liberia, and proud that he could so well represent his people.” There is also a program in the Jordan collection listing Jordan along with Dr. J. E. Perry as speakers at a Missionary Mass Meeting of the Pleasant Green Baptist Church on March 12. Both he and Orchid probably gave other talks in the community during their return to Kansas City as well.⁵⁸

The Jordans returned to Liberia by way of Washington, D.C. and New York. Woody L. Taylor interviewed Jordan for *The Afro-American*: “The advances made by the natives in police work in the short space of three years have been nothing short of phenomenal.” Taylor listed the names of five top officials Jordan had brought to New York for six months training in the latest police trends: Edward Cooper, newly appointed commissioner of police; J. G. H. Davis, captain of police and an administrative assistant; George Perry, chief of detectives; Wilmut Mason, inspector of police of Grand Bassa County; and Allen Yancey, inspector of police, Maryland County, City of Harper, Cape Palmas. Taylor gave much credit to Orchid. He added that while the Jordans have been in Liberia they have seen women get the vote and become employed in office work whereby previously they remained at home and tended the babies. He also noted that Jordan had organized a fire department in Monrovia in 1949. That department had a complement of sixteen men and plans to branch out to the rest of the country.

When Taylor’s column appeared, the Jordans were already in New York purchasing supplies and uniforms for the police force in Monrovia. They sailed from New York for Monrovia on July 28.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Letter from Dudley to J. D. Milligan, March 7, 1950, letter from Board of Commissioners to Cassell, March 27, 1950, letter from Butler to Chief Johnson, March 8, 1950, KCPD file, LJC; undated newspaper clipping, but shortly after May 10, 1950, LJC; letter from Dudley to Orchid Jordan, May 2, 1975, Bruce Watkins Museum, copy, LJC; Pleasant Green Baptist Church program, March 12, 1950, LJC.

⁵⁹ Woody L. Taylor column, *The Afro American*, July 29, 1950; In April 2007 I made a presentation of some of the photos from the Jordan Scrapbook to the Liberian Studies Conference in Toledo, Ohio. Coincidentally I shared the platform with Dorothy Davis, who is the God child of Orchid and Leon Jordan, and whose father, Griff Davis, was a professional photographer and close friend of the Jordans. In the question and answer period that followed our presentation, Dr. Svend E. Holsoe, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Delaware, who was

Leon's aunt, Sallie Love, died September 18, just a few weeks after the Jordans returned to Liberia. The Jordans sent a \$500 check to Lucile Bluford to purchase a life membership in the NAACP. Theirs was the third life membership taken out in Kansas City. Leon said of the purchase: "this culminates a life-long ambition which will give to me a bit more self-respect in my yearning for first-class American citizenship." Although the membership put "a strain on the family budget," he was happy to be able to afford it. Since it followed so closely his aunt's death it was also a likely tribute to his aunt and uncle's long service to the Kansas City NAACP.

In the spring of 1951 two of Jordan's flying students, Wilmot McCritty and Philip Jargbah, soloed after four months training. They were approved for continued training in advanced aerodynamics, and two new students were chosen to begin training in a month or so. Jordan was using a Piper Vanguard Trainer, 65 H. P., but President Tubman approved the purchase of a larger plane, and the students' training might well continue for six months in the United States. *The Liberian Age* commented on Jordan's teaching skills: "The public considers Leon Jordan as a marvelous man of pluck and wits. His approach in the training of cross section mentalities is admired by all. He said that not the literary [*sic*] training alone, but a certain degree of intelligence and a scientific approach by the teacher are all required for the training work."⁶⁰

That year President Tubman was also reelected for a second term, and immediately began planning for a second inauguration. The Jordans were deeply involved in the preparations for the inauguration and in the two weeks of spectacular events that celebrated it. Orchid was now in charge of the police photography department. The photographic laboratory the Jordans established probably became the genesis of the remarkable scrapbook of over 900 photos taken

twelve years old when his parents were in diplomatic service in Monrovia, was pleased to learn why the police in Monrovia he remembered wore New York City uniforms.

⁶⁰ *The Liberian Age*, May 7 & 14, 1951, LJC.

during the Jordans' years in Liberia. Slowly some of those featured in the photos have been recognized. Dorothy Davis, God-child of the Jordans and daughter of Griff Davis, photographer and friend of the Jordans said there is a photo of Orchid and Pearl Primus



together in her father's collection. That led to the identification of Pearl Primus dancing and researching among the natives. The puzzle of identifying all those featured in the photos is, however, far from complete. What is clear is that the Jordans were talented photographers and Monrovia, particularly during President Tubman's second inauguration in 1952, provided an extraordinary setting to photograph a rich panoply of both local and international citizens.

Oden and Olivia Meeker described this inaugural celebration several months later in *The New Yorker*:

They went on for ten days and included a state dinner almost every night, a formidable series of receptions and garden parties, and daily public celebrations of one sort or another, with oratory. The new research institute of the American Foundation for Tropical Medicine, a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar laboratory donated by Harvey S. Firestone, Jr., as a memorial to his father, was dedicated during this period, and there were numerous parades, including one by six hundred Marines from the attack transport U.S.S. Monrovia, which paid a formal call on the city it was named for. The Liberian Army was issued new weapons, new uniforms, and white-enameled American

helmets for the occasion. A chef was imported from France to take care of the state dinners, and a decorator to arrange the bunting on the public buildings and along the route of the parades. From Italy came a bandmaster, who conducted a Liberian band, and an *artiglierista*, who brought his own cannon, to fire joyful salutes.... The United States delegation to the inauguration consisted of Edward R. Dudley, the Ambassador to Liberia; Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, the famous Negro educator; Major James S. Stowell, of the United States Air Force; and Carl Murphy, head of the Afro-American Company, which publishes newspapers in Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia.

Another important guest whom the Meekers do not mention is Brigadier General Benjamin Davis, America's first black army general. In October, 1951, Liberian Secretary of State Dennis invited Davis and his wife, Sadie, to be President Tubman's guests during the inauguration ceremony. The Davises came for a month. They arrived in Monrovia on board the *African Pilot* December 31, 1951. In his



journal Gen. Davis recorded that the *African Pilot* loaded two railroad cars bound for Monrovia at a stop in Charleston. The Jordans took fourteen photos of the *African Pilot* arriving in Monrovia and unloading the two railway cars. At the time Liberia had a single railroad line connecting Monrovia and the iron ore mining camp in the Bomi Hills. On the seventh day of the

inauguration ceremonies, President Tubman took his international guests there by rail to view the progress of the mining industry. There are three clear photos of Gen. Davis in the Jordan scrapbook: (1) with his wife Sadie, seated at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium on the opening day of the inauguration, (2) with Sadie talking to other guests between the formal dinner and the ball in honor of the special missions on the second evening of the inauguration, and (3, not shown) in a tired crowd at the end of a 200 mile excursion into the interior on the third day of the inauguration. Davis reports in his journal that he did not get back to his hotel until 2:30 a.m. on the next day of this excursion.



On Sunday, January 11, Davis notes that he and his wife attended a dinner hosted by Dr. J. Max Bond, President of the University of Liberia at the Executive Pavilion. Dr. Bond is brother to Horace Mann Bond, then President of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and uncle to Julian Bond of Civil Rights fame. Davis lists Mary McLeod Bethune, Mrs. Jordan (presumably Orchid Jordan), Mrs. Chandler and Mrs. King, the wife of the American ambassador, as other guests at the dinner. The Jordan scrapbook also includes many photos of Mary McLeod Bethune at various events of the inauguration, including a brunch given January 14th by the Liberian Social and Political Movement in her honor at the Pepper Bird.

There was another notable guest with Kansas City connections that the Weeks did not mention in their article. Etta Moten attended Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, next door to Kansas City, Missouri, before finishing her degree at the University of Kansas. She got her first break on Broadway in the show *Zombie*. Gershwin wrote *Porgy and Bess* with her in mind, but had some difficulty persuading her to take the part because she



was a contralto and the part called for a soprano. But once she accepted, she quickly became a striking success. Shortly after becoming the first African American to be invited to sing in the White House in 1934, she married Claude Barnett, head of the Associated Negro Press, who became an interested observer of the Liberian scene and another important guest at the Tubman inauguration. On Sunday evening, January 13th, 1952, Moten gave one of her last public performances to climax Tubman's inauguration ceremony. She continued a long life of active philanthropy and political engagement. Her 100th birthday was celebrated by more than 400 notable guests, including Studs Terkel and Harry Belafonte. The Jordan scrapbook contains four photos of her performance, one with Mary McLeod Bethune appearing on stage with her. She gave an autographed photo of herself to the Jordans reading, "Love and best wishes to Leon and Orchid, Liberia, 1952."

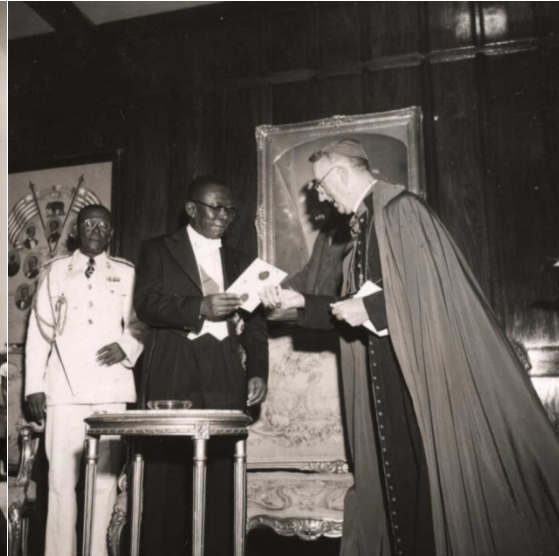
The preparations of the capital for the inauguration, the Italian *artiglierista* firing his canon, the military parades, the parade of floats, the games and dances, Pearl Primus dancing with and photographing native dancers, devil dancers performing, the parade of foreign

dignitaries greeting President Tubman, the mix of diplomatic guests and top level Liberian political leaders at President Tubman's garden party, the dedication of the American Foundation for Tropical Medicine on the Firestone Plantation with Harvey Firestone present, the arrival of the USS Monrovia and the marines instructing their Liberian counterparts in the use of weapons being



transferred, the two hundred mile trip into the interior and the meeting with the tribal chiefs, the excursion to the Bomi Hills to see the iron mines and their transporting of ore by rail to the harbor of Monrovia, all are captured by hundreds of photographs in the Jordan scrapbook, including many endearing portraits of ordinary citizens. The scrapbook is truly an extraordinary chronicle of this political event and many of its attendant activities.⁶¹

⁶¹ Oden and Olivia Meeker, "Letter from Liberia," *New Yorker*, Nov. 29, 1952, pp. 120-121; *America's First Black General*, pp. 162-163; Numbers 2910, 4501, 5412 and 6901, Jordan Scrapbook, LJC; Copy of Gen. Davis's Journal during his stay in Liberia, LJC; *Etta Moten Barnett*, *TexasEscapes.com*; Occasionally a bit of revealing humor intrudes in the Scrapbook's photos. There is a photo of a woman releasing the flag bunting that hides the bronze plate recording the name of the Antoinette Tubman Bridge on the railway trip to the Bomi Hills. I assumed the smiling woman was Antoinette Tubman and the photo was of a formal dedication of the bridge. There are other nearby photos of well dressed men apparently carrying on a dedication ceremony. But on closer examination I realized that the woman was Mrs. Hendrik Jordense and the photo was probably a good natured spoof. There are other photos not included in the scrapbook of the Jordans and their friends enjoying various party and informal activities. Some of these have identifying names written on the back side. Mrs. Jordense is often pictured and identified. Clearly she and Orchid were close friends. She came to visit the Jordans after they resumed living in Kansas City.





On March 5, 1952, Jordan wrote to Kansas City Police Chief Johnson: “We have just completed a successful Presidential Inauguration that carried an unusual amount of color and splendor. The experience was one of a life time. Even though I tried to take some of the festivities in stride I must admit that several events ‘popped’ my eye. The police received commendations from his Excellency the President, so, all in all feel rather proud of the boys.” He then requested leave for four and a half months from April 15 to September 1. His request was approved on March 22.

The tone of Jordan’s letter to Chief Johnson is significant. While it is respectful, it is also easy and confident. Jordan’s work in Liberia had gone extremely well. The Kansas City Police Department had been very supportive and apparently appreciative of his achievement. On June 2, President William V. S. Tubman capped the Jordans’ experience by making Jordan Knight Commander of the Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption.

On June 11 the Jordans flew to Dakar on the way to Lisbon. It was the beginning of a grand European vacation. They stayed two nights in Lisbon, then flew to Barcelona for ten days. From Barcelona they flew to Paris for another ten days. There is a photograph of Orchid with a caption reading, “snapped by Ollie Stewart, in his apartment, Paris, 1952,” in the Jordan Collection. Stewart was a long and noted member of the African-American community from 1949-1970 in Paris. He published



frequently in the *Baltimore Afro-American*. From Paris the Jordans flew to London for two weeks, and finally from London to Rome for a week before returning to Kansas City. There are numerous postcards recording their grand European tour, and coming on top of the dazzling events of Tubman's second inauguration, it has the feel of a planned climax to their Liberian adventure, as if they were seriously considering coming home to Kansas City for good proud of a mission accomplished.⁶²

⁶² Letter from Jordan to Johnson, March 5, 1952, and reply from Johnson, March 22, 1952, KCPD file, LJC; Leon and Orchid Jordan's passports, LJC.

IX

Resigns from KCPD, Returns to Liberia,
Then Back to Kansas City and a New Career

When Jordan returned to Kansas City Chief Johnson had been succeeded by a new chief, Bernard C. Brannon. The years of understanding support he had enjoyed from the Kansas City Police Department disappeared with the former chief. Chief Brannon probably knew little about Jordan's work in Liberia, and in any case did not know what to do with a black police officer whose administrative experience rivaled, if not exceeded his own. As the new chief decided, Jordan complained to Albert F. Hillix, a lawyer head of the police board that he was not being treated fairly because of his race. He was called before the board in November for a hearing. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, but when he reported to the Flora Avenue station he was in charge of twelve Negro patrolmen working shifts scattered around the clock. When Hillix asked if this was the kind of assignment he expected. He said it was not.

The board went into executive session to discuss his complaint and then held secret meetings. Meanwhile Ambassador Dudley wrote from Liberia requesting that Jordan be given yet another leave so that he could return to Liberia and "finish up the very excellent work he had begun." The contrast between Jordan's position in Monrovia, where he was in charge of a large police force, flying his own plane, and having access to the highest levels of government, and the limited and racially segregated post he was offered in Kansas City with only a Lieutenant's badge as compensation was clearly too great for him to stomach. Albert Hillix and Mayor William E. Kemp seemed sympathetic and challenged Police Chief Brannon, but no significant change in duties was offered.

Jordan submitted a formal letter of resignation November 24th, noting that when he reported for work on Nov. 17 he was dismayed to find “that I was to be in charge of a detail of 12 police officers, all Negroes, working on scattered shifts that cover 24 hours around the clock. The duties I am performing as a lieutenant are the same that I performed as a sergeant. In other words, I am a lieutenant in name only with no visible benefit to police efficiency.” The Jordans then quickly made reservations to return to Liberia.⁶³

It was a kick in the gut. He had reason to expect better. Older and more experienced, he probably was not quite as surprised by his home community’s provincial racial intransigence as were many younger black American veterans of World War II who returned to segregated communities after living and fighting in relatively racially liberated areas abroad. But he must have felt a similar anger. He had reason to expect better. But also, as for many of them, it fired a deep desire to somehow fight such blatant racial injustice.

He was forty-seven years old. His resignation made the personal question of a midlife career change even more momentous. He was born in Kansas City. He was proud of his family’s roots in Kansas City for three generations. He was now a very successful police department chief in another country, but he and Orchid apparently never seriously thought of living in Liberia for the rest of their lives. So the question inevitably loomed, what could he do in Kansas City. His anger and resentment and the memories of his father as an agent of racial change began to give direction for a new plan for his life.

However, before he got very far into that question, he decided to import a bit of Kansas City to Liberia. Errol Warren, the son of Jordan’s detective partner Cliff Warren, remembers that “Uncle” Leon tried to persuade his father to come to Liberia. Cliff was willing to consider

⁶³ *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1970, July 15, 1952; *Kansas City Call*, Nov. 28, 1952, May 14, 1954; letter from Dudley to Police Commissioners, Nov. 3, 1952; letter of resignation, November 24, 1952, KCPD file, LJC.

it, but his wife was a little reluctant. However, Errol felt that he was the decisive factor in their not going. When it was explained to him that he would be attending school in Switzerland and visiting his parents in Liberia only in the summer, he threw a tantrum of objection. With his parents only lukewarm, his vehement *no* proved decisive.

So Leon turned to Albert Reddick, whom he had trained as a police officer. Reddick was hired to be Jordan's assistant in the Liberian Department of Justice. Reddick and his wife went to Liberia in August, 1953, and stayed until the end of 1955, about a year after the Jordans returned to Kansas City. Their son was born in Liberia. Reddick remembered living in the nicest house he had ever lived in. It was prefabricated and made in Germany. He could see the Jordans' home from his. He consulted with Leon usually more than once daily. Their task was to turn what had been a European-type constabulary into something more like an American police force. He tried to instill independence and self-respect in his trainees.

He too learned to fly. That is how he and other senior officers moved about the country. He developed an exam to test recruits. He designed it at what he estimated as 5th grade level. All who took it failed. He then reasoned there must be something wrong with the exam. He got help from a missionary teacher and constructed a new test that worked better. But he had to submit his list of applicants who passed the test to a political superior for approval before hiring them. His political superior redlined a great number. He didn't know why. Another official then took him aside and asked him to look at the list more carefully and see if he noticed anything common among the redlined names. They all ended in *bah*. That he was told was a signal that the men were from the Kru tribe. The Kru tribe in the thirties had rebelled against the government. The official doing the redlining feared he was putting guns in the hands of potential

rebels. That was a tribal political problem of which he was unaware. Leon advised him that was just the way it was.

Reddick said trading and smuggling diamonds was common in Liberia at the time. Orchid became a travel agent for Pan American on their return to Liberia. She gave him access to Pan American passenger lists. With that information he learned about a group of Mandingos who traveled through the bush picking up diamonds and then transported them to Beirut or Amsterdam. He was able to arrest several as they boarded planes with their loot. But he was naïve about what would follow. He thought the value of the recovered diamonds could then be used to improve their police work. But he never saw any value from the recovered loot and feared that they were only turned over to other smugglers.

While Reddick and Jordan met regularly about police affairs, Reddick's description of his work suggests that Jordan let Reddick assume more and more responsibility for running the constabulary while he began thinking more and more about what he was going to do on his return to Kansas City. Jordan had established a substantial basic departmental structure. It now became Reddick's responsibility to fine tune and improve its development.⁶⁴

Jordan also persuaded his close friend Captain Cecil B. Daniel of the Kansas City Fire Department to come to Liberia to organize a modern fire fighting force in Monrovia. Daniel came to Liberia at the same time as Reddick. He organized three major pumper companies and a ladder company, completing his contract four months ahead of schedule. He returned to Kansas City in 1954.

Lloyd Daniel, Cecil's son, like Errol Warren, remembers with great warmth being carried about on "Uncle" Leon's shoulders. He also remembers his father's saying that Leon told him, "When you get back to Kansas City tell them niggers on Prospect when I get back we are going

⁶⁴ Interviews with Albert Reddick, September 24, 2004, and Errol Warren, September 24, 2007.

to cut Kansas City a new ass hole.” This is probably the strongest evidence of the anger that smoldered in Jordan following his racially insulting treatment by the Kansas City police department. Daniel understood that Leon officially got a 5% cut on the diamonds his police recovered from smugglers and that he sometimes underreported the take to increase his cut. He was now sufficiently obsessed with a new mission to disregard ordinary rules to right the wrong he had personally suffered.⁶⁵

In May, 1954, Leon briefly visited Kansas City after serving as a special courier to Washington for the Liberian government. He gave a generally upbeat picture of his Liberian police force. There were now six full-fledged pilots, all trained by him. He said Albert Reddick had done a commendable job training a detective force of 35 men. And he gave high praise to Captain Cecil B. Daniel for completing his training mission. He also stated that, “Diamond smuggling and petty larceny provide most of the work for the police force, but both these types of crime are on the decrease.”

Orchid linked her husband’s decision to go into politics to his anger at the restricted position he was offered by the Kansas City Police Department in 1952, the growing political turmoil in Liberia when they returned, and Leon’s sense of family history. By 1954 it became increasingly clear that President Tubman would be seeking another term that would require a constitutional change. The political imbroglio surrounding that move eventually sparked a challenge from former President Edwin Barclay in 1955 in a very divisive election. Orchid did not comment in detail on the political events in Liberia, but she did note that the lives of Leon’s father and grandfather instilled in him a sense of obligation for doing something for his people.

⁶⁵ Interview with Lloyd Daniel, June 22, 2007; *The Call*, May 14, 1954.

Jordan's father's death when he was thirteen had been traumatic. His enlistment in the army at the age of fifteen probably was an effort to emulate and recapture something of the prestige he remembered his father's possessing as Captain Leon H. Jordan. At thirteen he probably was also reasonably aware of his father's work managing the Autumn Leaf Club. He almost certainly noted the public acknowledgement of his father's work on behalf of the interests of his people that accompanied the front page news of his father's death, particularly the credit his father received for stopping Jim Crow legislation that would have segregated the railways and the funding of protests to congress against the E. St. Louis racial violence. He probably also was aware that his father's managing the Autumn Leaf Club involved him in activities that were considered highly improper. It seems more than likely that all these memories were working in his mind when he began to plan what he would do on his return to Kansas City.⁶⁶

The career of Col. John West, the friend and man who hired Jordan to go to Liberia, illustrates an alternative opportunity Jordan could have chosen, but apparently never seriously considered. Gen. Benjamin Davis noted that Col. West came to see him while Davis was President Tubman's guest during his second inauguration: "He is indeed a busy man. He has a banana-cocoa plantation, broadcasting station and contracts for renovating houses and making furniture. He says Muriel refuses to live in Liberia. He has already one hundred thousand banana trees and hopes to have a quarter million by April." West resigned his official posts before investing in the future of Liberia. His wife Muriel and their children took up residence in Washington, D.C. West's entrepreneurial career thrived and he also became an author, publishing *Eye for an Eye* and *Cobra Venom* with Signet Editions, before dying in an auto accident February 23, 1960, in Kumasi, Ghana. Jordan, however, seems to have made up his mind early on his return to Liberia that his future would be in Kansas City. After Jordan

⁶⁶ *The Call*, May 14, 1954; Orchid Jordan taped interview, Kansas City Black Archives.

returned to Kansas City in 1954, a string of VIP visitors from Liberia suggests strongly that Jordan had all the necessary contacts to emulate West's entrepreneurial career if he had so chosen.⁶⁷

Jordan's maternal grandmother, Virginia Jacobs, died at the home of his aunt and uncle, the Wrights in Topeka, October 1, 1954. She was ninety-two. Leon sent a cablegram from Liberia that was read at the services. The Jordans left Liberia for good a couple of months later. Then John Wright died January 8, 1955. Orchid is pictured in the *Call* at a reception in Kansas City early in January and she and Leon attended John Wright's funeral a few days later in Topeka. Wright reached the age of eighty-eight. There was ample recognition in the press of the long and storied political career of "the dean of the county courthouse."

The Jordans probably traveled directly to Houston from Topeka.

The *Call* showed them in a photograph with Dr. E. B. Perry, Jordan's boyhood friend and the son of his father's fellow officer and doctor in the Seventh Immunes, who had visited him in Topeka when



Jordan's father was in his final days in the hospital. They were houseguests of the Perrys for a week before going on to California.

After returning to Kansas City, Jordan looked over the political territory. By August he had purchased The Green Duck Tavern from Tim Moran, a veteran politician who served the Northeast bosses. Lucile Bluford reported that he had qualms about going into politics and the

⁶⁷ Gen. Davis Journal, January 16, 1952, LJC; *The Call*, March 4, 1960.

liquor business at the same time, but his friends talked him out of his squeamishness. He was never cited for violating liquor laws. Moran became his early mentor in contemporary Kansas City politics. By April of the following year, Jordan filed as a candidate for state representative of the fourth district. He would have to beat the incumbent, J. McKinley Neal, in the primary. Bruce Watkins filed for the same seat as the Republican candidate. After Neal defeated Jordan in the primary, Jordan ran as an independent and Watkins ran as the Republican candidate. Neal defeated both. And so the seed of a significant future political partnership was sewn in mutual defeat.⁶⁸

Jordan probably realized that the entrenched political machine was more formidable at that time than he first imagined. So he carefully developed his own network of political loyalties over the next few years before openly challenging the incumbent power. Meanwhile he and Orchid hosted a parade of visiting friends from Liberia. Orchid opened a shop to market their African art collection, and they showed their collection of African art to friends and other public audiences.

In September, 1955, the Jordans were surprised by a visit from Emmett Harmon, chairman of the American Liberian economic development committee. Harmon had attended an Episcopalian conference in Honolulu, but had been in the states for a month. Harmon had an undergraduate degree from Howard and a law degree from Harvard. The Jordans had a few friends in for cocktails to meet him. A curious sidenote to the *Call*'s notice of this event is that Jordan is still described as "on leave from Liberia."

In November of the following year, shortly after opening the Green Duck, Jordan was elected First Vice-President of the Board of Directors of Provident-Wheatley Hospital, the hospital that began as Perry's Sanitarium just down the street from where he grew up. Then in

⁶⁸ *The Call*, Jan. 14 & 28, 1955, Aug. 17, 1956, Nov. 30, 1956; July 24, 1970.

March, 1957, Mrs. Hendrik Jordense of Hoenderloo, Netherlands, a close friend of Orchid's, the woman who is photographed removing the Liberian flag from the official plaque on the Antoinette Padmore Bridge and other photos in the Jordan scrapbook, came calling. The "charming Mrs. Jordense" was gaily entertained at a meeting of "The Gang" at the home of Mrs. Earl D. Thomas, the wife of the distinguished educator, who would become one of a pair of Kansas City's first black councilmen elected by Freedom, Inc. in 1964. Orchid took her guest to the Police Circus and to play bridge at the home of Mrs. Rutherford Edwards. Then she gave a cocktail party for her featuring orchids at her own home. She also took her to Topeka, where they probably stayed at the home of the Wrights, but were entertained at notable breakfasts given by Mrs. Leroy Huff and Mrs. Robert Shaw as well as a barbecue supper given by Mrs. Steven Riantyre.

Just a few months later in July, 1957, the Jordans were visited by Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and Mrs. Stephen A. Tolbert, along with Mrs. Robert Kitchen of Washington, D.C. Tolbert was of the family of the Vice President of Liberia and owned many business interests in Liberia, including the Mesurabi fishing company, a hotel with a service station and an ice cream parlor, and a cocoa farm that after failing began successfully producing coffee in Gbarnga. Tolbert built his dream home in Monrovia's Congo Town, sitting on 10 acres and facing the ocean. He typically worked from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on government business and on his private industries from 2 p.m. until he finishes the day. In 1949 he established one of the best experimental agricultural stations in the nation at Suacoco, 120 miles from Monrovia.

Mrs. Kitchen was the wife of Robert L. Kitchen, who was to be sworn in soon as the United States Minister of Sudan and who had served as first assistant to Dr. John W. Davis, Country Director of the U.S. government's Point Four program directed by Harold Stassen while

the Jordans were in Liberia. Mrs. Kitchen and the Tolberts were described as having a very relaxed vacation with the Jordans.

The following month Leon's aunt, Callie Edwards, died of breast cancer. Little notice was taken of the passing of this founding member of the Inter-City Dames in the press, but her death was recorded at St. Augustine's, the church that Leon and Orchid, following a long Jordan family tradition, also attended.

In February, 1958, Orchid flew to Washington to attend Robert Kitchen's swearing in as Minister to Sudan. She then flew with the Kitchens to New York City, where she attended to business matters. It isn't clear what business matters the Jordans had in New York, but after Leon's death a fellow representative said that Orchid complained of the difficulties of sorting out the complicated money affairs Leon left in the city.

Then in August, the Jordans hosted more friends from Liberia, Major and Mrs. William Porter along with Mrs. Lawrence Greeley Lewis. Porter had been an ROTC instructor at Kansas City's Lincoln High School and his wife Yuki, was well known in Kansas City. He had recently completed a two year tour with the U.S. Military Mission in Liberia, but had retired from the army to work with the Ordinance department of Columbus, Ohio. Mrs. Lewis's husband had been a secretary in the U.S. embassy in Monrovia, but was in transition to a new embassy post in Ankara, Turkey.

In 1959 Orchid opened Joor's Cosmopolite Shop next door to the Green Duck in an effort to market the collection of African artifacts they had brought back from Liberia. Vesta Warren, the daughter-in-law of Cliff Warren, assisted her in the shop. The shop stayed open for about a year, but did not draw sufficient interest to maintain it. The Kansas City Public Library put on an exhibit of primitive art from January 15 to February 9, 1962. The Jordans loaned the library a

pair of carved ivory tusks they had bought in 1947. The library chose to display only one of the tusks. At the end of the exhibit the second tusk was embarrassingly missing. The Jordans offered a \$100 reward for it, but it was never found.

On April 30, 1962, the Jordans displayed their African collection at St. Augustine's church. Of special interest was a devil's mask worn only on special holidays, with which the natives were originally loathe to part. In Liberia this mask instilled such fear in their Liberian houseboys, the Jordans had to keep it securely locked from sight in a cupboard. The Jordans slowly closed the door on substantial social and entrepreneurial opportunities in Liberia to recreate a new chapter in the Jordan family history in Kansas City.⁶⁹

Leon and Orchid returned to Kansas City from Liberia just as a national civil rights movement was getting underway. Just before their return the Brown versus Board of Education decision of 1954 set in motion a vast national reevaluation of segregation in public schools. That same year Emmett Till,⁷⁰ a fourteen year old from Chicago, was kidnapped, brutally beaten and dumped in the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. In 1955, shortly after the Jordans returned, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her refusal grew into a bus boycott that brought Martin Luther King to national attention and to the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. President Eisenhower had to call on federal troops to enforce a court order to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. And in 1960 four black students from North

⁶⁹ *Kansas City Call*, Sept. 30, 1955; Nov. 30, 1956; March 22, July 5, July 19, & Aug. 15, 1957; Feb. 7 & Aug. 1, 1958; Feb. 6 & March 2, 1962; *Kansas City Times*, Feb. 21, 1962; *Kansas City Directories, 1959 & 1960*; Interviews with Leo McKamy, October 7, 2004, and with Cliff and Vesta Warren, Sept. 24, 2007.

⁷⁰ Alvin Sykes, activist from Kansas City, Kansas, won national recognition for his leadership in winning a federal reinvestigation into Emmett Till's murder. In 2011 Sykes succeeded in persuading the Kansas City Police Department to reinvestigate the murder of Leon Jordan. The resulting investigation largely put an end to years of rumors and questions about Jordan's murder.

Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat in at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, drawing the nation's attention to the injustice of segregated public accommodations.

Locally a citizens committee of professionals in the black community, the Community Committee for Social Action, organized in late 1958 to challenge segregation in the dining facilities of the leading department stores in downtown Kansas City. When negotiations reached an impasse, the Rev. Arthur Marshall spoke for CCSA: "This group has attempted to negotiate in a fair way, and it is now necessary to take overt action. If they walked in Montgomery, surely we can stop buying in Kansas City." In 1959 CCSA had reached an acceptable agreement on this particular issue, but it was only a beginning. On March 3, 1961, the *Call* carried a photo of Leon Jordan with other local leaders picketing a downtown department store. Jordan was firmly entrenched among the black middle class leaders of CCSA.

In early 1961 the national office of the Congress of Racial Equality sent a field officer to Kansas City to organize a local CORE chapter. He called the first meeting in my home. Most of us were white except for the Jordans and Larry and Opal Blankinship. The field rep insisted that we elect officers to become organized. Most of us did not know each other. Probably because the meeting was held at my home, someone suggested that I become chairman. I objected that I had moved into Kansas City from Detroit only a few months earlier, and I particularly did not know the black community. But at that point Leon rhetorically, if not literally, put his arm around me and said, "I'll introduce you to the black community." In retrospect, I was experiencing what Jordan's friend from the early 30's, Reed Hoover, described as Jordan's charismatic power to command a room. At a loss for words, I became chair of KC CORE, and Leon Jordan became my mentor into the black community.

A few months later Gloria Newton, who was president of the young adults of the local NAACP chapter, called and asked if I could attend a meeting in which they were planning a social action program. Gloria was not free to tell me the nature of the social action, but if I attended the meeting I would learn. I was not free to attend that meeting so I asked if I could send a representative from CORE. She readily agreed. So two representatives from CORE attended the Youth Council's planning for a drive-in at Fairyland Park on May 13, 1961, but they were sworn to secrecy and could not tell me about the action planned. Fairyland Park refused Negroes admission except for a few days at the end of the season set aside for them. It had thus become an irritating symbol of segregation. On the morning of the drive-in, Gloria called me again, told me what the plan was, and asked if I could arrange to be playing miniature golf near the entrance of Fairyland so that I could be a witness to the events that followed in case any legal action was required. I agreed.

I called A. Theodore Brown, a friend of mine and head of the Kansas City History Project, and asked if he would like to play miniature golf and witness the drive-in. He agreed. We arrived about fifteen minutes before the first cars arrived. Seven cars containing black citizens drove up to seven different entrance ways. When the drivers were refused entrance they turned off their ignitions and refused to move, in effect blocking the entrances. The Park employees fussed, the manager came out, and his lawyer and the police were called.

All this took much time, and I began to feel my usefulness as a witness was ended. Ted Brown decided to go home. However, the gathering crowd was sullenly antagonistic, and I felt some responsibility particularly to my two fellow CORE members in the cars. There were eight auto entrances to the park. The demonstrators had blocked seven. The park attendants were happily waving other customers through the eighth entrance. The success of the drive-in seemed

in doubt. I approached Rev. J. Donald Rice, who was directing the drive-in. He had been with Martin Luther King in Montgomery and had schooled the participants in non-violence, although I did not know that at the time. I volunteered to drive into the one remaining open entrance if he would provide me with a black passenger. He quickly provided me with a young student from Rockhurst College, Cecil Williams, who would later go on to law school, handle much of the administrative work in Bruce Watkins' office when the latter became County Clerk, and subsequently establish a successful private practice on his own.

As young Williams and I waited in line to enter the park, I was anxious and asked him what happened to the fifty to one hundred cars I had been told would be part of the drive-in. He was embarrassed and apologetically replied, "I guess we've got to educate my people too." I immediately recognized my question was unfair, but there was little time for discussion. A beefy attendant saw me and happily waved us in, but his attitude changed dramatically when he spotted my companion. After he called me several obscene names and invited me to step outside the car and have my ass kicked, I turned off the ignition. The silence in the car was broken by a chuckle from my partner. Tense, and not a little fearful, I was not amused and looked at him questioningly. He smiled and said, "Well, doctor, I guess you don't sit so well with your people either." My first reaction was to resent his flippancy, then the humor of the situation caught me. For that moment he and I shared the post-racial bonding we were both looking for.

We filled the final entrance and then sat until the Park's attorney returned with the warrant for our arrest. We were all taken to the Brookside jail and were prepared to spend the night under arrest. But most of the demonstrators were in their late teens, and the police warned Lee Vertis Swinton, the lawyer who then headed the NAACP, that the demonstrators would be housed in the downtown jail indiscriminately with all the prisoners usually picked up on

Saturday nights. They could not be segregated from the worst offenders. Swinton, under considerable pressure from concerned parents, many of whom were unaware of their children's commitment, then arranged for all of us to be released on our own recognizant bonds.

It was my initiation into social action and, though I didn't realize it at the time, I was in the company of a remarkable group of young people who would quickly move from supporting CCSA and the NAACP to become the youthful vanguard of Freedom, Inc. once it was formally established. This group of young people was led by a vigorous activist, Daisy L. Brown-Moore, who was a member of CCSA, the sponsor of the NAACP Youth Council, and soon to become an active member of CORE and ardent supporter of Freedom, Inc. Besides Gloria Newton and Cecil Williams, whom I have already mentioned, the group included Edith Haney-Galvin; David Carr; Phillip Curls, who would later become head of Freedom, Inc.; Melba Dudley, who would marry Phillip Curls, and herself become a city councilwoman; Bernard Powell, who would become a social activist who died young; Charles Hazley, who would become a city councilman and a Freedom leader; Harold Holliday, Jr.; who would become a lawyer like his father and a Freedom leader; and Jacqui McAfee Moore, who would later become a leading administrator in the Mid-American Research Council.

These were a significant portion of the young vanguard, whose aspirations Leon Jordan recognized and invited to become part of a community-changing black political party.⁷¹

⁷¹ Shirmer, *A City Divided*, p. 218; *Call*, March 3, 1961, Sept. 13, 2002; Interview with Jacqui Moore, Sept. 18, 2008; Interview with Cecil Williams, October 23, 2008; Farnsworth, "It Was a White Man," pp. 14-15.

X

Establishing Freedom, Inc., 1962-1966

Felix Payne, a club owner and Democratic leader who knew Jordan's father, died January 14, 1962. Payne founded and published the *Kansas City American* and in 1928 became an official of the Democratic National Convention held in Houston, Texas. He was co-owner of the Kansas City Giants in 1909 and city tennis champion in 1920. Working with R. A. Long, he and Bennie Moten put their fund raising squadron over the top in community contributions for the Liberty Memorial and was recognized for that achievement in a glittering event at the Hotel Baltimore. The Paynes and the Jordans shared a long family history. Leon Jordan became a member of the Beau Brummel Club, founded by Payne and his friends in the 1930's. The Jordans gave a steak dinner for Payne's son, Felix Payne Jr., and his wife in 1958. The son held a government position in Washington. Jacqui McAfee and Harold Holliday Jr., when they went to Howard University were told that as members of Freedom's youth group they could contact either Payne or Senator Tom Eagleton for help and support. The elder Felix Payne was a likely bridge figure in the mind of the younger Leon Jordan to his father.⁷²

On the national scene in the spring and summer of 1962, the Freedom Riders challenged patterns of deep seated segregation in travel throughout the South. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had grown out of the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins and began organizing communities. SNCC was beginning to focus on registering black citizens to vote in many southern states and meeting violent white resistance as early as 1961. Meanwhile Jordan saw in Kansas City a parallel need for its black citizenry to free itself from the political

⁷² *The Call*, September 12, 1958, and January 26, 1962; Interview with Jacqui Moore, September 18, 2008.

dominance of the northend white bosses who had controlled the black community since his grandfather's time. He quietly began to lay the groundwork for organizing local black voters.

In March, 1962, Jordan publicly severed his relation with Tim Moran. The particular issue on which he chose to make the break concerned a plan for allotting seats in the city council. Jordan and Watkins favored having 12 separate district seats, a plan that favored more black representation on the council. Moran supported a division of six seats elected solely by districts and six at large. Jordan accused Moran of pulling away from him on this issue. Both Jordan and Watkins then resigned from the 14th Ward Democratic Club, Inc. Jordan also resigned his political job as deputy constable in the courtroom of Magistrate Stuart Blackburn. Both Jordan and Watkins went to the courthouse on Monday morning, March 26th and told Moran in person of their decision. Moran appeared surprised and shocked. He said he was sorry about the break with Jordan whom he had been grooming to take his place when he retired, although he had no intention of retiring in the near future. He had been ward leader since 1910 and had owned and operated the Green Duck for many years before selling it to Jordan.

Jordan and Watkins then issued the following public statement:

Effective this date we are announcing that all our connections and affiliations with organized political groups in this city have been severed.

For some time we have felt that in some small measure we may be able to contribute to the betterment of the Negroes' position in this community if we established a completely independent political organization. This, of course, will not be to the encouragement of those seeking personal gain or to gratify selfish interests or ambitions.

Operating within the framework of the Democratic party, we shall stimulate vitally needed political interest in the future. In the past, this program has been delayed—to say

the least. Our hopes are that our support will come from those who sincerely believe the Negro deserves first class citizenship and representation in all branches of our government.

With this in mind we are establishing a completely independent organization whose activities will extend to all Negro precincts of this city.

We need the help and suggestions of those who see the political position of



Charles Moore, Fred Curls, Leon Jordan, Bruce Watkins, Howard Maupin

the Negro in Kansas City as we see it and are willing to work for its betterment.

Jordan signed the statement as 14th Ward Committeeman and Watkins simply as a citizen. They indicated the headquarters of their organization would be set up in the old Carver Theater building across the street from the Green Duck.

In May there was another memorable organizational meeting in Howard Maupin's barber shop. Jordan and Watkins met with Leonard Hughes, Jr., Fred Curls, Dr. Charles Moore, Marion Foote, and Maupin. Leonard Hughes had come up with a name for the organization--Freedom, Inc. Jordan was named President and Watkins was named Chairman of the Board. Freedom's office was established at 2506 Prospect, next door to the Green Duck; the old Carver Theater continued to be the meeting place for larger activities.

On July 21st Freedom held a rally that served as a political coming out party at the Carver Theater, preceded by a Cadillac motorcade, with 21 county candidates included. Bruce Watkins gave the opening address and served as master of ceremonies. Freedom was described as “the brainchild of Leon Jordan.” Jordan gave the final talk, but in between Sheriff Arvid Owsley, Judge Kopp, Everett O’Neal, Richard Bolling, J. McKinley Neal and several others spoke. Jordan closed saying, “We are going to stick with our guns until we see victory,” and then added, “all candidates for office would get one Hell of a screening before we put out our list of endorsed candidates.”

Dovie Means was one of the black office holders Freedom targeted as controlled by the white factions. She fought back saying she was as racially minded as any member of Freedom. And relative to the advertisement, “Is Uncle Tom dead?” she said, “The only ‘Uncle Tom’ she had heard anything about prior to this primary fight was a man named Tom Pendergast, a deceased politician who used to protect Leon Jordan’s father in his operation of a saloon years ago at 18th and Vine. The same man was instrumental in Mr. Jordan being named a policeman, before he [Tom Pendergast] died.” This is a rare public reference to Leon’s father and his ties to Pendergast, and may help explain why Jordan did not talk about his father more than he did.

The Tuesday after the Freedom rally, Leon Jordan and Chester McAfee were sitting in front of Jordan’s package store next to the Green Duck when a police officer ordered the two and others standing nearby to move on. McAfee became indignant and insisted they didn’t have to move. The officer arrested Jordan and McAfee. Leonard Hughes represented the pair before Judge Lewis Clymer and the case was dismissed. But Hughes and his two defendants then went to the office of Police Chief Clarence Kelley and filed a complaint. The chief attributed the incident to an inexperienced officer. Jordan, however, made it clear he thought he was being

harassed for the recent formation of Freedom, Inc. This is an early indication of Jordan's belief that Chief Kelley was no friend of the black community. Jacqui McAfee Moore later gave this incident a more comic twist when she said that her father and Leon began a suit against the police department and that the proceeds of the suit were to pay her college tuition. She decided not to wait.

In August Jordan faced and defeated James A. Mason, heavily backed by Tim Moran, for the post of Democratic committeeman of the 14th ward by a vote of 1408 to 831. Rosemary Lowe, Freedom's candidate for committeewoman, however, lost to Dovie Means by a vote of 1241 to 992. Nevertheless, the *Call* announced that "Although he failed to win both Democratic county committee posts. . . , Jordan so roundly defeated Moran's candidate for county committeeman that Democrats all over the county courthouse now are recognizing Jordan as the new ward 'boss.'"⁷³

In the flush of this beginning political success, Orchid's mother, Susan Maude Ramsey died, at the age of eighty-two at St. Margaret's Hospital in early October. In 1959 she had moved to Kansas City, Kansas, to live with her son, Harvey, and to be near her daughter, Orchid. She became an active member of the Quindaro Christian Church.⁷⁴

The election of Bruce Watkins and Dr. Earl Thomas to the city council as Freedom candidates in 1963 was a historic and a signal victory for Freedom. Leading up to that election Dutton Brookfield, wealthy businessman and aspiring political leader, had split from the Citizen's Association claiming that it endorsed too many Democrats for key offices and hence was no longer non-partisan. He then formed the Independent Voters Association and became the opposition candidate for mayor to Ilus Davis, the Citizen's Association's choice. Freedom chose

⁷³ *The Call*, March 30, May 11, July 27, August 17, 1962; Interview with Jacqui Moore, Sept. 28, 2008.

⁷⁴ Clipping of *Dispatch*, October 12, 1962, Clay Center Museum, Clay Center, Kansas; Copy LJC.

to join forces with Brookfield's Independent Voters Association. The Citizen's Association which had won respect and power for its role in ridding Kansas City of Pendergast and his boss rule, won the mayoral race, but Watkins and Thomas, as IVA and Freedom candidates, won council seats. The Citizens Association, seeing Freedom as only another racial form of the boss politics they had opposed for decades, tried to crush it in its infancy. But the reforming white civic leaders who wrestled political power from Pendergast had never proven either very knowledgeable or responsive to the needs of the black community, and in this case they, at least initially, failed to reckon with the fact that the civil rights movement was giving Freedom a reason for being that made it markedly different from just another traditional political faction.⁷⁵

There is a significant footnote to Freedom's success. Harold Holliday was originally slated to be Freedom's candidate for 3rd district councilman, and Bruce Watkins was to be the candidate for councilman at-large. It was assumed that Watkins's previous associations with the Republican party and his family's prominence would bring him broad political support for the at-large post. However, when it became clear that he was not going to get some of the cross-party political endorsements he expected, the decision was made within Freedom, that Watkins would bump Holliday as candidate for councilman and Thomas would become the candidate for councilman at-large. Holliday, with his superior service in civil rights organizations, was not willing to accept that decision and then chose to run as a Citizen's Council candidate. Watkins' election was a bitter defeat for Holliday, but within months he had rejoined Freedom, and quickly again became one of its staunchest leaders. Fred Curls later remembered that shortly after the '63 elections, Jordan ordered, "We need Harold Holliday. Bring him back." Jordan

⁷⁵ *The Call*, April 5, 1963.

recognized the value of Holliday's dedication to civil rights and his acute legal talent. He was quickly brought back within Freedom's fold.⁷⁶

In June, 1963, the Jordans brought Leon's aunt Josephine, the last of the previous generation of his family, to a nursing home in Kansas City for her final days, just as Jordan's mother had taken his father to Topeka for the latter's final days. The woman who had been a second mother to him died in September. She had traveled and sang with Blind Boone and later gone to London to perform in music halls. She was baptized by the Bishop of London, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury. She married John M. Wright, who had a long and distinguished career in Kansas politics. And in her own right she was named "Woman of the Year" in church and religion in 1960. She taught Sunday School, sang in the choir at St. Simon's, and lived to become the church's oldest living member. She was a member of the Oak Leaf Club, Ne Plus Ultra, Round Table Reading club, Council of Clubs, and Topeka Council of Churches, and was instrumental in forming the Carver YMCA. It was with heavy heart that Leon Jordan buried this woman who had become a second mother to him in Topeka.⁷⁷

On November 22, 1963, America's young prince of Camelot took an assassin's bullet to the head in Dallas. The nation stopped in introspective shock at the virulent strain of hatred and violence strung through its national politics. Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson seized the moment to put his best self forward, dedicating his enormous political skills to enacting the agenda of John F. Kennedy. As a Southerner, and particularly as a Texan, he had enormous authority to promote and pass civil rights legislation. But the Civil Rights effort taking place on the ground in the South continued to be marked by violence and heroic protest.

⁷⁶ Interview with Fred Curls, July 29, 2004.

⁷⁷ *The Call*, September 20 & 27, 1963.

In Kansas City the issue of public accommodations took center stage the following spring in 1964. The city council passed an amendment extending a public accommodations ordinance passed in 1962 by a 11-2 vote. The local Tavern Owners association and a hastily formed organization identified as the Association for Freedom of Choice opposed the ordinance and successfully petitioned for a public referendum. By an impressive majority, white business, church, and political leaders, along with the major newspapers, supported the ordinance, and it was framed as a test case for Kansas City to prove its progress in race relations before the nation. President Johnson was at the same time continuing to build his consensus for a national Civil Rights act which included both voting rights and equal access to public accommodations.

Locally a campaign organization, People for Public Accommodations, was formed and chaired by three leading white citizens, William F. Barthelme, Robert Lyons, and Kenneth Aber. Mayor Ilus Davis actively supported the ordinance. The intense national drama taking place primarily in the South for civil rights had at last sensitized the leaders of the Citizens Association to their local responsibilities. Church leaders from all faiths joined their voices and active organizing efforts in support. Labor and educational leaders supported the ordinance. In the black community, Harold Holliday led the effort, but he was also charged with coordinating the efforts of all civic groups across racial lines. His wife, Margaret co-chaired with Mrs. Stephen Hadley the women's division of People for Public Accommodations.

On April 7th citizens came out to vote in surprising numbers, but the ordinance passed by a slim majority of only 1,743 votes despite the broad support of the city's white leadership. The energized vote in the black community proved decisive. It contributed more than half the total vote in favor of the ordinance. The *Kansas City Call* justly claimed, "an unprecedented voting

record for Negro Kansas Citizens.” On this issue Kansas City’s white leadership failed to reach very deeply into its own community.

The heaviest vote came from the 14th ward, Freedom’s home base. But very impressive votes also came from the 17th ward, Holliday’s home ward, the 3rd ward where Freedom was encroaching on the rule of Bernard Gnefkow, and the 2nd ward where the Rev. Kenneth Waterman operated independently of the tired and corrupt rule of Louis Wagner’s Jeffersonian Democratic Club. On April 17th the *Call* showed a photo of Leon Jordan, President of Freedom, Councilman Bruce Watkins, Ed Steward, regional representative of the Automotive Workers, AFL-CIO, and financial chairman of Operation Public Accommodations, and Lee Vertis Swinton, president of the NAACP, all at the black headquarters of Operation, P. A. at 2544 Prospect, next door to Jordan’s Green Duck Tavern. The caption under the photo opens, “VICTORY IS SWEET.”

It was an important victory for Freedom, Inc. and the community it represented. The community as a whole was clearly the winner, not any single politician. Nobody’s pockets were lined from this vote. But the black community’s opportunity and presence in the larger community became freer and richer. It brought home to the black community the value of organizing its political power. Freedom Inc. won respect as the public voice of the community and not just another political faction.⁷⁸

In June that year *The Call* published a warm memory that Jordan wrote in tribute to Chester A. Franklin. Jordan first met Franklin during Jordan’s “short-pants period” in Denver before Franklin founded *The Call* in 1919. Grandmother Jordan nicknamed Franklin “Big Chief” because of his erect stature and somewhat Indian characteristics. The name stuck.

⁷⁸ *Kansas City Call*, Apr. 3, 10, & 17, June 5, 1964; *Kansas City Times*, Apr. 7 & 8, 1964; *Kansas City Star*, Apr. 6 & 8, 1964; Thomas P. Murphy, *Metropolitics and the Urban Community*, p. 117.

Franklin's athletic ability particularly impressed the young Jordan, and since this was about the time he lost his own father, Franklin became a substitute father. Although Franklin was always busy, ambitious, and somewhat self-centered, he commanded attention. A special relation developed and Jordan makes clear he is writing this testimony as an act of love for "a most wonderful man, loyal and understanding as any young man would want."

Prior to the days of *The Call* Jordan sold papers for the *Kansas City Sun*, owned by Nelson Crews, "the golden orator of his time" and friendly political competitor to Jordan's father. After finishing college he worked in the Advertising Department of *The Call* under Earl Wilkins, the brother of Roy Wilkins who later became much better known as the leader of the national NAACP. In that position Jordan assisted Franklin dishing out the papers to the newsboys. Franklin's physical strength sent Jordan to bed early on Wednesday and Thursday evenings, and by Friday noon he was completely worn out.

When Jordan received his offer to head the Liberian police force, he discussed the matter with Franklin over a game of pinochle. He had been directed to fly to Liberia but had never been "higher off the ground than my old Ford would bounce after hitting a hole or rut in the streets. Well, I did not fly to Liberia but the results of this discussion with the Chief resulted in my losing all fear of aircraft and later developing into a flight instructor."

Jordan came particularly to admire Franklin's strong faith in himself during the period of his final devastating illness, when his athletic body could no longer do his bidding. The proud sprinter not only had to learn to walk, but first to crawl. He chose to fight his way back under his own power. Shortly before Franklin's death in May, 1955, and just after Jordan returned to Kansas City from Liberia, he and Jordan planned a trip to Africa. Jordan was to rig an open view seat in one of the flying trainer airships, so that they could "drag" many of the hinterland

villages for a close-up view and photos. Franklin didn't make it, but "He was so damn gallant that he made you want to cry and laugh and cling to him and carry him in your arms and lean on him for support all at the same time."⁷⁹

On July 2, Congress passed President Johnson's Civil Rights Act. The next day the Congress of Racial Equality opened its national convention in Kansas City. The barber shop of the Hotel Muehlebach was immediately tested and found carefully compliant. James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman were CORE volunteers training to register voters in Mississippi when they were brutally murdered on June 21, 1964. The nation followed the case of the missing men for weeks before their bodies were discovered. The mother of James Chaney came to the CORE convention in Kansas City and was interviewed in the lobby of the Muehlebach Hotel while CORE members lined the mezzanine looking down on the flood-lit interview. When the interview was over the hotel resounded with the spontaneous lyrics of *We Shall Overcome* ringing through the lobby. Freedom, Inc.'s battle for equal access to public accommodations and to realize the legitimate value of the black vote was seen as dramatically synchronized on the local as well as the national scene.⁸⁰

In the fall of 1964 Jordan defeated J. McKinley Neal as state representative in the 4th district, a post in state government he held until his death, and in which he was succeeded by his wife, Orchid, for many years afterwards. Harold Holliday joined Jordan in the House as a representative of the 14th district. But the earlier summer primary for that election also included a significant local political drama involving Representative Richard Bolling, who by then had become a national political figure.

⁷⁹ *The Call*, June 5, 1964.

⁸⁰ *Kansas City Times*, July 3 & 4, 1964; I witnessed the interview of Mrs. Chaney and the spontaneous singing of "We Shall Overcome."

Hunter Phillips, Western Judge of Jackson County, who notoriously said, “I’ve run with the support of the factions and I’ve run without it, and let me tell you I’d much rather run with them than against them,” spotted an opportunity to defeat Richard Bolling in the Democratic primary of 1964. Bolling was first elected to Congress in 1948 on something of a fluke. He bet heavily on President Truman’s coattails, against current political wisdom, and won. Once in Congress, with Truman’s support, he moved steadily up the leadership ladder particularly becoming a favorite of House Speaker Sam Rayburn. But he was not a pork barrel legislator and most observers believed him to be too liberal for his district. Bill Morris, a faction leader who became Jackson County Public Administrator in 1966, spoke for many when he said: “Bolling was arrogant as hell—never came around when in town and never took time to see you when you went to Washington. He was too liberal, always claimed he was a national politician with no time for constituents. He was forever giving us that Rules Committee bullshit.”

But in 1961 Bolling reached too far running for majority leader of the House. He was defeated by Carl Albert. When John McCormack succeeded Sam Rayburn as Speaker, Bolling lost more influence over internal House policy and strategy. Lyndon Johnson, after becoming President in 1963 was also not particularly friendly. Then at the end of 1963 Bolling announced he was getting a divorce from his wife, Barbara. Hunter Phillips saw an opportunity to run a low key campaign against Bolling in the primary and with the support of the factions defeat him as a Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives.

But Bolling rose to the challenge, rallied his national labor and civil rights supporters, and campaigned vigorously personally on the ground, particularly in the black community, and defeated Phillips in what was seen then as a very innovative political campaign. While Jordan did not share Bill Morris’s belief that Bolling was too liberal, he too apparently was put off by

Bolling's distancing himself from local political leaders. However, Clarence Mitchell, chief lobbyist for the NAACP, and an old friend of Jordan's, called and reminded Jordan that if a civil rights advocate like Bolling was defeated, the NAACP would lose considerable influence in Washington. Bolling headed a special 22 man civil rights steering committee set up by the influential Democratic Study Group. Jordan agreed to support Bolling, but told Mitchell, "This doesn't mean I got to like the son of a bitch." The voting power of Freedom was now beginning to be recognized nationally and Jordan clearly understood and accepted Freedom's national responsibilities.⁸¹

Just before the November elections the Freedom Inc. Youth Council, now led by Thomas Neely, gave a surprise dinner at the Natonians Club to honor Mr. and Mrs. Jordan and Mr. and Mrs. Fred Curls, their sponsors who had been "so nice." Among the thirty-five people present, the Hollidays were also specially invited.

Richard C. Tolbert graduated from Central High School in 1964 and joined the Freedom Youth Council. Jordan noted his exceptional abilities. He was headed to Yale University and Jordan arranged a summer research internship for him at the Institute for Community Studies. He later arranged for him to be a government service trainee in the Budget and Systems Department of the city manager's office and an administrative assistant in the Jackson County Department of Administration. Tolbert was allowed to live in rooms above the Green Duck. Tolbert often acknowledged that Jordan became the father he wished he had. And Jordan in turn clearly saw in Tolbert a potential leader of the community.

He strongly encouraged him not only to complete his BA and MA degrees at Yale, but to finish the doctoral dissertation that Tolbert never did complete. He once told him, "I want you to

⁸¹ *Kansas City Call*, Sept. 27, 1963 and Nov. 6, 1964; Steven Glorioso, *Fight Against the Factions*, pp. 1-40; *K.C. Jones*, Sept. 1990; Box 32, Folder 9, Richard W. Bolling Collection, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, Special Collections.

go back to Yale and don't come back until you finish your Ph. D. There are too many niggers with Master's degrees working in the post office." He introduced Tolbert to political leaders throughout the state and in 1968 he arranged for Tolbert to attend the national Democratic convention in Jordan's position. The trust and faith Jordan put in Tolbert was exceptional, but not unique. Many members of the Youth Council remember with some sense of wonder the responsible assignments Jordan gave them. The concern for young people that he had shown as a police officer carried over to his career as a political leader. He believed Freedom's future depended on the young, and it was Freedom's responsibility to create possibilities for the young.⁸²

On May 18, 1965, Representative Leon Jordan had a confrontation with Representative Frank Mazucca in Jefferson City that on the surface seemed like a minor incident, but below its surface there were deep issues of ethnic and political conflict which would make the confrontation memorable in the black community and the northend for years. At a meeting of the house municipal corporations committee, chaired by Mazucca, Jordan had charged that there was discrimination in the handling of promotions of Negro officers in the Kansas City Police Department. Chief Kelley, several other top police officers, including Major Cliff Warren, and several police board members were present. Mazucca called Major Warren to testify. Warren testified that there may have been discrimination in the past, but he didn't believe it existed under Chief Kelley. Mazucca also called another Negro sergeant to testify.

⁸² *The Call*, November 6, 1964; Interview with Richard Tolbert, June 25, 20007.

After the session Mazucca saw Warren in the hall and engaged him in a conversation. Jordan emerged from the house chamber and joined the conversation. He was clearly angry over Mazucca putting the two Negro police officers on the spot in the presence of Chief Kelley and his fellow officers. “If they told the truth their commanding officers would be unhappy and if they didn’t the Negroes in Kansas City would know they were not telling the truth,” he later explained from his office. During the conversation with Mazucca Jordan’s anger got the



best of him. There were differing accounts of the shoving and pushing that followed. But clearly at one point the sixty-one year old Jordan threw a punch at the fifty-nine year old Mazucca. Mazucca claimed Jordan’s fist connected with the lower part of his jaw, but it was a grazing punch that did no serious physical damage.

Jordan quickly acknowledged that both men were too old for fisticuffs. He later walked into Mazucca’s office and said, “I was a bit out of line and emotionally disturbed. I want to extend my apologies.” Mazucca replied, “You know I never have discriminated against your people and I never will. Just don’t try to cut me up here or cut me up in Kansas City.” But afterwards Mazucca said, “I can’t work with a man like that. He’s liable to blow up again.”

The county court was already at work on the redrawing of district lines in Jackson County. Mazucca took the county court’s plan and presented it to the 20-member House apportionment committee. Harold L. Fridkin, Jackson County counselor, who was instructed by

western judge Morris Dubiner to start redrawing the district lines had arrived in Jefferson City the evening before. Louis Wagner, an assistant Jackson County counselor, and notorious faction leader, assisted Fridkin on the details of the reapportionment.

On the strictly police department issue, Jordan had also brought up in the hearing the recent retirement of Alvin Brooks, who after eleven or twelve years of service had achieved no higher rank than corporal. After retiring from the department, Brooks became active in Kansas City CORE, and soon became its Chairman. He then went on to a distinguished career of public service as Executive Secretary of the Human Relations Commission, a member of the Kansas City Council, Mayor Pro-Tem, and missed being elected Mayor of Kansas City by only a narrow vote margin. Jordan could not foresee the distinguished career Brooks was to achieve, but he had been partner to Cliff Warren for many years on the police force and understood very well the spot Mazucca had put Warren on.

But clearly also at issue below the surface was the contest between the power of the northend politicians and Freedom's effort to make the black community independent of their control. When Jordan was murdered five years later no one was ever convicted of the crime. But by far the most pervasive belief in the black community was that he was the victim of political retribution. The second investigation into Jordan's murder conducted in 2010 suggested strongly that there was considerable basis for this popular belief.⁸³

The immediate FBI investigation into Jordan's death looked into the women in Jordan's life and revealed another story that came to a climax shortly after Jordan's confrontation with Mazucca. In December, 1965, Marian Foote resigned from Freedom, hounded by rumors that she had been having an affair with Leon Jordan over the last several years. She had known Jordan since 1957 when she began visiting the Green Duck on "25 cent nights." She was

⁸³*Kansas City Call*, May 21, 1965; *Kansas City Times*, May 19, 1965.

involved with politics and worked with the Elwood faction. She and Jordan discussed politics. She became pregnant and was fired from the Elwood faction. Jordan hired her to work in the liquor store, but she vehemently denied that Jordan fathered her baby. She was involved in the early organization of Freedom. Even after she began working in the County Investigator's office, she worked part-time at the Green Duck. Then Orchid called her and told her she had heard that Foote and Jordan were having an affair. Orchid warned her to "stay off of 26th and Prospect and out of Mr. Jordan's car." Her only reply was to ask Mrs. Jordan not to call her at work. Orchid Jordan later confirmed Foote's account of the phone call.

Foote then took the matter to Bruce Watkins, consistently insisting that the rumors of the affair were false. Watkins, according to her, called her back a short time later and said "that things had been straightened out." The rumors, however, did not stop. Jordan then called a meeting of Freedom's staff and informed them that "his private and professional lives were separate and he did not appreciate people trying to break up his home with their rumors." Still the rumors didn't stop, and Foote decided to resign from Freedom in December, 1965.

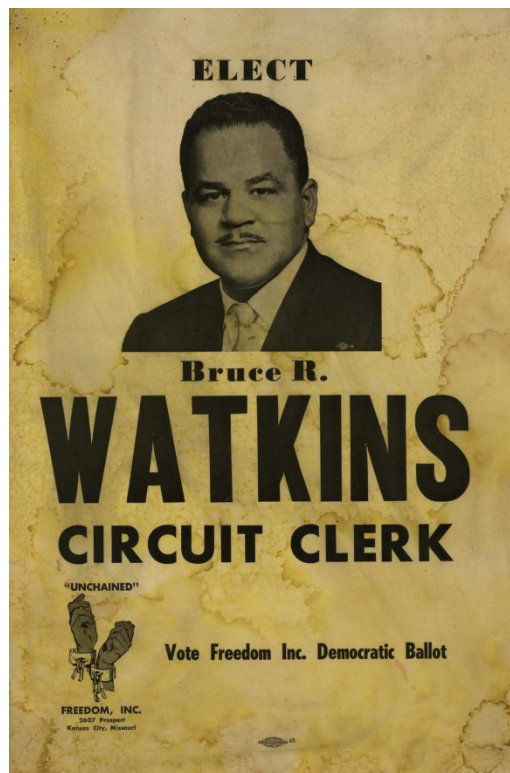
Two years later Foote and her boyfriend, Vernon Wright, began operating a restaurant at 39th and Indiana. They ran into financial difficulty. Jordan cosigned a loan for them at the Kaw Valley State Bank. When Wright was unable to make the last few payments on the loan, Jordan paid them, but Foote claimed Wright eventually repaid Jordan. In 1968 Foote ran for state representative, but did not get Freedom's support. Her relations with Freedom had understandably cooled, and after Jordan's death she said she had not talked with him for a long time.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Interview with Marian Foote by Patrolwoman H. Winston, July 29, 1970; Interview with Orchid Jordan by Jefferson Smith, Jr. and George F. Lueckenhoff, August 7, 1970, FBI file, LJC.

XI

Freedom Inc. Grows into a National Force, 1966-1970

In 1966 Charles E. Curry, a local businessman who had been successful in real estate and who was a friend of Harry Truman, decided to reinvigorate his Committee for County Progress party, which had not done well in 1964. He brought in professional political organizer Matthew Reese, who had worked for John F. Kennedy. The strategy was not to confront the factions directly, but to play to the silk stocking community with the white hat reform issue and at the same time to build on the resurgent racial pride of the black community, in effect to grow the budding coalition that



had passed the controversial 1964 public accommodations act. Bruce Watkins, then a city councilman, was key to the latter half of this strategy. He joined the CCP as a candidate for County Clerk opposing the incumbent John J. Mc Fadden, a close associate of Louis Wagner. Watkins insisted that the black community was as interested as anyone else in effective community leadership, but he clearly saw enduring faction control as the principal barrier: “The factions, which control the County won’t do it. If they better the Negro they’d lose control of him. So they have exploited him.”

Melba J. Marlow later reviewed the significance of Bruce Watkins' service as Jackson County Circuit Clerk. She credits Watkins' election to the City Council and Jordan and Holliday's election as state representatives to setting "Freedom solidly on the power track. . . .So while common folk were buying color TV's, ranch houses, and new cars, Freedom's boys were flexing their muscles wondering where to make their next assault." After much discussion that led only to a quandary, all of Freedom's leaders went home to bed, "all but Harold L. Holliday, who sat before the fire and thought and thought. Like a bolt from heaven, the idea struck him. . . .A COUNTY OFFICE, ONLY A COUNTY OFFICE WOULD DO! Then a more wrenching thought, What office?. . .along came full revelation. . . .THE CIRCUIT CLERK OFFICE!

"It was not 2 o'clock in the morning, but to Holliday it was a day not to bother with time. He called Leon Jordan, the President of Freedom; he called Bruce Watkins, for along with his revelation was the vision of Bruce Watkins who could bring it off. The idea was viewed, tossed around and plotted before the day got off to an official start.

"When Watkins declared his candidacy for the circuit clerk office the announcement was met with disbelief, derision and extreme doubt. Even among his own organization consternation prevailed, and voices were heard protesting that things were moving too fast. To no avail, Jordan, Holliday, and Watkins remained stubborn in their decision. . . .Freedom's successive victories made possible by the solid voting black bloc had begun to demand respect among political circles. Because of their avowed battle against the factions, the factions knew they were off-limits to any overture they might make.

"Therefore CCP, badly in need of solid support could send out feelers and make conversation with Freedom, Inc., and eventually add the name of 'Watkins' to their team."

Watkins adopted a straightforward platform that he continued to maintain in 1970: Better Operation of the Circuit Clerk office; Better Custodial Care of Records; Better Safe-guarding of Public Moneys; Better Public Relations; and Equal Opportunity in Employment. Noted as a strong speaker, Watkins deliberately was unusually quiet during the 1967 campaign, and many feared his name and face would be forgotten on election day. When his chances seemed most dismal, a story broke in the *Kansas City Star* charging some employees in the county clerk office with embezzlement. Watkins refused to make this a public issue. "At the end of the day when victories were certain, the Watkins name had moved from the shadow of the question mark into the brilliance of a halo. He had become the first Negro county office holder."

In August the *Call* triumphantly announced that the joined forces of Charles Curry's Country Progress Committee and Leon Jordan's Freedom, Inc. had made "a clean sweep of Jackson County, defeating the Democratic factional organizations in eight out of nine major offices [in the Democratic primary]. For the first time in history, a Negro, Bruce R. Watkins, was elected to a county-wide position. Watkins, 42 year old city councilman, virtually did the 'impossible' by defeating John J. McFadden, incumbent city clerk of Jackson County, by the overwhelming majority of 48,455 to 37,429. . . .

"Watkins himself was surprised that he defeated McFadden by the margin of 11,000 votes. He had expected to win in the central city districts but was not certain how he would fare in the outlying districts of Jackson County where the population is mostly white. 'I was astounded and highly pleased,' Watkins said the day after the elections." Watkins's and Freedom's triumph dramatically extended Freedom's political authority into Jackson County politics. In that same primary election J. McKinley Neal, with total backing of the factions, tried

to reclaim the state legislative seat he had held for eighteen years before Jordan defeated him two years earlier. But Jordan crushed Neal by 2,593 votes to 629, a four to one margin.

In 1966 Stokely Carmichael and other young militants were raising the banner of Black Power, and in many areas of the nation there was a notable white backlash. But Watkins's election in November caused the *Call* to express relief that "The 'white backlash'—which took various forms around the country from the near-election of Lester Maddox, the fried chicken king in Georgia, to the solid defeat of George P. Mahoney, Maryland segregationist—was not felt here. In electing Bruce R. Watkins to the office of Jackson county circuit clerk, the voters of our local community turned a deaf ear to the 'white backlash' as we thought they would. Democrats by and large refused to cross their party lines for racial reasons. Watkins was part of the County for Progress team with which he swept to victory in the August primary. The team stayed together, with ability and personality being the dominant factors, not race."⁸⁵

Also in 1966 the federal district court of western Missouri directed the Missouri General Assembly to reapportion itself to achieve more equal representation of the residents of the state. Harold Holliday was one of the successful complainants. As a result of the court order Kansas City was able to elect one more Negro member of the House of Representatives. St. Louis was able to elect four additional Negro members. At the end of the legislative session in July, 1967, Holliday wrote, "without question the Negro delegation in the House of Representatives was more effective than it has ever been in the past." The unity of the Negro representatives was particularly significant in passing Congressional redistricting legislation, which resulted in St. Louis gaining a Negro representative in the United States Congress.

⁸⁵ *Kansas City Times*, July 20, 1966; *Kansas City Call*, Mar. 20-26, April 3-9, 1970; Aug. 12-18 & Nov. 18-24, 1966; Larry E. Ruby, "The Campaign for a County Government: the 1966 Jackson County Primary," pp. 2-3, 41-42.

Holliday also claimed credit for the black representatives in passing a bill reorganizing the Kansas City School Board which should result in at least two Negro members joining the Board. But he acknowledged that on many issues there were different opinions within the black legislators and that even when they were united they were not always successful. In February, 1967, Marjorie King, a Kansas City activist who had won a position on the state Human Resources Board, organized significant public support for a bill which would allow mothers on Aid to Dependent Children rolls to receive payments when fathers were unemployed and remained at home. Freedom provided six busses to take people to Jefferson City. Father Renee of St. Aloysius Catholic Parish provided three more. Despite the strong show of public support that bill along with several others died in the Senate.⁸⁶

1967 was a year of simmering civil unrest in the nation. Inner cities were seething with activity and resentment. Campuses were inflamed with anti-Vietnam War protests. Martin Luther King and others were linking the two issues. President Lyndon Johnson was caught in a painful political straddle. The year, however, was also notable for the appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court in October.

In February, 1968, Leon Jordan was invited to speak to Sally Steinbach's class in American Government at the Metropolitan Junior College. The students questioned him on the catch-phrase of the day, Black Power. Jordan dismissed the phrase as "rhetoric." "Black Power, per se, is nothing new. Freedom, Inc. is Black Power, but 'Burn Baby Burn' is out of line! I'd be willing to throw gas bombs if I thought it would get better schools or better jobs for Negroes. But it won't." When asked if Kansas City Negroes were too apathetic, he responded, "I'd say complacent. The worst thing is for men of good will to say nothing! When that happens, the guy with a scheme gets his way—then we have an explosion."

⁸⁶ *Kansas City Call*, Feb. 26—March 2, July 14—July 20, 1967.

Jordan's appearance in the class was arranged by Mrs. Irene Vernell, a student in the class who had begun working for Freedom, Inc. Jordan helped Vernell and her two daughters move out of the home she shared with an abusive husband, Feazell Vernell, in December, 1967. He found her an apartment at 39th and Prospect. She was in the process of getting a divorce that was completed in June, 1968. Feazell Vernell had introduced himself to Jordan in 1965 and secured Jordan's help in getting a barber's license. Jordan also cosigned a loan Vernell received to start his barber shop. Feazell admitted Jordan gave him good advice about running his business and investing his profits. But Vernell became outraged when he learned that his wife and Jordan were having an affair.

According to Irene, Feazell was an embarrassingly suspicious husband prone to outrageous accusations. He indeed did describe his wife as a common prostitute when later telling his story to FBI agents, even telling them that he had once planned to take her to Alaska to make money for him on the street. The agents interviewed him because he had threatened Jordan's life. Vernell's threats were dramatic gestures of bravado that few, including the FBI agents, took seriously. However, he was apparently acquainted with Maynard Cooper, Doc Dearborn and Robert and Jimmy Willis, three of whom later were indicted for Jordan's murder. Irene openly acknowledged her relationship with Jordan to the FBI. She believed that Orchid did not know of their affair. Orchid, however, told another agent after her husband's murder that she had heard of Jordan's relationship with Irene Smith [Vernell] but had no definite knowledge of it.⁸⁷

A week after Jordan's appearance at the Junior College there was a significant election within the Jackson County Democratic Committee. Six of the nine Negro members of the

⁸⁷ *Call*, March 8-14, 1968; O. Brown to Major E. L. Willoughby, July 25, 1970, Interview with Irene (Vernell) Smith, July 29, 1970; Interview with Feazell Vernell, July 16, 1970; Interview with Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, FBI File, LJC.

committee voted with the Curry-Watkins Committee for County Progress to elect Thomas R. Slaughter chairman of the committee. They ousted Garrett Smalley, the former chairman and candidate favored by the factions.

Then a rapid series of dramatic national events hugely influenced life in Kansas City. On March 31, Lyndon Baines Johnson announced he would not be a candidate for the presidency in 1968. The public turmoil over his failed Vietnam policy had taken its toll. The following week Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4th at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Riots broke out in many cities of the nation, including Kansas City. Locally the national guard was quickly mobilized and the police action was swift and repressive. The official reaction sparked a notable public conflict between Freedom, Inc. and Gov. Warren Hearnes. Their relationship had not been friendly to begin with.

The week before the state Democratic convention to be held on June 1, Freedom released a statement opposing Hearnes' favorite son candidacy and the imposition of the unit rule on Missouri delegates to the national convention. Freedom criticized the governor for being "totally unresponsive to the concerns and aspirations of the black citizens of the state." Hearnes responded by immediately firing four Freedom employees of the state government and then was reported to have said that these employees belong to an "organization that did not believe in law and order." Freedom had strongly criticized police acts that resulted in the deaths of black citizens during the riots in Kansas City.

Hearnes' support was solid in the conservative rural areas of Missouri, so he came into the state convention in substantial control. However, when he got up to speak thirty-five Freedom delegates walked out. They were joined by some of the black delegates from St. Louis and some of the white supporters of Gene McCarthy. Hearnes paled in anger. When he finished

speaking the delegates returned to the convention. The governor was forced to compromise on his call for the unit rule controlling the state delegation at the national convention. The compromise agreed that the unit rule could only be effected by a two-thirds vote of the delegation held at the national convention.

In September Jordan was elected chairman of the Fifth Congressional district Democratic committee. He deeply felt the honor of the occasion, “Heretofore in no place in the history of the state of Missouri has a Negro been elected to such a high office in the state Democratic party structure. It has jarred me, moved me and touched me, to know that the Democratic party has moved to this new position. It is an honor to Kansas City and the Democratic party.” He spoke at the county courthouse where he was elected unanimously by the committee that had now come under the control of the Committee for County Progress. Charles E. Curry attended although not a member of the committee. Committee members representing the North Side political factions did not attend. Harry Jones, who reported the meeting for the *Times*, also described Jordan as “a member of the third generation of his family to be born in Kansas City.” It seems very likely that Jordan mentioned this proudly in his talk and felt that he was now living up to the legacy of his father and grandfather.⁸⁸

Richard Tolbert, Jordan’s protégé, wrote the article in *The Call* describing Freedom’s actions at the state convention. He would assume Leon Jordan’s seat at the raucous Democratic convention in Chicago. Robert Kennedy was murdered a few days after the Missouri state convention on June 6. The cross currents were strong in the city and the state.

Freedom, Inc. carried its campaign against Hearnese into the general election in November. It publicly announced its opposition to him in the primary and refused to be swayed

⁸⁸ *The Call*, June 1, 14, 19, 1968; *Kansas City Times*, September 4, 1968.

by pleas from Curry's Committee for County Progress, with whom it otherwise worked closely, to drop its opposition to Hearnese.

But Thomas Eagleton's candidacy in the Democratic primary that year was another significant Freedom story. There were three strong candidates: former Senator Edward V. Long, Thomas Eagleton, and True Davis. Long had been in the Senate for eight years and had a strong record of voting for civil rights legislation. True Davis had by far the best financed campaign. Tom Eagleton was the newcomer and underdog. Many years later in another campaign Richard Tolbert tells a colorful story of True Davis coming into Kansas City in 1968 and successfully buying political support in the black community until he came face to face with Leon Jordan. Davis with his henchmen supposedly walked into a meeting with Jordan, threw \$10,000 on the table and said "Leon, I need your support." That was big money in those days and there were many eager to take it. "But finally Leon said, 'Look here, True: I can certainly use the money—but I can't take it. I gotta go with Tom Eagleton. He doesn't have your money, but he's been right for the black community.'

"Leon felt that Eagleton had proven himself a friend, and on that basis he turned down the highest bidder. That was Leon Jordan. And that's what I represent," claimed Tolbert.

Whether Tolbert's story is literally true or not, Freedom did choose to support Eagleton in the primary. Eagleton did win that primary, and Freedom's support was unquestionably crucial. Eagleton became a dependable friend of Freedom's, and more particularly of Leon Jordan's. Eagleton was much more responsive to local politics and politicians than Richard Bolling. He gave a particularly warm tribute to Jordan at the latter's funeral, remembering how they shared their passion for politics as they sat down together in the backroom of Jordan's Green Duck tavern.

That Democratic primary provided Freedom with other key victories. Dr. William Bryan, Freedom candidate, was elected as the first black County Coroner. Leon Jordan easily beat back the factions' effort to defeat him by choosing the popular great black pitcher, Satchel Paige, to run against him. Bruce Watkins was elected Democratic committeeman in the second ward, until this time a faction stronghold. And Herman Johnson, a Freedom candidate, was nominated as state representative for the thirteenth ward. Harold Holliday senior failed to win his nomination to the Senate, but after the dust settled, he returned to his post as representative.

Despite the fact that Charles Curry stepped out of his leadership role in the C. C.P. just before the November vote, the 1968 general election was seen as a big victory for the C.C.P. and Freedom over the factions. Hearnese was, of course, reelected, but Bruce Watkins declared, "I can hardly tell you what a great victory Freedom Inc. scored. The Negro community has voted against Governor Hearnese and Edgar Keating and overwhelmingly for Hubert Humphrey in a superb demonstration of ticket splitting that shows Hearnese we mean business." Leon Jordan added in a lower, but still determined, voice, the vote was "a significant victory against a racist governor." These claims were supported by some impressive statistics. Freedom's support for Roos drew 3,196 votes against 1,035 for Hearnese in Jordan's own ward. At the same time his voters supported Tom Eagleton, the Democratic candidate for the U. S. Senate by 4,773 to 328. A similar pattern could be seen in other Freedom strongholds.⁸⁹

Freedom had demonstrated its power to deliver a strong black vote in Kansas City. It had increased its power in the state legislature, and it had played an important role in keeping the

⁸⁹*Call*, Oct. 25-31, Nov. 1-7, 1968; *K.C. Jones*, "Richard C. Tolbert, Other Voices," September, 1990; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1970; Thomas Eagleton's funeral tribute to Leon Jordan, LJC; interview with Richard Tolbert, September 1, 2004; *Call*, August 9, 1968; Amy Hart, "The Founding of Freedom," p. 133. In May, 1968, Alvin Brooks, who had served in the police department for eleven years without rising above the rank of corporal and who had been serving his third term as Chair of Kansas City CORE, was appointed Director of Human Relations for Kansas City.

careers of Richard Bolling and Tom Eagleton, two significant national leaders, on track. It was now gaining state and national recognition.

But what was Freedom? How did it work? And what in particular was Leon Jordan's leadership role? Bruce Watkins gave a very revealing interview to Sgt. Lloyd DeGraffenreid on these matters after Jordan's murder. He said that prior to Leon's death, he [Watkins] "had little or nothing to do with making political deals or meeting with any of the top people of other political organizations, such things as picking what offices Freedom would try for and who would run for these offices, what other political organizations that Freedom would become allied with during an election year, which candidates of other political organizations that Freedom would endorse, how much money would be spent, how the money would be raised was all done by Leon." Watkins's "specific job was to make speeches."

Orchid Jordan was equally emphatic: "She stated that Leon was the sole boss of Freedom, Inc., and made the final decisions in all matters that came up. This included what offices that Freedom would try to win, who would run for these offices, what other political organizations they would become allied with, and what candidates of any other political organizations that Freedom would endorse. He also had the final say in how much money would be needed, how it would be raised, and how it would be spent. If any problems arose within the organization, or with any other organization, Leon was the one who would handle it."

Howard Maupin, officially the Treasurer of Freedom told a detective after Leon's murder, that "he was called upon to handle only small sums of money." And a check of deposits in Freedom's account since January 1, 1970, revealed that the largest deposit was \$350.00. Maupin said he had "no knowledge of the alleged large sums of money coming into Freedom,

Inc., from various political factions or candidates. These statements suggest strongly that Leon Jordan held the growing strands of Freedom's political power tightly in his own hands.

However, Freedom had grown to include a large number of elected officials, many of strong independent minds, known to express their beliefs on public platforms, as well as a great number of volunteer workers, including a whole cadre of young supporters with lively ambitions and a generationally different understanding of their problems and their future. Melba Marlow's description of how Freedom came to extend its power into Jackson County politics probably gives an accurate portrait of how, in fact, such decisions were made in Freedom. Jordan talked with, listened to, and cajoled his followers with extraordinary effectiveness. He had some patronage positions to offer, and he loaned money to needy patrons on occasion. He offered business and financial advice to others. But while apparently well off, he did not have a large personal fortune. It seems clear that he somehow generated an extraordinary personal trust in his leadership decisions. And that trust grew with Freedom's success. As Freedom's power grew, Leon Jordan became more and more a political legend within the black community.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Interview with Bruce Watkins, July 21, 1970, p. 902; interview with Orchid Jordan, July 18, 1970, p. 529; interview with Howard Maupin, July 23, 1970, p. 1125, KCPD file on Jordan Murder, copy in LJC.

XII

The Challenge of Radical Youth

While Freedom was achieving significant local success, the national civil rights struggle was increasingly challenged by black nationalism. This challenge also began to appear in Kansas City. In February, 1969, the local Black Panthers organized a public gathering at Gregg Community Center focusing on the Kansas City Police Department's lack of service to the black community. Bervin Fisher, President of the Lincoln Community Council, as well as now Chair of KC CORE, and openly critical of whites' participation in that organization, was the featured speaker. He said: "We are rapidly approaching a police state. If a white policeman will brutalize black people, one day he'll brutalize white people. If something is not good for black people, it is not good for white people." He charged the use of gas by the police in the previous summer's rioting was shocking, particularly by a "police force which has less than five per cent black officers; of the 540 men, only 55 are black."

Bruce Watkins was among the more than 700 who attended. He said he hoped to hear "what we can do as a community to bring about peace here in Kansas City." He noted that some of the Black Panthers' ideas are "similar to what we've been fighting for a long time."

In June, 1969, Rep. Herman Johnson rose on the floor of the House of Representatives to protest a "Black Manifesto" appearing in his House mailbox without an acknowledged source. It was said to have come from the Republican side. "The document under question apparently is a copy of the 'manifesto' produced by James Foreman's group delivered and adopted by the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, Michigan, on April 16, 1969. It consists of seven pages of mimeographed or photocopied matter. The 'manifesto' has caused

quite a stir in religious circles throughout the country as Foreman and his associates have appeared before various church bodies seeking \$500,000 in reparations to Negroes for the wrong done them by America throughout the years.”

On August 20, Bruce Watkins called a meeting at the Wayne Minor Housing Project to begin a campaign to appoint at least two black judges to new positions created by the legislature for Kansas City and Jackson County. He noted that at present out of 47 persons executing judicial authority in the area only one, a municipal court judge, Lewis W. Clymer, is black. The meeting was well attended by church and civil rights organizations as well as such elected officials as Leon Jordan, Herman A. Johnson, Henry Ross, and Harold Holliday, Jr. representing his father, who was out of town.⁹¹

In October, Pete O’Neal, head of the Black Panther Party, claimed his organization had enough evidence to send Police Chief Clarence M. Kelley to the penitentiary. He accused Kelly of authorizing the transfer of firearms from the police department which found their way into the hands of right wing organizations.

Soon after these public charges Jordan reached out to O’Neal, telling him that he had some police reports that he had held since 1964 which might be of interest in his campaign against Chief Kelley. The reports were only part of a file that gave rise to suspicions that another police officer might have been involved in a \$5,000 insurance fraud. According to O’Neal Jordan told him that William Canaday had given him the reports several years ago for safekeeping. Two of the reports were written by Canaday. Both Canaday and Jordan denied the reports were given to Jordan by Canaday. Jordan said he received the reports in the mail. He didn’t know who sent them.

⁹¹ *The Call*, January 17-23, February 21-27, June 20-26, & August 22-28, 1969.

But O'Neal secretly taped his conversation with Jordan. In early December he took his tape to *The Kansas City Star*. Harry Jones, a *Star* reporter, wrote that a voice sounding like Jordan's clearly named Canaday as a source of the reports. When Jordan was confronted with the tape, he said, "I have never experienced such treachery before." He acknowledged telling the Panthers Canaday was the source, but then said he told them this to disguise the true source, whom he thought he knew, but refused to name. The Panthers suspected the reports revealed that Kelley had deliberately suppressed evidence to aid the officer involved.

They considered the matter for two months before calling on Canaday and Jordan in an attempt to get the information Jordan held into the public domain. Accounts of the conversations then held at Canaday's restaurant and Jordan's Green Duck sharply differ. But that the calls were made is not in dispute. During a call at the Green Duck the Panthers managed to exchange some meaningless papers they brought with them for the confidential reports Jordan held without Jordan realizing it. They then made the reports public. The reports did not indicate any fraud had been committed, and the officer involved was not charged. Jordan insisted he had not believed the reports were sufficient evidence of any crime having been committed, and that he respected the officer involved.

Jones's story focused on Jordan's relation to Canaday and his animus against Chief Kelley, not on the Panthers' duplicity. Both Jordan and Canaday insisted that they had talked to each other only once in the last several months. Jordan said that was a year or more ago, and Canaday estimated it was six months ago. "Jordan spoke highly of Canaday, 'I'm fond of Canaday, I like him.'" But Jordan made clear he did not respect Kelley, and added that if he did have something substantial "to hit him across his bigoted nose with" he would want to do it himself. While Canaday denied having any animus against Kelley, Jones reported that during

Canaday's closing days with the department the tension between him and Kelley was common knowledge. Canaday was indicted on a federal tax charge in March, 1964, and later convicted. But before his conviction he was allowed to retire with his pension benefits. While Jordan brushed off the importance of the story, it suggests Jordan was having more than a little trouble navigating the swiftly changing political currents.⁹²

The Panthers' sensational campaign against Chief Kelley overshadowed Bruce Watkins' announcement in November that he had fulfilled his campaign pledge by accumulating a surplus of \$15,000, primarily from his investing money deposited in the circuit clerk's office for litigants in interest bearing certificates of deposit. He returned that surplus to the operating budget of the County Court, although lamenting his lack of authority to use that money for badly needed improvements in employee salaries and modernization of office equipment.

The manner in which the Panthers were garnering the public spotlight, while Freedom's more mundane achievements were going relatively unnoticed might well have been on Leon Jordan's mind when he was interviewed on January 12, 1970, by Richard A. Shaw, an investigator working for the United States Congressional Committee on Internal Security, which was concerned with the Kansas City Black Panther Party. Shaw reported:

Jordan emphatically characterized the Panthers as a group of gangsters intent on preying upon the community through emotionalism and deceit. He said that the constant Panther programming of confrontation with the police and the administration is, in his opinion, designed to get for themselves sympathy through improper news coverage by the so-called responsible news media. . . .

However, Jordan was quick to point out that in his opinion the Negro community is absolutely not supporting the Panthers financially or morally to any significant extent.

⁹² *The Call*, October 10, 1969; *Kansas City Star*, December 4, 1969.

He explained that he believed white liberals are being duped through Panther deceit far more than the responsible faction of the Negro community. . . . He said that considering how the Panther membership is comprised of thieves and degenerates, it is amazing the foot-hold they have gotten while operating under the guise of racial justice and freedom. . . .

Jordan said that what angers him the most is the fact that the Panthers would use as a guise the issue that is so important to all of us (justice and equality) in an effort to serve their own selfish and—and that so many so-called responsible and well-meaning people would permit themselves to be taken in.”

Then the interview morphed into a significantly different area. Jordan apparently became particularly angry as he described the leaders of the Panthers as “users,” not “pushers” of narcotics. Sergeant Parker of KCPD was present during the interview, and Jordan, becoming furious, told of a narcotics pusher who operated within a block or two of the Green Duck. He said he had provided police information about this man and the police had done nothing. He felt the amount of narcotics traffic in Kansas City was a great public danger. Sergeant Parker made no comment, but acknowledged he was aware of the man Jordan referred to.

Jordan’s strong views on the Panthers apparently interested the Congressional Committee on Internal Security. Robert M. Horner, Chief Investigator of the committee, wrote Jordan on February 27th, regretting that the committee could not invite Jordan to come to Washington to testify, but inviting him to submit his views on the Panther Party in writing “for possible inclusion in the hearing record.” About the same time that Horner was writing his letter, Investigator Shaw was interviewing Everett P. O’Neal, prominent businessman and long time friend of Jordan’s. O’Neal called Jordan over to talk to Shaw again. Before Shaw could

mention the possibility of testifying, Jordan said: “You have the wrong man; we will handle our own problems,” and in general showed a reluctance to become further involved with the Committee on Internal Security. O’Neal “gave Jordan hell” and told him if the black community did not speak out the Panthers would take over. Jordan, however, refused any further discussion. He did not submit a written statement of his views on the Black Panthers to the committee.⁹³

Jordan had long felt skeptical about how much help he and the black community could expect from the Kansas City Police Department. He probably had no more faith in the work of congressional committees. But by this time he may also have begun to have doubts about his own judgment. James Phillip “Doc” Dearborn had won Jordan’s friendship and trust. Sergeant Lloyd DeGraffenreid, perhaps mindful of Irene Smith’s testimony, later described Dearborn as like a son to Jordan. Dearborn had shown an interest in Freedom as early as 1966. And Freedom found a job for Dearborn’s wife, Rita, in the Jackson County Collector’s office in January, 1970.

But Dearborn had a cruelly sinister streak that Jordan for some time seemed blind to. He was in fact a key figure in a group that began to organize itself in 1968 and eventually came to be labeled the Black Mafia. The leaders of this group were identified as Eugene Richardson, James Phillip (Doc) Dearborn, and Eddie Cox. They saw controlling the narcotics trade in the black community the path to power, the very threat that Jordan feared most. In May, 1970, just a few weeks before Jordan’s murder, federal agents and police made several well-timed raids uncovering extensive evidence of the groups’ trafficking in narcotics. Suddenly the group’s activities became public for all to see.⁹⁴

⁹³ Interview by Robert A. Shaw, letter from Robert M. Horner to Leon Jordan, February 27, 1970, FBI file, LJC.

⁹⁴ *Kansas City Star*, July 31, 1971.

The second Kansas City Police investigation into Jordan's murder uncovered a particularly telling interview of the son of Joe Centimano, who was known by such names as Crazy Joe, or Cokey Joe, but who preferred the title of Mayor of Vine Street. Centimano had a liquor store on 19th and Vine, in the heart of the black community, just a block from where Jordan's father once ran his Autumn Leaf Club. It is not certain whether Centimano was a "made" man, a true initiate of the Mafia, but he was close friends with several Mafia members, and more important, he lived the life of a low level Mafioso. He paid off police; he murdered those who crossed him; he fenced stolen property, particularly guns, which included the shotgun that was used to kill Jordan; and he dealt with contraband liquor and narcotics.

He was a close friend of Frank Mazucca, the North end politician, whom Jordan scuffled with in the state legislature in 1965. That incident was considered by many sufficient cause for a hit on Jordan, but higher ups at the time decided against it, particularly after Jordan apologized. But Centimano had many other reasons to resent Jordan and what he was doing. The mayor of Vine Street had a vested interest in resisting Jordan's effort to give the black community political and economic control of its own future.

Centimano's son, Danny, had spent weekends with his father at his liquor store as he was growing up. Danny's mother was divorced from Centimano and had remarried several times. Every Friday afternoon a yellow cab waited for Danny outside Knott elementary school to take him to Joe's Liquor Store. Sometimes Doc Dearborn or Eddie Cox would be in the cab to chaperon young Danny.

Danny was often impressed and fascinated with the fast life he witnessed, the beautiful women, the glitzy cars, the ready money, and often sumptuous good food, but he also was deeply disturbed by the brutal violence. His troubled youth led him into a life of addiction and petty

crime, but the memory of seeing his father, consumed by rage, cold-bloodedly murder another human being weighed soddenly on his soul. He stepped forward during the second Jordan investigation with the encouragement of *Kansas City Star* reporter, Mike McGraw, who had befriended him. After giving the police much information in a long interview, he asked particularly if they were interested in clearing a long unsolved murder. When they expressed interest, he told the story of the death of an unknown man later identified as Richard DeLeon Hill.

Danny remembered that it happened in late November, either 1968 or 1969. Doc, Eddie, and his dad had taken him hunting. They hunted squirrels, rabbits, and ducks, but Doc and Eddie would also scope out small town appliance or jewelry stores for possible robberies. They returned to the store and had homemade squirrel stew to celebrate Danny's thirteenth birthday. Apparently Eddie then left, but Rita, Doc's wife was working at the liquor store. Danny says of Rita, "I was a kid, and she was so beautiful." Late that night just before closing time, 1:30 a.m., a black customer came in. Danny waited on him. He bought Budweiser with a twenty dollar bill. Suddenly Danny's dad grabs his long barreled .38 and his face fills with rage. As Danny is counting out the customer's change, his father charges around the counter and puts his gun to the customer's head. He accuses the mother fucker of stealing from him and the woman across the street. The father orders Danny to get the old coat he wore over his dress suits.

When the man protests frantically he doesn't know what Joe is talking about, Joe responds, "Nigger, shut up! I'm gonna put you in the fucking river. I'm gonna put you where they'll never find you."

Danny is scared. His dad orders Danny to get him a bolt action .410 shotgun from off the safe. He tells Danny and Rita to lock the door behind him and turn out the lights. When he

opens the door and the man starts to blubber, his dad says, “You know, nigger, you run down the street and I’ll shoot you down right in the street.” Then they took him to the Cadillac with Doc driving and Joe in the backseat with the guy, and drove off.

Danny and Rita are left in the dark. Danny says to Rita, “I guess they’re gonna, they’re gonna take him to jail.” Rita said, Dan, “They’re gonna kill that man. Didn’t you hear your dad say. . . .” Rita was near crying.

After about forty-five minutes they returned. His dad ordered Danny to get a wet towel so he could remove the blood from his hands. “Doc has just got this weird look on his face and Rita’s watching him like you know she’s scared.” Dad and Doc took the shotgun apart. “Doc took the bolt and dad took the, the other part of the gun, and they cut the barrel down there on Vine Street, I mean they did, they put the paper down there, cut the barrel, folded it up and kept the shavings, destroyed the blade they cut it with I mean they were very thorough.”

Danny Centimano woke up the next morning and saw a story in the *Kansas City Star* of an unidentified body found under the ASB Bridge. Robbery was ruled out, since \$67 cash was found in the victim’s pockets. The police had no leads until Danny Centimano told them his story 32 years later. The police and Mike McGraw quickly were able to identify the murder victim from the information Danny gave. It was 38 year old Richard DeLeon Hill, an attendant in a nearby parking garage, with an alcohol problem, separated from his family. The body had been found November, 30, 1968. Danny died in February, 2011, but he rested easier having given the Hill family some final information about what happened to the husband and father.⁹⁵

On May 19, 1970, the FBI raided the homes of leaders of what had come to be known as the Black Mafia. The FBI published a full scale investigation of this group a year later. Leon

⁹⁵ 2nd Kansas City Police Investigation into Leon Jordan’s Murder, Interview with Danny Centimano, pp. 194-266, particularly concerned with Hill murder, pp. 252-266, LJC; *Kansas City Star*, July 24, 2011.

Jordan was murdered July 15, 1970. The investigation revealed that Eddie Cox and Doc Dearborn met in Lansing prison in the mid-sixties. When Gene Richardson was released from Leavenworth after serving a one year sentence for violating the Mann Act in January, 1969, Cox recruited Richardson to join him and Dearborn in a bid to take over the narcotics trade and hence most major criminal activity in Kansas City's black community. Cox, originally from Joplin, had a tested IQ of 162, and was considered the brains of the group. Richardson was the putative leader, but all three had their own people talents and independent personalities. Danny Centimano, when asked if there was a hierarchy, replied, "No, each one of em had their own strength."

The FBI report said: "Between 1968 and 1970, 20 people were killed . . . mostly by gunshot. Men and women. There were no hired killers . . . it was done by the principals of the organization." At the height of their operation in January, 1970, "it is estimated these men were taking in approximately, \$100,000 a day. The major source of their income was through narcotics." While there was a second tier of group members, these three kept control within their small group.

When Danny was asked about the relation between these three and his dad, he said, "they had their own thing going on and they ran a lot of things by my dad." He represented the relation between his dad and both Dearborn and Cox as very close. His dad was a little suspicious of Richardson.

Joe Centimano began to worry about the safety of his fiefdom on 19th and Vine when the windows of his store were broken out and looting took place during the riot following the death of Martin Luther King. The final straw came just before the FBI raid in May, 1970, when he began to hear there was a mole in the narcotics operation. Walton

Ireland Froniabarger, a second-ranked member, played both sides of the game. Cokey Joe decided to close his place on 19th and Vine and move to a store on 55th and Troost. Ironically, even as the aging Leon Jordan began to sense that there were strange and terrible forces threatening his political movement so did the aging Mayor of Vine Street.⁹⁶

The 2011 Kansas City Police Investigation in Leon Jordan's murder concluded that Doc Dearborn was primarily responsible for Jordan's death, with Joe Centimano passing along the order for the hit from the mafia who were still protecting their power base in the black community. That raises the question why did the streetwise Jordan come to admit Doc Dearborn, who became a leader in narcotics trafficking while befriending Jordan, but who already had engaged in cold-blooded murder, so closely into his affairs. As he grew older Jordan apparently found it more and more difficult to understand what was going on on the street. After his murder Irene Smith told police that Jordan believed Dearborn would protect him and complained that while Dearborn was in jail his information about what was going on was cut off. When Dearborn was arrested on a burglary charge, May 18, 1970, Jordan interceded with Judge Clymer and requested that an extensive pre-sentence investigation of Dearborn be conducted. Then on May 25th the charges were increased to include conspiring to purchase and sell cocaine. Jordan, who was strongly anti-drugs, then told Clymer to withdraw his efforts on behalf of Dearborn. Orchid Jordan reported that Leon was surprised and indignant to learn that Dearborn was involved with narcotics. It may also have been his first serious intimation that he had coddled a viper in his inner circle. Dearborn and his partners were able to raise bail through Jimmy Willis. They were released from jail shortly before Jordan's murder. Danny Centimano

⁹⁶ *Kansas City Star*, July 30, 1971, Danny Centimano quote, 2nd Kansas City Police Investigation, p. 204, LJC.

described Willis as a close friend of his father's. Dearborn and Willis had worked closely together in the past.⁹⁷

When their operation was in its heyday, O. G's Lounge was a favorite night spot for Cox, Richardson, and Dearborn. Bruce Watkins met Dearborn there and Ollie Gates, the lounge owner, described Dearborn to him "as a player." In another interview Watkins told police that he had seen Jordan talking with Dearborn on a couple of occasions, but what stuck in his mind was an incident involving Lee Bohannon. "Bohannon was in front of the Green Duck Tavern campaigning. Shortly after he arrived -another police character named Maynard Cooper arrived with three other Negro males and made Bohannon leave." Maynard Cooper, Jimmy Willis and Doc Dearborn were all indicted for Jordan's murder two years after it happened, but when Willis was found innocent, the charges against the others were dropped.

Danny Centimano said that Leonard Hughes was well acquainted with his father. Hughes also became Dearborn's attorney.

Dearborn could be personally persuasive. Jacqui Moore, the daughter of Jordan's longtime friend Chester McAfee, came to know Dearborn after she was married. He gave her a ride home one day and told her he would protect her. He seemed earnest. He looked after her and when she told her husband about his offer of protection and her husband questioned why, Dearborn called and talked to her husband. As far as she was ever able to determine his offer was genuine and carried no price.⁹⁸

Jordan's affair with Irene Smith was sufficiently well known to add to his reputation as a lady's man and probably prompted talk about his relation to Rita Dearborn. Orchid told police what she heard about Rita's employment from Freda Vermont, a former employee at the Green

⁹⁷ 2nd Kansas City Police Investigation, pp.3-5, Judge Clymer interview, p.224; *Kansas City Star*, May 25, 1970.

⁹⁸ Watkins interviews, 2nd Kansas City Police Investigation, pp.1318 & 248, LJC; author's interview of Jacqui Moore, September 18, 2004.

Duck who had moved on to a good job in the County Collector's office. The police then interviewed Freda Vermont. According to Orchid, Rita was dismissed from her county job because of her possible involvement with Tom Neely, the leader of Freedom's youth group. Rita was pregnant at the time of her employment. Orchid reported that Neely made several phone calls to George Lehr trying to get Rita reinstated. Freda Vermont told police that there was much gossip about how Rita obtained her job, but she said that Rita was dismissed after she was arrested with her husband on the narcotics charge.

Vermont also told of an ominous visit she received from Arkansas Cleaver, a man she considered on the fringe of Freedom's activities and a close associate of Doc Dearborn. She happened to be in the hospital for a heart operation when Rita was placed in her county job. After she returned to work, Cleaver called on her and told her she was talking too much about Dearborn's wife at the Collector's office. She protested that she was not even acquainted with the circumstances of Mrs. Dearborn's employment, and when he learned that she was recovering from a serious heart operation he told her that he had advised Dearborn not to bother her. She insisted that Cleaver did not threaten her, but she seemed to have taken his concern as an implied warning. She advised police she was moving to Houston, Texas, in October.

When the FBI interviewed Orchid about the women in his life in August, Orchid told them that the Musicians Union had a memorial picnic for her husband on the Sunday prior to the interview in a park adjacent to the Jordans' home. Doc Dearborn introduced himself and his wife to her. Later an associate of Dearborn's brought Dearborn's baby girl and placed her in Orchid's lap. He then asked if Orchid knew whose child the little girl was, and she said yes, meaning the Dearborns. But she thought this person intended a different message since he made a point of being seen placing the child in her lap.

Irene Smith said she heard the rumor of Jordan and Rita Dearborn having an affair from another employee at the County Collector's office; however, she added that Jordan "seemed really fond of Mr. Dearborn and she assumed that because of Mr. Jordan's affectionate nature, someone had probably seen him hug or kiss Mrs. Dearborn and made too much of it." Rita Dearborn Jackson later vehemently denied any sexual relation with Jordan, but there had been enough talk to make Doc Dearborn resentful.⁹⁹

In March, 1970 Jordan tried to squelch a story that made it into the press that Freedom might ally itself with the Democratic factions in the coming Democratic primary. Jordan admitted that conversations had taken place and said he would talk to anyone. But he said "It was highly unlikely that Freedom would join forces with the factions which it had been fighting for many years."

However, in early July Freedom made a point of endorsing George W. Lehr, the presiding judge, against the challenge of Dr. Charles Wheeler, plus a slate of candidates for the August primary that according to the *Kansas City Times*, "fall into the pattern of the old-line factional ticket." Was Jordan in these final weeks of his life trying to close Freedom's war with the factions? After Jordan's murder, Bruce Watkins discouraged the Kansas City police from believing the "North Side" might in some way be involved, by telling them that Jordan had switched Freedom's voting strength from the Committee for County Progress to the Regular Democrats who represented the "North Side." He was quite specific. A campaign chest of \$39,000 "was to be split four ways with Jordan and state Rep. William Royster each receiving \$12,000 and \$7,500 going to Alex Presta and Harvey Jones."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ KCPD interviews of Bruce Watkins, July 31, 1970, Judge Lewis Clymer, July 16, 1970, Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, Freda Vermont, October 5, 1970, and Irene Smith, July 19, 1970, Jordan Murder Files, KCPD, LJC.

¹⁰⁰ *Kansas City Call*, March 20-26 and July 2-9, 1970; KCPD Interview Bruce Watkins, July 20, 1970, LJC.

In May the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* honored Harold L. Holliday along with seven other legislators for meritorious service. G. Duncan Bailey, publisher of the *Globe-Democrat* stated:

“Harold Holliday is the recognized leader of the 13 black members of the House of Representatives. He has been particularly effective in all matters relating to legislation for the poor and oppressed, black and white. He has become one of the few members of the House, who commands the attention of the entire body when it (*sic*) rises to speak.

“Harold Holliday, a black man who has struggled for his own higher education, is recognized as one of the strongest supporters of education at all levels from grade schools through college and universities for the State of Missouri. Finally, Holliday has won the respect of many members and observers in the House because of his sincere desire for good government without regard to race.”

Gov. and Mrs. Warren Hearnes were guests at the luncheon honoring Holliday and the other representatives.¹⁰¹

That July there was another incident, seemingly minor, but an incident that anticipates a political controversy in the investigation that was to follow Jordan’s murder on July 15. Tom Neely headed Freedom’s youth group. In May he very publicly resigned his position in district attorney, Joe Teasdale’s office:

Dear Mr. Teasdale:

Last Friday afternoon when you came into my office in the “Wife and Child Support Division” you told me that you would fire me and others in your office if Freedom, Incorporated does not support you for Western Judge.

When I got back from Viet-Nam, I appreciated the opportunity to go to work in your office. It gave me a chance to do the type of work I like and to go back to school.

¹⁰¹ *Kansas City Call*, June 19-25, 1970.

Now I see that it doesn't matter how good a job I do. You are only interested in political support. If you get it those of us who belong to Freedom can keep our jobs—if not we will all be fired.

My wife and I have talked this over and have decided that we don't want the job on your terms. It is hard to quit when you are expecting another child and still have a couple more years in school but I know that there is no such thing as job security in your office.

There are people who work for you who need their jobs even more than I do. I just hope that by making my resignation public I can keep you from firing all of the people in your office who happen to belong to Freedom. They are caught in the middle. Mr. Teasdale, if you want support in the black community you should campaign for it, rather than threaten your staff.

Thomas J. Neely

Teasdale denied making these statements to Neely.

Irene Smith later told FBI agents that she and Jordan went out for a drive on Monday evening, July 13th. When they returned to the Green Duck Jordan went to the second floor and cut a political tape recording critical of Joe Teasdale. It was to be played in response to dialing “Dial Truth,” or UN 1-2222. After Jordan's murder on July 15th, Joe Teasdale would quickly charge two men with the killing against the advice of many in the black community. After a few days the charges would unravel, and Orchid Jordan and other leaders of Freedom would sharply criticize Teasdale for delaying and confusing the effective investigation of Jordan's murder. Neely's charge and Jordan's telephone tape suggest that Teasdale's problems with Freedom began before Jordan's murder.¹⁰²

Just a week before Jordan's murder the *Kansas City Times* decided that Lee Bohannon's challenge to Jordan's Democratic candidacy as state representative in the August primary created

¹⁰² *Kansas City Call*, May 8-14, 1970; ?

a convenient opportunity to pose the dramatic question: “Just who are the real leaders of Kansas City’s black population?” The story opens with photos of Leon Jordan and Lee Bohannon. The article plays up the obvious contrasts between the dashiki-clad, twenty-six year old black militant and the seasoned, conventionally suited, sixty-five year old President of Freedom, Inc. But the article concludes: “Tangled within the intricate, paradoxical web of the contest is the irony that the two opponents are closer on most issues than either realizes.” Jordan probably understood that quite well, maybe Bohannon did as well, so the reporter’s statement seems questionable, but it made good copy.

Jordan seemed assured throughout the interview that Bohannon was no real threat to his political seat. He mocked the contrasts the reporter tried to dramatize. “Maybe I don’t wear a dashiki. . .but then I lived eight years in Africa, so I guess I don’t have to.” Bohannon insisted his running was not a vendetta against either Jordan or Freedom. He praised Freedom for the caliber of its members. But he added, “If Leon had run a couple of young cats in his organization, I never would have run against him.”

To which Jordan countered by agreeing that it was time for young people to take hold. “But you’ve got to take hold of something. We have young people in Freedom. Lots of them. And they’re sharp, let me tell you.” He insisted he would like to see a man with Bohannon’s energy “come through Freedom. But he won’t be able to talk his way through. He’ll have to work his way through. And he’ll have to climb over the backs of some awfully sharp youngsters.” Jordan added that this would likely be the last time he ran for his seat.

To Bohannon’s claim to represent the black man on the street, Jordan pointed to the order and respect he maintained at the Green Duck. “I’ve got some awfully tough guys working for me down there. They don’t let anybody get picked on. If two guys are determined to fight, they

know the routine. They come to me, I shake them down for weapons, and then they go out back and beat hell out of each other. They know when they come back in they'll each have a drink waiting for them—on the house.” That tough-love policy seems reflective of Jordan’s many years of police work as well as his experience managing the Green Duck.

At the end of the article, Jordan admitted to feeling a few aches and pains of age, noting that the time was not distant for him to step aside as President of Freedom, Inc. But, “When a young man takes over, we’ll pick the man—not the white community.”¹⁰³

Phil Jay Cohen regularly supplied Jordan with supplies of food and drink he sold at the Green Duck. Cohen told police that he talked with Jordan about an hour on July 6th, when Jordan picked up his usual order. He said Jordan told him, “Things are just crazy,” and he talked about sealing up his building. Cohen thought he was going either to board or brick up the windows of his tavern. In fact, Jordan did just that. On Monday, July 15th, Jordan again stopped by and talked about “his nephew, Richard Tolbert.” Tolbert was not in fact his nephew, but many of Leon’s young associates habitually referred to him as “Uncle Leon.” Jordan told Cohen that this would be his last year heading Freedom, and that “he hoped Richard would slip into his shoes.”

David Gilbert Hall was Jordan’s accountant. He told the police that Jordan was troubled by a \$220 monthly cash shortage that had begun to appear early in the year in the Green Duck’s accounts and that he could not account for. He asked Hall to conduct an audit that then showed the Green Duck operated at an annual loss of \$2,000. Hall thought this was odd since he considered Jordan an excellent businessman. Hall indicated that a group of attorneys had made

¹⁰³ *Kansas City Times*, July 8, 9, 1970. It is notable that Cliff Warren, Jordan’s close partner on the police force, retired from the KCPD and assumed a position as manager of the new security department of Kansas City’s School District in January, 1969. He would suffer a serious heart attack the following year, a month before Jordan’s murder.

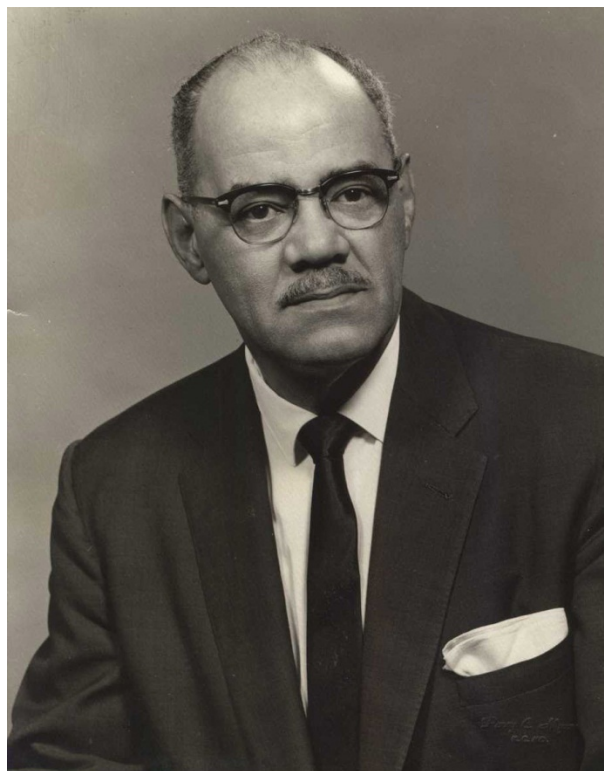
an offer to buy the Green Duck. Hall did not name the attorneys, but Leonard Hughes told police that he had discussed buying the Green Duck with Jordan about six months prior to his death. Hughes said Jordan was tired of the business and was asking \$40,000 for his tavern. When Hughes looked at the books he saw the Green Duck earning an average \$2500 per week. These different accounts of the profitability of the Green Duck do not add up, but it is clear that just before he was murdered Jordan was looking for a way out of both politics and the Green Duck.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Interviews with Phil Jay Cohen, July 15, 1970, p. 92; David Gilbert Hall, July 18 & 21, 1970, pp. 553, 554, & 855, and with Leonard Hughes, July 22, 1970, p. 994, KCPD file, LJC.

XIII

Sudden Death and an Explosion of Recognition

July 14, 1970, the last day of Leon Jordan's life, began like any other day at the Jordan home, but his activities that day remind us of some of the most prominent threads in the canvas of the later years of his life. He left for the Green Duck after lunch. That afternoon he called his lifelong friend, Lucile Bluford, to tell her he had a call from Fred Dobbs, a retired Captain of the Kansas City Police Department. Dobbs was now living in Compton, California, where he ran a newspaper, but he called to wish



Jordan luck in his campaign against Lee Bohannon. Dobbs had called Bluford two months earlier when he saw Jordan's name in a press release and asked her to say hello to Jordan for him.

Orchid joined Leon at the Green Duck in the evening. She went to the second floor where she usually worked on their accounts. But shortly before 7 p.m. an old friend from the past arrived at Kansas City's airport. Ethalyn Gordon, who in the early forties married Joe Stevenson, who in turn grew up with Leon and went to school with him, arrived from Detroit and called EvEssey Spivey, commonly referred to as Joe's sister, but in reality Joe's sister-in-law, to let her know she would be in town for a few days. EvEssey and her husband owned the Black

Hawk tavern, where Ethalyn Gordon reached her, and where Ethalyn was then invited to come. There is a photo of Ethalyn as a very attractive young woman in the Jordan Collection with an inscription that reads, “Sister Orchid, Luck and Success Always, Lil Sis.”

In spite of the inscription being addressed to her, Orchid described Ethalyn as a closer friend to her husband than to her.

Ethalyn and Joe Stevenson are the dance couple who worked at the Chez Paris that Jackie Rhodes remembers visiting when she sometimes rode with Jordan and



Cliff Warren. Ethalyn and Joe separated and divorced in the early 50's, but remained good friends, visiting each other when they were in the same city. And Ethalyn remained close to Joe's sister-in-law, EvEssey, who found nothing unusual in Ethalyn's plans to stay with her once arriving in Kansas City.

At the Black Hawk, Ethalyn called her former husband to let him know she was in town and invited him to come by the Black Hawk. Joe quickly agreed and just before 9 p.m. walked over to the Green Duck to see if he could pick up a ride to the Black Hawk. He found Leon working on a sliding door in the liquor store adjacent to the tavern. He kidded Leon about trying to be a carpenter. He told Leon he had a phone call from Ethalyn. At first Leon thought she had called from Los Angeles, and responded that he too recently had a call from Los Angeles. Leon referred to his call from Dobbs.

Joe then made it clear that Ethalyn called from in town and would be at the Black Hawk until the Spiveys closed the tavern at ten. Leon was surprised and delighted. Joe then walked over to the bar to chat with the bar maid, Katherine Parker, hoping that he and Leon would drive over to the Black Hawk before ten.¹⁰⁵ But just before ten, a white male, obviously known to Leon but not to Joe, came in and sat down with Leon.

The white male Stevenson saw was Robert D. Kingsland, a registered lobbyist, former prosecuting attorney of St. Louis County, and assistant attorney general under Senator Thomas Eagleton. He came with a check from Charles Herman, Vice-President of General Standards, Inc., a liquor distributor in Kansas City, Missouri. Kingsland said they discussed Jordan's political campaign and Jordan told him he was having great success in developing young leaders in Freedom to the distress of his opponents. He also told Kingsland that Bohannon was getting considerable money, probably from True Davis, to fight Lt. Governor Morris. After hearing of Jordan's death, Herman stopped payment on his check causing Orchid to be suspicious. She reported the matter to the police. She was unaware of the original purpose of the check.

Kingsland remembers being the only white person in the Green Duck, but he also remembers being introduced to a representative of the UAW, who wore glasses, named Ivory, and to an M. D. whose name he couldn't remember, but who almost certainly was Dr. Mark Bryant, Coroner of Jackson County. Leon later told Irene Smith that he had spoken with Bryant that night. Kingsland also talked briefly with Orchid. Gussie Mimms remembers that Jordan's long conversation with Kingsland delayed their usual weekday early closing time.

Kingsland wasn't the only white person at the Green Duck that night. Sergeant Charles Barnes from the Kansas City Police Department also stopped by to talk to Jordan. Jordan

¹⁰⁵ Interviews of Ethalyn Anita Gordon, July 27, Joseph Ira Stevenson, VeEssey Spivey, and Katherine Parker, July 28, and Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, KCPD files, LJC.

expressed concern about the “black mafia” that he felt responsible for recent bank robberies and other illegal activities. The FBI had raided the homes of Gene Richardson, Doc Dearborn, and Eddie Cox by this time, and the immediate results of the raid was published in the newspaper, but it had not yet published its detailed report of the burgeoning “black mafia.” Barnes rode with the Jordans when Leon took Orchid home shortly after midnight. Leon left Orchid with the thought he would be home soon to share ice cream with her.¹⁰⁶

Joe Stevenson stayed at the Green Duck drinking three or four vodkas until about midnight when George Meadows, a former bartender, offered to drive him home. Meanwhile Ethalyn had gone to bed chatting with EvEssey Spivey. Sometime after midnight she asked her host when she had last heard from Leon. EvEssey replied that he was probably still at the Green Duck. So Ethalyn called there. Katherine Parker took the call and told Ethalyn, Jordan was just checking out. Ethalyn identified herself as Ethel Gordon from California, and when Leon heard this he immediately took the call telling Katherine that Ethel was Joe Stevenson’s ex-wife. He asked how long she had been in town and after an extended jovial conversation asked what she was drinking. She told him “Hennessys” and he said he would bring a bottle and stop by to see her. Gussie Mimms, who ran the liquor store attached to the Green Duck, remembers Gordon suggesting she would drop by the Green Duck, but Leon responding, “Oh Hell, we’re closed—I’ll drop you one by.” Mimms packaged a bottle of Hennessey cognac and two bottles of sweet soda at Jordan’s request.

Gussie Mimms had been with Jordan many years and knew those who walked in and out of the Green Duck about as well as anyone. Fezell Vernell, Irene Smith’s former husband, would come to see Mimms when Jordan wasn’t there. But Mimms denied to police knowing any girl friends Jordan might have. After making up the package, Mimms left with Parker about

¹⁰⁶ Statements by Robert D. Kingsland, August 6, and Charles Barnes, July 15, 1970, KCPD files, LJC.

12:45 or 12:50 a.m. It was the night of the All Star Major League Baseball Game. Mimms remembers the street being surprisingly quiet when she left. She guessed that after the game everybody had gone to sleep. She did remember, however, seeing a lone boy, about thirteen years old riding by fast on a bicycle. That sighting gave credence to a young boy's story that he witnessed Jordan's murder and could identify the killers.

After finishing his conversation with Gordon, Leon called Irene Smith and told her he was going home to eat ice cream with Orchid. Orchid left a hand-written note among other memorabilia at the Bruce Watkins Cultural Center that read: "Met in Topeka, Kans—On playground went to get ice cream cone and came to ask if anyone would like a lick. The nite of his death I was waiting for him to come home to eat ice cream with me."¹⁰⁷

Kenneth Irvin was the night clean-up man at the Green Duck. He arrived that evening about 11:45 p.m. and began stocking shelves. After Parker and Mimms went home, Irvin was left alone with Jordan. It was customary for Jordan to lock Irvin in the tavern when he left. Shortly after 1 a.m., Jordan said, "See you in the morning, Kenny," took his package of cognac and Vess soda and locked the door behind him.

In the back of the bar, Irvin heard a blast. As he walked to the front of the bar, he heard a second and thought perhaps a third. When the police interviewed Irvin immediately after the shooting, he denied seeing any details of the crime except Jordan lying in front of the tavern. However, after a lie detector test indicating that he wasn't being completely truthful, he then testified that "When I got to the window, I looked out and saw Mr. Jordan lying in the street by his car. At that time I saw a negro man who has bushy hair, what they call an Afro, but it wasn't a great big one. This man was dressed in a dark colored suit and it looked like his shirt was

¹⁰⁷ Interviews of Gussie Mimms, July 15, Ethalyn Anita Gordon, July 27, Joseph Ira Stevenson, Ve Essey Spivey, and Katherine Parker, July 28, 1970, KCPD files, LJC; Orchid Jordan's handwritten note, Archives, Bruce Watkins Cultural Center, copy, LJC.

lighter than his suit. This man looked like to me that he was stocky build, and was a little taller than I am, and I am five feet—five inches tall. I know he wasn't six feet tall. . . .I would guess this man to be between 35 and 40 years old, and he didn't appear to me to be a jitterbug, which I mean a younger boy with all the fancy clothes. This man was facing Mr. Jordan, who was lying in the street, and he was holding a long barreled gun, which could have been a shot gun and might have been a pump-type shot gun. Just as I looked out the window of the tavern, and saw this man from the window and ran to the phone to call the police. As I was dialing the phone to call the police, I heard a car speeding away and it sounded to me like it was going west on 26th Street. Shortly after this the police came and also Gussie Mimms, the barmaid, who unlocked the door of the tavern and let me out.” Months later Irvin would change his story again, eventually providing more incriminating details leading to the indictments of James A. Willis, Doc Dearborn, and Maynard Cooper.¹⁰⁸

After locking the tavern door, Jordan habitually drew his 38 calibre pistol from its holster behind his back as he walked toward his car always parked in the same spot. He also had keys and packaged cognac in his hand. Just after he neared his car and placed his pistol in his right pocket a shotgun blast fired from a car slowly moving south on Prospect crumpled him to the pavement, keys flying. The first shot came after Jordan pocketed his pistol. That suggests his ambushers had watched him carefully and knew his habits. The car carrying three men stopped. One got out and fired two more blasts into Jordan's prone body. After the man returned to the car, the car turned the corner and sped east on 26th Street. The pellets found in Jordan's body were OO shot, the heaviest used in shotguns. At least two shots were fired from such close range the wadding from the shells was found in his wounds.

¹⁰⁸ *Kansas City Call*, July 17, 1970; Interviews of Kenneth Irvin, July 15, 1970, July 23, 1970 and July 27, 1970, KCPD file, LJC.

The blasts were heard at the fire station just up the street at 2534 Prospect. The fire captain and two fire fighters were quickly on the scene with a resuscitator, but to no avail. The police response was also swift. Police arrived at 1:17 a.m. to find the firefighters at work. Gussie Mimms and Orchid Jordan were there even before the police. Mimms had no sooner walked into her home than she received Irvin's call. She rushed back to the Green Duck to find Orchid cradling Leon's head in her lap. She unlocked Irvin from the tavern. Leon was then quickly moved to Research Hospital at Orchid's request. But it was too late. The firefighters had never discovered a pulse. He was pronounced DOA. Dr. Mark Bryant, who had visited Leon earlier in the evening, made the official declaration as coroner.

All of Leon's belongings found at the scene were identified by Orchid. As a former police officer, Leon carried a 38 calibre blue steel pistol for self protection. That was now in his pocket. Money, credit cards, etc. all were found. This was not a robbery, but an assassination. The package



containing the cognac and the Vess soda was at first a puzzle. Orchid claimed it was not her husband's. That was not his drink. But Gussie Mimms apparently cleared that up.

After Bryant's official ruling, Leon's body was sent to General Hospital, and Orchid went home where several friends had gathered, including the leaders of Freedom. Orchid's

brother Harvey Ramsey was also there. The investigating officer quickly realized this was not the best scene for asking questions and cut her visit short. 109

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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BLOOD STAINS NEAR A FRONT TIRE show where Leon Jordan's body fell after he was shot to death early today near Twenty fifth street and Prospect avenue. Chalk circles (center foreground) mark where shotgun shells were found.—Kansas City Star photograph by Joe Wellington.

LEON JORDAN IS SLAIN

Three Blasts From Assassin's Shotgun Kill One of the City's Most Powerful Negro Political Leaders—Attack Occurs in Front of His Tavern at 2548 Prospect

HUNT FOR 3 KILLERS

Metro Squad Takes Up Investigation Into Murder of the State Representative and Co-Founder of Freedom, Inc., Political Group

The police Metro squad today began an intensive investigation into the shotgun slaying of Rep. Leon M. Jordan (D-Kansas City), president of Freedom, Inc., a major Jackson County political organization.

Jordan, 65 years old, was struck by three blasts of 00 buckshot early today as he left the Green Duck tavern, 2548 Prospect avenue, which he owned and operated. He died instantly.

Witnesses told police the car with two men in the front seat and one in the rear passed the scene at the instant Jordan was shot. The murder occurred at 1:13 o'clock today when Jordan was walking from the front door of his tavern to his car parked nearby.

At the Metro square, police already had issued a pick-up order for a 1969 brown-colored Pontiac car occupied by three Negro men.

Jordan reached his peak in state politics in 1966 in the contest for United States senator and governor.

In the senatorial contest, the support of Jordan and his political organization, Freedom, Inc., was strongly sought in the Democratic primary election by former Sen. Edward V. Long, Thomas F. Eagleton and Tom Davis. Davis was running the hard-stance campaign and Long had voted in the Senate for eight years for all civil rights causes.

Jordan, in making one of his most difficult decisions, joined other leaders of Freedom, Inc., in announcing support of that organization for Eagleton who won the 5-way primary fight for the Democratic nomination and who carried the election.

In addition to his election-day work for Eagleton, Jordan had announced his decision early enough to have an impact on those politicians who traditionally stand back while waiting for a winner to emerge.

The Green Duck tavern was the frequent scene of top-level political discussions. Candidates for offices ranging from the United States Senate to committee posts used there to seek support from Jordan.

Gov. Warren E. Hearnes, on the day of the death of Jordan today, said "a leader of people has been taken from us."

(Continued on page 1B)

SHARP STRIKE AT ENEMY

South Vietnamese Troops Undertake a Major New Offensive With the Aim of Destroying Base Camps of Foe in Jungle Terrain West of Da Nang

AIDED BY U. S.

Marine 'Copiers Land Assault Forces, American Advisers

BULLETIN

Washington (AP)—Secretary William P. Rogers of the State department declared today that success of Allied operations in Cambodia has increased the probability that eventually the Communists will decide to negotiate seriously on a peace settlement in Vietnam. Rogers thus reversed a negative emphasis he had given with statements in London when he said the Vietnam war "might very well end up with a situation of no war and no peace."

Salon (AP) — Nearly 8,000 South Vietnamese troops launched a major new sweep today, seeking to destroy North Vietnamese base camps in rugged jungle country west of Da Nang.

Kicking off one of the biggest operations in months in the northern provinces, waves of U. S. Marine helicopters landed the assault troops and their American advisers shortly after daylight in an area 25 to 40 miles east of the Lao-

(Continued on Page 2A)

LOSE A LEADER

Black Political Group Badly Hurt by Jordan's Murder

By Robert P. Sigman

Within hours after Rep. Leon M. Jordan was killed by assassins early today, his co-leaders moved to fill the void left by the death of the president of Freedom, Inc., the major black political organization in Kansas City.

Pressed by the closeness of the August 4 primary, Bruce R. Watkins, circuit clerk, and Rep. Harold L. Holiday (D-Kansas City), confederated at length and then lashed with candidates and politicians outside the group. Commitments made in the election by Jordan and the group will "remain in place," Holiday said.

A Militant Remains

Jordan's death left only Leo A. Robinson, a young black activist, in the Democratic primary race for Jordan's 11th district seat in the Missouri House of Representatives. No Republican filed in the district.

"There is a state that provides when an incumbent stands for re-election after, the 15 days can be opened for five days," Holiday pointed out.

In Jefferson City, James Kirkpatrick, Missouri secretary of state, said the law applies to both political parties.

Rare Is Open

Fillings will open in his office in the Missouri Capitol at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning and will continue Friday, Saturday, Monday and Tuesday. The closing deadline will be 1:30 o'clock Tuesday afternoon, Kirkpatrick said.

Frank Martin, chief clerk of the Kansas City Election board, said the primary ballots were now being printed and it would not be possible for Jordan's name to be removed. His name can be covered, however.

Mr. Bertine Onley, Jackson County clerk, said filings for the committee post in the 15th ward will be reopened tomorrow. Robinson and another candidate are filed.

Mr. Onley said the county committee election falls under the same provisions that apply to state legislative races in event of an incumbent's death.

"This is not going to destroy Freedom, Inc.," Holiday said of the slaying. "In fact, it gives us added incentive to do the job we were trying to do."

Jordan, who was considered the top leader of the organization, handled many of the political details, such as recruiting workers and getting the vote out on election day, as well as negotiating with politicians outside the group.

Watkins worked closely with Jordan in co-ordinating campaign activities.

"Bruce is pretty well braced for the winter cannot be done if uncovered buildings."

"If we were to consider placing artificial coverings over the terminal buildings to allow the concrete work to be completed we would be talking in the neighborhood of approximately 2 million dollars of additional construction costs," he added.

"If the strike were to end today, with luck and considerable reworking of all the construction contracts we could project

(Continued on Page 2A)

War's End a Key To Campus Peace

Washington (AP)—A presidential commission aimed at pacifying the nation's campuses was told today it will not succeed until the Vietnam war ends.

"It may well be," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), "that the only line in the commission's report that will have any real meaning for our colleges and universities is the line that reads: 'This war must end.'"

Kennedy and Hugh Scott, Senate Republican leader were among the six witnesses called at the first hearing of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest.

The others: S. I. Hayakawa, San Francisco state college President; Robben Fleming, University of Michigan president; Charles Palmer, National Student Association president; and Otis Coakley, president of the Black American Law Student union.

Scott declared, "We must retreat from demagoguery in all its scelerous form. It is time to show each other our humanity, our human goodness."

"Student awareness does this generation credit, as does their idealism. Their anger at the system, the establishment, is evidence of this awareness."

The commission, headed by William W. Scrantom, former Republican governor of Pennsylvania, was named a month ago by President Nixon in the wake of campus uprisings that followed the U. S. move into Cambodia.

Spared especially by the shooting deaths of four students at Kent State university in Ohio and two youths at Jackson State college in Mississippi, Nixon asked the panel for full recommendations by October 1.

Palmer, who represents student governments at about 500 campuses said:

"Many students see this commission as a possible vehicle for change, but believe your recommendations will be only superficially followed and that your report will join the Kerensky and Eisenhower Commissions' statements on some dusty shelves."

A presidential commission headed by former Illinois

(Continued on Page 2A)

State Felt His Power

By Henry Clay Gold

Chickering's success in Missouri, Jordan, whose death today stunned Missouri officials and political leaders, often was hailed as the Democratic party's most effective warrior in election day.

Jordan reached his peak in state politics in 1966 in the contest for United States senator and governor.

In the senatorial contest, the support of Jordan and his political organization, Freedom, Inc., was strongly sought in the Democratic primary election by former Sen. Edward V. Long, Thomas F. Eagleton and Tom Davis. Davis was running the hard-stance campaign and Long had voted in the Senate for eight years for all civil rights causes.

Jordan, in making one of his most difficult decisions, joined other leaders of Freedom, Inc., in announcing support of that organization for Eagleton who won the 5-way primary fight for the Democratic nomination and who carried the election.

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Gov. Warren E. Hearnes, on the day of the death of Jordan today, said "a leader of people has been taken from us."

(Continued on page 1B)

Hanoi Silence: A Call for Peace?

The National-World Editor The Star has just returned from Southeast Asia where he spent six weeks in Cambodia and Vietnam. It was his fifth reporting assignment in the area since 1962.

On Inside Pages

The Kansas City Chiefs-College All-Star football game, scheduled for July 31 in Chicago, remains in jeopardy. In the latest development, the All-Stars issue, through the National Football League Players association, a statement declaring they will discontinue supervised practices, Otto Graham

prompt talks with the Chicago Tribune Charles, sponsors of the game, as to the status of the match. Page 1B.

A senator plans hearings into the 5,000 bombings that

BOHANNON VIEW ON SLAYING

At a press conference early this afternoon Leo Bohannon, candidate for state representative from the 11th district, said that the sympathy of his organization goes to Freedom Inc., and Mrs. Jordan's family over the slaying last night of Leon Jordan.

His statements followed: "These are troubled times, and the death of Mr. Jordan our organization will and has suffered greatly. We now turn our campaign to the people and Freedom Inc. for advice and support."

"Moral and campaign supporters have worked long and hard, and if it be the will of God, today, said 'a leader of people has been taken from us'."

(Continued on Page 2A)

K.C.I. OPENING DELAYED

Development Director Tells City Council the Construction Strike Has Set Back Date at Least Until 1972

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(Continued on Page 2A)

ROOFS NOT ON

Exposure to Weather Will Prevent Work This Winter

He said the primary reason for the most recent projected delay was that the construction strike has prohibited the finishing of the concrete roofs of the six, high tower in the 11th ward.

11 midnight 87° 8 a.m. 77°
1 a.m. 77° 8 a.m. 77°
3 a.m. 77° 8 a.m. 77°
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7 a.m. 77° 8 a.m. 77°
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11 p.m. 77° 8 a.m. 77°

Relative humidity, 4 a.m., 71 per cent; 1 p.m., 49 per cent.

1-8 bet will full maximum.

GO MAKE — Got the MAXIMUM sun shining, sunny, sunny with some scattered star and times showers. All 100% - 100%.

(Continued on Page 2A)

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(Continued on Page 2A)

109 KCPD crime scene report, July 15, 1970, FBI file, LJC; Kansas City Times and Kansas City Star, July 15, 1970; Call, July 17 & 24, 1970.

Kansas City woke up that morning to a front page of the *Kansas City Times* announcing Jordan's murder. The *Times* editorial was quoted at the beginning of this story. It immediately recognized that Jordan's murder was an enormous loss to the community. That day's *Kansas City Star* ran the banner headline, LEON JORDAN IS SLAIN. Front page stories detailed the achievements of Freedom, Inc. under Jordan's leadership. Jordan's death and achievements also blanketed the *Kansas City Call* when it appeared July 17th.

The *Call*'s editorial registers the black community's shock, anger, and determination: "Leon Jordan is dead—the victim of an assassin's bullet—but the legacy that he leaves will keep his memory green.

"Leon will never die because the things that he stood for and the organization that he founded and headed—Freedom, Inc.—will live on.

"Freedom, which grew from a tiny seed in the minds of Leon Jordan and Bruce Watkins a scant eight years ago, has become today the strongest black-controlled political organization this city and state have ever known. It started in the 14th ward less than 10 years ago and gradually grew in size and strength until today it operates effectively in four wards and in the coming August primary and November elections, it hopes to expand into a fifth. . . .

"The early morning murder of Leon Jordan shocked and stunned Kansas Citians of all races and of both political parties. Disbelief was the first political reaction, followed by shock, dismay and bewilderment.

"The question on everyone's lips is 'Why?'

"Leon Jordan was not a man to make enemies. He was a friendly and likable man. He was kind, generous, and had a habit of helping, not hurting, people. He was free with his worldly goods. Many is the person, who got help from Jordan when he needed it most.

“It is ironic that he should be shot down with a gun fired by a black man’s hand when Jordan spent his life fighting and pushing for the rights of black men and striving to make the world a better place to live in which to bring up youngsters of all races.

“Freedom, Inc., was conceived because Jordan felt that only building a strong political base could the Negro in Kansas City or anywhere else achieve the economic and social justice which he had sought for decades.

“Jordan’s theory turned out to be correct.”¹¹⁰

Focus/Midwest quoted Senator Thomas Eagleton’s thoughts on learning of Jordan’s death:

“In just a few years as the guiding hand of Freedom, Inc., he molded the black community of Kansas City into the kind of powerful political force for the accomplishment of black objectives it always should have been but never was before.”

It followed Eagleton’s words with its own comment:

“There is little to add. Jordan played ball with the disreputable as well as the elite. He made vote trades, to which he freely admitted. In his last interview, he expressed the struggles with his conscience such actions forced on him. But there is one thing he never did—sell out his people for himself.

“In his heart he was as militant as any posturing streetcorner Stokely; in his manner he was as conciliatory and gracious as any Pullman porter. In between these extremes was the whole man with both ideals to be realized and moxie to recognize the clearest route toward their realization.

“He did not talk like a Jefferson nor act like a Lincoln. He was a politician and a legislator, in the most literal sense of those words.

¹¹⁰ *Call*, July 17 & 24, 1970.

“We are sorry he won’t be with his people any more and we share their sorrow doubly because he was a decent, honest and effective presence for men of good will, regardless of their pigmentation.”¹¹¹

In addition to the editorial that appeared in the *Call*, Lucile Bluford wrote a more personal story about the man she knew since she was in pigtails and he a teenager. She began by mentioning her leisurely phone conversation with him the afternoon before his murder. She remembered this conversation ranging over a broad variety of subjects, noting that while she and Leon often disagreed on some subjects, she always enjoyed their disagreements and usually learned something in the process. This day, however, there was no disagreement. Leon was in a jovial mood, although he seemed more concerned about the challenge to his political seat than she thought he should be.

She then asked him whether Jack Scott, a former Lincoln high school basketball and tennis star, now living in Detroit, had reached him the previous weekend. Scott had come by the *Call*’s office and said that Leon was one of the people he wanted to see. Leon said Scott did indeed reach him. They had a good visit. Leon had taken Scott to see his farm and then put him back on the plane to Detroit.

“Leon was the kind of guy who made lasting impressions on people and who made strong friendships. When old friends came to town, they could not leave until they had visited with Leon. . . . Friends would be grieved at the death of Leon Jordan no matter when or how it occurred. But to have him shot down by assassins in cold blood is more than his friends can take. They can’t understand how anyone would want to kill Leon, a big, likeable, friendly guy who was congenial and jolly most of the time, giving the impression that he didn’t have a care in the world.

¹¹¹ Undated copy of *Focus/Midwest* editorial, LJC.

“This is not to say that Leon did not at times display a temper when he became aroused or agitated about something, but his ‘spouting off’ was short lived and for the most part he always had a smile, a hearty handshake, and was ready with a wise-crack or a joke. He carried on a lot of foolishness and when he felt good and was younger, he was loud and at times boisterous, yet at the same time he had a serious side.

“At heart, he was a ‘race’ man who believed in building Negro power politically and economically. His and Freedom’s goals actually were quite similar to those of the young black militants who were opposing him in the August primary. Both groups are interested in building race pride and race strength.

“Leon sought to build pride in his people not by talking about it but by building an organization in which his people could have pride through its accomplishments. He saw the Negro’s greatest avenue of power to be through political strength. On this, I was wholeheartedly in agreement with him.”

Bluford remembers that Jordan had “reservations about going into the liquor business” when he returned from Liberia. “But Leon’s friends talked him out of his squeamish feelings.” She noted that he “ran a clean, orderly establishment. There was never any trouble in his place that he couldn’t handle himself.” She also said that over the last few years, in several conversations with her he expressed his longing “for the day he could turn the reins of the organization [Freedom] over to a younger man.”

Dr. Girard T. Bryant, friend of Jordan’s for forty-four years going back to their days together in Topeka, and recently named President of Penn Valley Community College, remembered Jordan as, “Sometimes loud and boisterous, almost always radiating good humor and wholesome fun, occasionally quick to anger and equally quick to forgive, constantly making

friends and sometimes short term enemies, Leon went through his life helping people in general, black people in particular. He was a true leader of blacks because he could count on 20,000 or more Negro votes to back him and Freedom, Inc., which he founded. But in any sense of the word, Leon was a leader.

“As his friend, I grieve for him. I grieve also for my people who, by any test, are the real losers in this senseless carnage. It is too late now to rant about the rising rate of homicides or to scatter blame right and left in a futile effort to obtain justice. It is not too late, however, for black people to awaken to what is happening in their midst and to put a stop to it. And only they can do it.”¹¹²

George Lehr, who would go on to become Missouri’s State Auditor and later win plaudits for cleaning up the scandal-plagued Teamsters Union Central States Pension Fund, said of Jordan: “Politically, he was almost a father to me. I don’t know what to say. There’s no way I can communicate what a great loss this is. He was the Martin Luther King of this community. . . . The number of kids he sent through school—paid their way through , no one will ever know. . . .I talked to him a few hours before the shooting. He cautioned me against campaigning out there. He said it appeared to be much testier than in recent years. He said to let him worry about the campaigning out there.”¹¹³

Among the written memories Orchid elicited from friends for a potential book on Leon’s life was one from Kenneth and Julia Smith of Oakland, California. The Jordans had visited San Francisco a few months before Leon’s murder. The Smiths dropped by the Jordans’ hotel to take them on a drive to beautiful Sausalito sitting at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais and spreading to the

¹¹² *Call*, July 17 & 24, 1970.

¹¹³ Amy Hart, “The Founding of Freedom,” pp. 89, 94.

waters of San Francisco Bay. The ladies went shopping. The men watched the ebb and flow of the Bay waters and the varied pedestrians walking by:

“While standing there, leaning on a parking meter, Leon mentioned that the little city of Sausalito reminded him of a section of Paris, France. . . .He said that he had gone to Paris because he wanted to have the privilege of doing the things he wanted to do and not running into friends and acquaintances which would surely persuade him otherwise. Leon also mentioned that never in his life had he gone anywhere that he had not run into someone who knew him or whom he knew. He laughingly recalled that Paris was no exception. Leon had barely completed this statement when up walked a young fellow and said, ‘Pardon me, sir, aren’t you Mr. Leon Jordan of Kansas City, Missouri?’ He went on to say, ‘You possibly do not know me, but my father (mentioning his father by name) is a longtime friend of yours and, of course, I have known you all of my life.’ When the young man left, Leon looked at me and stated very simply, ‘Kenny, history repeats itself; for me there ain’t no hidin’ place down here.’”

For Smith this experience pointed up Leon’s “warmth, personality and demeanor. Leon loved people. Leon served people, and people responded in kind. . . .Leon Jordan was of Kansas City, Missouri, but he cast rays of sunshine throughout the world. And because of this, there was no hiding place down here for him, and I will wager a small bet that there ‘AIN’T NO HIDIN’ PLACE’ for him ‘up there.’”¹¹⁴

Jordan’s funeral on Saturday, July 18th, the largest funeral Kansas City has seen in recent years, was held at the Watkins Funeral Home. Before the services began, Bruce Watkins, with his mother Olivia Watkins at his side, closed his friend’s casket for the last time with tears in his eyes. More than 1500 people overflowed the chapel. Gov. Warren E. Hearnes, Lt. Governor

¹¹⁴Letter to Orchid Jordan from Kenneth Frederick Smith, Orchid Jordan Collection, Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Center, copy in LJC.

William Morris, U.S. Senator Stuart Symington, U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton, Kansas City Mayor Ilus W. Davis, a large delegation from the state legislature, and numerous city and county officials attended. Freedom, Inc., officials sat in a special section.

Senator Thomas Eagleton and Representative Harold Holliday were the two main speakers at Jordan's funeral. Even though their eulogies are quoted at the beginning of this biography, it is appropriate to quote them again here. Eagleton remembered visiting Jordan a few weeks earlier at the Green Duck where the two went into the back room "which Leon rather imaginatively called his office.

"Orchid was up in the little loft area doing the bookkeeping. Leon and I were seated below. He told me to sit on the only chair—after all, I was a U. S. Senator—thanks in large measure to Leon Jordan—and he was seated on a box turned on its side.

"Listen here, Tom,' he told me, 'some of you white people talk about race. Well, let me tell you—there is a race. That race is the race that all of us are in—black people, brown people, yellow people, white people. That race is the race of life.

"The trouble is,' Leon went on, 'that for so many years you white people wouldn't let us blacks even get to the starting line so that we could get into the race.

" We now have some laws that say we can get to the starting line.

" Tom, as long as I live I am going to try to see to it that my people compete in the race of life.

" We've got to run. We've got to be on the go. We've got to be part of the action."

Eagleton began by noting that the opportunity to give a speech to a politician is ordinarily "both easy and desirable." But the occasion of this eulogy was "neither easy nor desirable. . .

.Leon Jordan was my friend. . . .The death of a friend is a traumatic experience, shockingly aggravated in this setting when that death was provoked wantonly. . .brutally. . .senselessly.”

Despite the dirty connotation that the word, “politician,” carries to some, he and Jordan accepted the title, and for both it “ranks in quality with the title ‘judge,’ or ‘minister,’ or ‘doctor.’

“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.”

Eagleton closed by likening the thoughts of this “concerned, sensitive, vital and dedicated man” to Martin Luther King’s appeal at another time and in another city to “Let freedom ring

from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. . . .And when we allow freedom to ring from every village, from every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black men and White men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

Harold L. Holliday reminded his audience that "Leon was a descendant of that nation of black and kinky haired people who were brought to this land bound and in chains. His was the heritage of one whose forefathers were enslaved, whose bodies knew the sting and hurt of the whip and the lash and were bought and sold like cattle, and were counted and inventoried as a part of the wealth of their owners. His was a heritage of oppression, a heritage of the most outrageous enactment of the tyranny of men over men.

"He was born of a place and time when the people declared that he, solely by reason of his race and color, was inherently inferior. He, therefore, was to be excluded from that society of other so-called civilized folk, thru policies of segregation, discrimination and exclusion, policies which were firmly embedded in the law of the land and enjoyed every legal sanction. But this situation of evil was not to forever endure—For along came Leon Mercer Jordan who a long time ago looked at his heritage and his history—became an extension of these and then took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and entered the arena, joined the struggle for justice, equality and freedom.

"After many years of battle thru the NAACP, the Community Committee for Social Action and similar organizations, it came to pass that one day he decided that the fight for justice, equality and freedom could best be attacked thru government and by law—so it was that the decision was made to create Freedom, Inc.

“Leon taught us to build, not destroy. Real black power he said is vote power and he made vote power synonymous with Freedom, Inc. Today, Freedom, Inc. is an instrument of black power exercised on a scale and to a degree never before known in this county.

“Never forget, never forget this man who lay here. This man of iron will, the boundless energy, and the vision. Yes, the vision—the vision to see that that one day would come when every legal sanction of segregation and discrimination would be stricken from the laws of this land—the vision that he could help to make it so. Oh, yes, remember that day in 1964 when Leon brought us all together and led us to the polls to make certain that there was placed among the laws of this city the requirement that every public place be open to every man. Then he went to Jefferson City and placed the same law among the laws of the state. The iron will and determination of Leon Jordan has increased the number of black elected officials in this county from two to eighteen. Today black men sit on our city council. Today black men sit on our school board. Black men sit on our Junior College board. Black men sit in the state legislature. Black men sit on the Circuit bench, as our County Clerk and County Coroner. Black men sit in these places because of the political power of Leon Jordan and Freedom, Inc.

“Thank God, black men now know power—black power.

“Remember the days when black men, hat in hand, went begging to white plantation boss politicians, who thru instruments of fear and intimidation delivered the black vote. And in return, black folks got nothing. But this humiliating and degrading circumstance is now over.

“The day came when any man who wants to win public office by the vote of this county had to come to Leon Jordan. How often have we seen Leon sitting there on that elevated platform he used as an office at the Green Duck, he peering down in the uplifted faces of Magistrates, Prosecutors, Collectors, County Judges, Senators, State Representatives,

Congressmen and U. S. Senators. They all came to request the support of Leon Jordan and Freedom, Inc.

“Leon often said that the fact that men of great power came to him was not a tribute to him, but rather an indication of the respect and appreciation that powerful men had for the power of the black vote. Leon always said that he was only the instrument thru which the will of his people could be made known. But he was more than that.

“He was the Leader. A true gifted servant of the people. His was the vision, the wisdom to know the job to be done and how to do it. He was the man with vision who saw the need, and refused to believe that the need could not be met. His was the love, the will, the unswerving determination that no black child should come into the world amid the evils among which he was born. His was the inspiration, that driving personality which compelled other men to believe—to act.”

After an extensive procession of cars to the grave site at St. Anthony Gardens in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Father Edward L. Warner, Jordan’s priest at St. Augustine’s, gave the funeral sermon. Noting that Jordan’s death followed soon upon the recent deaths of Medgar Evers, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, he posed the question “is there any wonder that sometimes men refuse to get involved?” But he described Jordan as an “adventurist” who accepted the challenge “of that which is new and different.” Warner, elected to the school board just a year earlier, insisted Jordan’s work must go on. “His work has not been cut down with him. We will pay tribute to him best by getting back where the action is. It must be determined that death will not stop us.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Copies of Eagleton’s and Holliday’s eulogies to Jordan, LJC; *Call*, July 24 & 24, 1970.

XIV

Confusion, Prosecution Miscues, and Resolution

Freedom, Inc. rallied in the wake of Leon Jordan's murder.

Orchid was quickly persuaded to run for her husband's seat as state representative. In the primary she overwhelmed Lee Bohannon by a vote of 1961 to 157. She was easily elected in the November



elections and would go on to serve with quiet distinction and little opposition in that role for the next sixteen years before deciding to retire.

Bruce Watkins was named President of Freedom, Inc. Describing himself as Jordan's pupil, he publicly acknowledged that he was discarding his personal plans for the next ten years to accept a master plan for Freedom that Jordan had laid out for him the previous fall. He took notes during conversations he had with Jordan even though he had no foreboding of Jordan's tragic death. Now he used those notes to outline for the public Leon Jordan's Master Plan and dedicated himself to fulfilling it:

1. I [Jordan] plan to retire from the legislature in 2 years, hoping to give way to a young man, young enough in age that, should he choose, he would stay there for 20 years, possibly to become Speaker of the House someday by the seniority rule.

2. I have hope of unifying other black political wards to assure at least 4 black representatives on the City Council next year.
3. We must work harder that we may elect more free blacks to committee posts so we can gain a greater share of the Democratic policy-making in which blacks have supported for years.
4. If larger areas could be organized, there would be a great chance for a black western judge, or even a black candidate running for the U. S. Congress.
5. More blacks exercising voting power would change the employment practices of not only the government, but private enterprise and unions as well.
6. We must increase black representation in our Legislature by electing Sterling Bryant from the 15th district, and John Preciphs from the 2nd. This must be done this year. Of course, this strength will be combined with the re-election of the four representatives we now have. Such increased power should be followed by the election of one or two more representatives in the next two years, including a State Senator. You know, political influence helps change boundary lines.
7. We must begin to join hands with black groups in St. Louis and other larger size Missouri cities, to assure the support of state-wide candidates who are more concerned about Black problems.

Watkins closed with the challenging statement, “I will not deserve to be president of Freedom, Inc., which he founded, unless we have a victory just as he planned it to be.”¹¹⁶

Watkins would have a distinguished career in local politics culminating in an unsuccessful bid for mayor in 1979. He was suffering from cancer during his final campaign,

¹¹⁶ *Kansas City Call*, July 31-August 6, 1970.

and it took his life the following year. Freedom's ambition to have a black mayor in Kansas City would have to wait for Emanuel Cleaver's election in 1991. Alan Wheat became the first black representative of the 5th Congressional District in 1983. Watkins' tribute to Leon Jordan's master plan makes clear that while he was alive Jordan was the major architect of Freedom's extraordinary rise to political power. Leading Freedom, he not only freed the black community from its political servitude to white political bosses, but he created the political opportunity for future black Kansas Citians to be seen as leaders of the larger community. Freedom would go on to chalk up years of significant political victories, but as the intense involvement of the Civil Rights Era slowly faded, it became clear that Leon Jordan, presiding from the backroom office of the Green Duck, had played a role in Kansas City politics that would not be recreated.

Meanwhile Jordan's murder initiated a flurry of police activity to find his killers. Ironically Joe Teasdale, whom Freedom had been challenging as Prosecuting Attorney, was in charge. Two fourteen year old boys, Bobby Ramsey and Ronald Winstead, told police the day after the murder that they were riding their bikes in the area and had witnessed the crime. Although it later became clear that their story was not true, they did appear on the crime scene shortly after Jordan's murder and were able to describe details of the scene that were not generally known to the public. Ramsey said he recognized all three men who carried out the ambush. Ramsey identified Carlton Edward Miller and Reginald M. Watson in a police lineup, and the two were arrested. Teasdale, claiming the killing had all the earmarks of a professional gangland slaying and concerned for the safety of his two juvenile witnesses, kept a tight lid on what the police revealed to the public. He moved rapidly to convene a grand jury to indict Miller and Watson claiming that "the 20 Hour Rule prevented further investigation prior to filing

charges without releasing the suspects.” He placed Ramsey and Winstead in protective custody, keeping their identity secret.

Miller and Watson were charged with murder by a grand jury on July 17. Then the stories of the two young witnesses and the defendants began to be tested. The boys were brought to the scene for a reenactment of the murder. They were given lie detector tests. Witnesses for Miller and Watson appeared to refute the possibility of their being present at the murder scene. Discrepancies in the young boys’ stories became obvious. Ramsey ran away from protective custody and could not be found. After holding Miller and Watson in jail for ten days, on July 27 Teasdale was forced to drop the charges against them.

On the day Teasdale dropped the charges, Orchid Jordan voiced her regret and anger at a press conference held at Harold Holliday’s office. “I am heartsick at the actions of Prosecutor Teasdale in the handling of the investigation of State Representative Leon Jordan’s assassination. I never dreamed that anyone would seek to make political capital out of this tragedy but the prosecutor has attempted to do just that. Despite warnings from the police department to go slow while they continued their investigation, the prosecutor insisted that two men be charged with the murder on the unsupported testimony of a 14 year old boy. That witness failed to pass a lie detector examination when questioned. . . .Early in the campaign, Leon Jordan warned that the prosecutor would attempt to use his office for his own political gain. No one could have expected that he would do it in such a flagrant and despicable manner.”

Both Watkins and Holliday praised the police department and the metro squad for the way in which they investigated the murder, but they echoed Orchid Jordan’s indignation at Teasdale’s actions. Holliday commented, “Teasdale just loves those television cameras.”

In an editorial the *Call* pointed particularly to the injustice Miller and Watson suffered: “Ten days after their arrest and after ten days of notoriety, scorn and bitterness from a community which believed that the law-enforcement officials had done their job, the two men were found to be innocent and released but they will suffer to some degree for the rest of their lives for this act of false accusation. . . .Much time has been lost in the investigation and search for the real killers through the falsehood of a boy. How seasoned law-enforcement officials could be out-witted by a lying teen-ager is hard to understand.”

The editorial acknowledged proper steps were taken after charges had been brought against Miller and Watson that eventually led to the discrediting of the evidence against them, but went on to point out, “all this could have and should have been done prior to putting two innocent men through the torture that they have undergone by false charges that they killed Leon Jordan.”

Teasdale answered Freedom’s charges saying, “I had the facts in the Leon Jordan case. They didn’t. It’s as simple as that.” More convincingly in answer to the charge of political opportunism, he suggested it would have been politically to his advantage to hold Miller and Watson in custody until after the August primary. “Is letting them go, political opportunism?”¹¹⁷

A 1967 light brown Pontiac Bonneville was discovered late the day after Jordan’s murder in a weed-covered lot near 23rd and Highland. The car belonged to Verlin E. Kiblinger, who worked in the Kansas City postoffice and lived in Holt, Missouri. It was stolen from where he parked it the night of Jordan’s slaying. The shotgun used in the killing was found days later in a field at 24th Terrace and Garfield. Firing tests confirmed it was the murder weapon. That

¹¹⁷ *Kansas City Call*, July 31-August 6, 1970; *Kansas City Times*, July 28, 1970.

weapon had a bizarre history which would eventually prove crucial to the reinvestigation of Jordan's murder and the resolution of the crime.¹¹⁸

By early August following the murder, Bert C. Hurn, U. S. Prosecuting Attorney, announced that his office was investigating the possibility that federal laws were violated in Jordan's murder. While cooperating with the police investigation, he stressed that his office had no jurisdiction over the murder itself, but only with civil violations. However, FBI agents were soon on the scene. Freedom, Inc. collected a \$10,000 reward fund for information leading to the identification of the killers. Despite these robust efforts no charges would be filed again until 1973.

A year after Jordan's murder, Sgt. Lloyd DeGraffenreid, Sr., a former colleague of Jordan's on the police force and a good friend, who was then heading the investigation, said, "This is the most complex murder case I have ever worked on. In 23 years with the police department, I can't remember a case with less information, more blind alleys, more possible motives and more suspects. It's totally baffling."

De Graffenreid said they had looked at four possible motives: (1) Political reasons, (2) Business or personal animosity, (3) Jealousy (4) Criminal Activity. "So far, we have not uncovered one iota of evidence that Leon was involved in anything criminal. As for the other motives . . . I just can't say which one seems stronger than another. And then he might have been killed for a reason we haven't even thought of, something so trivial or unusual or simple that we've overlooked it."¹¹⁹

By mid 1972, Walter Ireland Froniamburger, who was involved in narcotics trafficking with Eugene Richardson, Eddie Cox and Doc Dearborn and who was imprisoned at the Federal

¹¹⁸ *Kansas City Times*, July 16, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1971; *Kansas City Star*, November 24, 2010; Captain James F. Connelly's report, pp. 41-45, 2nd KCPD Investigation of Jordan's murder, LJC.

¹¹⁹ *Kansas City Times*, July 16, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1971.

penitentiary at Leavenworth, got word to the authorities that he had information on the Jordan murder and he was ready to deal. After some reassurance that his cooperation might lead to a reduction in his sentence, he claimed to have been in the presence of James Willis in 1969, when the latter announced that he had received money for making a hit on Leon Jordan.

Froniaburger's story led to the indictment of James Willis, Maynard Cooper, and Doc Dearborn for the murder of Jordan.

The police long suspected that Kenneth Irvin had seen more of the crime than he had admitted to. They suspected he was fearful for his own safety. They finally persuaded Irvin that by putting him under protective custody he would be safe. He then said that he saw Jimmy Willis standing with the shotgun next to Jordan's body. Willis was brought before a jury in early December, 1973. The jury quickly found Willis not guilty. After that the Prosecuting Attorney saw no use bringing Cooper and Dearborn to trial.

The prosecution's two main witnesses, Froniaburger and Irvin, were very vulnerable to the attack of defense attorneys. In addition to being present when Willis claimed to receive money for a hit on Jordan, Froniaburger claimed to have been near the crime scene on the night of the slaying and to have seen Willis, Cooper, and Dearborn together in a car nearby just before the murder. Although he didn't witness the crime, he was parked near the scene and just after the crime claimed to have a clear view of Maynard Cooper standing over Jordan's body. The defense attorney not only dwelled on the admitted fact that Froniaburger had made a bargain for his testimony, but also got him to admit that at the time of the crime he was living with four women and profiting from their prostitution, and that he had been involved in the original burglary of the shotgun that was eventually used in Jordan's murder. He had also originally

suggested to police that it was Robert Willis, James's brother, who had said he received the hit money.

Kenneth Irvin probably had a more convincing reason for changing his story three times before identifying James Willis as Jordan's killer. He had originally been too afraid for his own life to tell anyone what he had seen. But clearly the inconsistent stories he told of that night's events were damaging. Irvin added a very suggestive detail in his testimony before the court. He said that as he returned to the front of the Green Duck after hearing the first shot, he heard Jordan say, "Oh, no," before the second shot went off. Jordan probably recognized at least one of his assailants, Doc Dearborn, a man whom he had befriended and believed was protecting him.

The key, however, to Willis's defense was his claim to have been on the road to Los Angeles at the time of Jordan's murder. Two men and a woman testified that they were with Willis on the road to Los Angeles to sell two Cadillacs he owned. The defense produced receipts for travelers checks that he cashed on the way, evidence of his registration at a motel, and testimony from a car dealer with whom he put his two cars up for sale.

The police were well aware of Willis's claims to be out of town and were suspicious that he had prearranged his alibi. Sgt. DeGraffenreid voiced his incredulity to me when he questioned how many people carefully save their gas and travelers checks receipts for such a long time after such an auto trip. Another fact that was not brought up in the trial that makes Willis's alibi suspicious is that Maynard Cooper also claimed to be driving to Los Angeles at the time of Jordan's murder. He was driving with Robert Willis, Jimmy's brother, and yet their trip was supposed to be completely independent of Jimmy's.

The police investigated Jimmy Willis's claims and were unable to come up with sufficient evidence to discredit them. Thus the prosecution decided not to contest these claims, but to suggest that it was possible for Jimmy to have flown back from Los Angeles in time to commit the murder and return in time to meet the car dealer as he claimed. However, the prosecution could not come up with any flight reservation evidence that would substantiate that Willis had indeed made such a journey. It remained only a possibility.

The jury quickly recognized how weak the case against Willis was. The first vote was 11 to 1. It took only a little more than an hour to reach a unanimous verdict of not guilty. Jimmy Willis cried with relief and jubilation before returning to his jail cell where he was doing time for a conspiracy to evade the purchase of a liquor license. For a long time that court decision took all the wind out of the investigation of Leon Jordan's murder.

A letter addressed to Jordan and published in the *Call* after the court trial expresses the weary public exasperation that followed:

Dear Leon,

We're trying, but whoever did the job is still doing it, according to the Jackson County Prosecutor's office. Ralph Martin, Jackson County Prosecutor, has dismissed the charges against Maynard Cooper and James "Doc" Dearborn, in connection with your murder case.

Why were they dropped? It seems as if the prosecutors didn't have much of a case to begin with. The case of James Willis, also accused of killing you, was supposed to be the "best" case they had. There were two witnesses who claimed they either saw Willis standing beside you with a gun, or heard Willis say there was a "hit" out for you. Both were discredited in pretty short order. So short, in fact that it took the all-white jury just 75 minutes to return a not-guilty verdict in favor of Willis.

Dearborn is now in the U. S. Penitentiary in Atlanta serving 25 years for narcotics convictions. Cooper is out walking the streets somewhere.

I haven't heard too much about those first two fellas they accused, Reginald Watson and Carleton Miller, since they were released a little while after you were killed. Three years, umph, time sure flies.

Anyway, Leon, I just thought I would bring you up to date on what is happening (&) about your death. Maybe I'll have more news for you in a year or so.

Sincerely yours

A. "B.Z." Boddy

(Elton Alexander)¹²⁰

The rumors about who killed Jordan and why continued to circulate with occasional vehement differences of opinion, but inevitably Jordan's murder began to fade from public memory as people focused on ordinary matters of more immediate concern. Then thirty-seven years after that plaintive letter the *Kansas City Star* commemorated the fortieth anniversary of Jordan's murder with a lengthy review. Alvin Sykes, a local activist, who won international recognition for getting the FBI to reinvestigate the notorious murder of Emmett Till, then decided the Leon Jordan murder needed and deserved public resolution.

Sykes encouraged other civil rights leaders to advocate a new investigation, but these efforts first met resistance. The police department, however, began reviewing the evidence it held from the first investigation and were dismayed to find that the shotgun used to kill Jordan was missing. The weapon had earlier been traced to a burglary of the Coast to Coast Hardware

¹²⁰ *Kansas City Call*, December 7, 14, 1973; *Kansas City Times*, December 5, 6, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, December 5, 6, 7, 1970; Depositions of Lloyd Allen DeGraffenreid, October 9, 1973, and Sylvester Young, September 17, 1973; and Reporter's Transcript of the case of *The People of the State of California vs. Maynard L. Cooper*, June 15, 1973, LJC.

Store in Independence. That prompted an internal search that revealed the gun was acquired by an unknown person outside the department in 1976. It was then purchased from a local dealer the following year to be used in a patrol car. In 1997 the gun was used by an officer in the shooting of a suspect. Consequently it was sent to the police laboratory. It was then returned to a patrol car assigned to Special Operations Division in 1998 until it was recovered while the department was deciding whether or not to reinvestigate Jordan's murder.

Capt. Rich Lockhart admitted the department's lack of care for a significant piece of evidence as he announced to the public that the department had successfully located the weapon in one of its own cars. He also reported that earlier reviews may also have been inadequate. This persuaded Chief Corwin, when he next met with Alvin Sykes, to take another look at the Jordan murder case. The result was a very lengthy and fruitful investigation that established that Doc Dearborn was chiefly responsible for Jordan's murder.¹²¹

The second police investigation focused much more clearly on the activities of the Black Mafia and featured lengthy interviews of those still alive who might know anything about the Jordan murder. The witnesses often contradicted each other and even themselves. They described sordid pandering and brutal intimidation resulting in murder, arson, and bizarre sexual behavior. There are also many self-serving stories of clearly questionable happenings. All in all it is a vivid view of underground crime during those years that is challenging to summarize. But as the questioning bore relentlessly on what was known about the Jordan murder, the role of Dearborn became obviously central.

Dearborn was a leading suspect in the first police investigation. He was charged with murder along with Maynard Cooper and Jimmy Willis when Willis was tried in 1972 and found not guilty. In the second investigation, the relations between Jimmy Willis, his brother Robert,

¹²¹ *Kansas City Star*, July 11 & 29, 2010.

Maynard Cooper, and Walter Froniaburger, who was a prosecuting witness in the Willis trial and the leaders of the Black Mafia, Eugene Richardson, Eddie Cox, and Doc Dearborn were all explored in much greater detail. The close relationships between these men may explain why Jimmy Willis and Maynard Cooper had such carefully prepared defenses indicating they were on the road at the time of the Jordan murder. They may well have heard that the contract had been issued, but they probably were not Dearborn's two companions in the murder. The wives, girlfriends, and other associates of all these figures were questioned with varying results of cooperation. The role of Joe Centimano was much more thoroughly explored.

The investigation summarizes the evidence it found compelling about Dearborn's role: "A present day witness reported being aware in 1970 of James P. Dearborn, BM, 9-5-32, intention to kill Mr. Leon Jordan. The witness stated Dearborn asked him (witness) to assist him (Dearborn) kill Jordan in the spring of 1970. The witness stated him and Dearborn surveyed Jordan's movement numerous times and conspired to kill Jordan with a 12 Gauge shotgun loaded with 00-Buck upon Jordan closing the Green Duck Tavern at 2546 Prospect. The witness stated he and Dearborn determined the aforementioned weapon and ammunition would give them an advantage over Jordan because it was known Jordan often carried a handgun on his person when closing his business. The witness stated he did not participate in Jordan's murder only because of being incarcerated when the murder was carried out. The witness reported Dearborn admitted his involvement in Mr. Jordan's murder to him (witness) years after the murder occurred.

"Another witness reported visiting Dearborn in his residence and the latter claiming responsibility for Jordan's murder. Dearborn told him the murder was "business" and a "hit" he had to carry out regardless of his being friends with Mr. Jordan.

“Another witness said that Dearborn came to his residence the evening Mr. Jordan was killed and asked him to participate. But he refused and disagreed with Dearborn’s intention to kill Mr. Jordan.

“Yet another witness reported that Dearborn asked him to assist him in killing Mr. Jordan. The witness refused and they argued over his refusal. He escorted Dearborn out of his residence and observed two of Dearborn’s companions sitting inside the car Dearborn arrived in. Two days later Dearborn told him he was the driver and those two companions were the shooter and the look-out.”

Doc Dearborn was part of the team that burglarized the Coast to Coast Hardware Store in Independence. That shotgun used in Jordan’s murder, along with other stolen goods then came into possession of Joseph Centimano. Thus the missing shotgun and its history lighted the way to the combination of men responsible for Leon Jordan’s death.

Doc Dearborn became himself a murder victim in Kansas City in 1985.¹²²

The investigation asks many questions about the political scene as well as the criminal activity that may have been related to Jordan’s murder, but it refrains from drawing any conclusions other than pointing to Dearborn’s guilt. It seems worthwhile to try to put together the story all this information implies. Jordan was well aware that it was time for him to pass the leadership of Freedom on to a younger generation. Jordan had high hopes for Richard Tolbert eventually becoming the leader of Freedom. He gave Tolbert much material and political support. However, Tolbert was not in Kansas City during these crucial events. Tom Neely, was another young leader, whom Jordan trusted and believed in. Neely was a candidate for Constable of the third district. He was running against Sylvester Norris, an oldline faction candidate. Jordan was now an accepted political leader who could deal on an equal footing with

¹²² 2nd KCPD Investigation, pp. 3 & 4, LJC.

the political leaders in the North end who still had an overlapping interest in the black community. Bruce Watkins described the agreement Jordan had reached to share funds with many of these leaders just before his death. Watkins saw this as a reason to dampen any suspicion that Jordan was murdered for political reasons.

But Neely's candidacy became a sore point in that agreement. According to Orchid Jordan, Lt. Governor Morris advised Jordan that the two oldtime faction candidates, Norris and Ross, would be removed from the ballot before the primary, but they were not. Morris then told Jordan the matter was out of his control, but Orchid heard Leon tell Morris on the phone that these candidates would have removed themselves if Morris had withheld financial support. She stated that "she feels that this opposition by JORDAN may have resulted in his death." This was in many ways a minor political quarrel, hardly grounds for issuing a contract on Jordan's life. But Jordan was trying to build new young leadership, and Neely's future was important enough to fight for at this time.

Joe Centimano long resented Jordan's success as a black political leader. He considered Jordan's physical confrontation with his friend John Mazucca in the state legislature an offense that merited immediate retaliation to teach any aspiring black leader his proper place. But at the time the mafia leadership did not agree. The close relation between the Mayor of Vine Street and Doc Dearborn is clearly established in the second murder investigation. When Doc Dearborn realized that he could no longer count on his close friend, Leon Jordan's support, that instead he must confront Jordan because of the latter's well known opposition to narcotics trafficking, Dearborn became available and attractive to Centimano as a hit man.

While the mafia leadership may have been willing to deal with Jordan, whose political strength could no longer be denied, there is little question that it tasted like bad medicine to do

so. As Jordan himself publicly noted when the *Star* began to question whether Freedom was beginning to work with the factions, Freedom had built its trust in the black community on its commitment to replacing the plantation bosses that so destructively dominated black politics. Thus a contract on Jordan with an experienced killer, who had inside knowledge of Jordan's habits, might well have now seemed an attractive and cheap opportunity. Jordan's insistence that Morris keep their original deal and remove Norris and Ross from the ballot may well have been only the most recent reminder of how irritating Jordan as a political leader had become.¹²³

Jordan's life was full of many surprising ups and downs, but despite his faults and miscues, he made it into a life of singular achievement. He rose through the ranks as a Kansas City policeman with notable recognition. He learned discipline and leadership. He took his policing talents abroad to build a reputable police force in Liberia. When those achievements did not win him appropriate promotion in the Kansas City Police force on his return, he resigned and plotted a midlife career change. Carrying a haloed memory of his father's public career, reinforced by knowledge of his grandfather's substantial public prominence, he returned to Kansas City intending to make a difference in the political arena. He wanted to have the family name Jordan recognized again as an agent of racial progress. He bought the Green Duck Tavern, apprenticed himself to Tim Moran to learn the ropes, and then joined forces with Bruce Watkins to found Freedom, Inc., a black political organization that he led to extraordinary political power and benefit to the Kansas City community. He applied the transformative political lessons of a momentous national civil rights struggle to the particular racial problems of Kansas City, freeing the black community from the political control of the northeast bosses, and winning the respect

¹²³ Interview of Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, FBI file, LJC.

of the larger Kansas City community for black leadership. It is almost impossible to be deeply involved in American politics without getting your hands dirty, but he stayed steady to the struggle with his big heart. He thus paved the way for the entire community to benefit from black leaders for generations to come.

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Photo Index

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Leon Jordan, [early 1960s]. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

Page 5 (Preface)

Sylvia Farnsworth [author's wife] and Orchid Jordan protesting brutality against "Freedom Riders" in the South. Source: "In Sympathy Protest." *Kansas City Call*. May 26, 1961. Research copy available in the addendum of the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Dr. J. Edward Perry. Source: *Forty Cords of Wood; Memoirs of a Medical Doctor...* / John Edward Perry. Jefferson City, Mo.: Lincoln University, 1947. Research copy available in the addendum of the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon H. Jordan [Jordan's father]. Source: [Untitled 45th anniversary photo feature]. *Kansas City Call*. [1964]. Research copy available in the addendum of the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Orchid Jordan. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan's academic transcript issued by Wilberforce University; September 11, 1933. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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(Top, left image) Orchid and Leon Jordan, Susan Maude Ramsey, John and Josephine Wright. (Top, right image) Leon Jordan and Susan Maude Ramsey. (Bottom, left image) Orchid Jordan (holding infant, possibly her niece), John and Josephine Wright, Leon Jordan (holding child, possibly Lavira Smith). (Bottom, right image) Unidentified man and woman (possibly Harvey Ramsey, Orchid's brother, and his wife, holding infant), Orchid and Leon Jordan, and a child (possibly Lavira Smith). Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Unidentified child (possibly Lavira Smith), unidentified woman (possibly Orchid's brother Harvey Ramsey's wife), unidentified child (possibly Ramsey and his wife's daughter), and Orchid Jordan. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Burglary and Robbery Bureau of 1945, Kansas City Police Department; Leon Jordan and his partner Cliff Warren are standing fifth and third from right, respectively. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

Page 88 (Chapter VII)

Leon Jordan and a black dog, on the steps outside his Kansas City home at 2745 Garfield. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Orchid Jordan holding an African lobster, after arrival in Monrovia, Liberia, December 1947. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan, unknown French official, Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, unknown Liberian official; at the ceremony to honor Jordan for his rescue coordination of a downed plane of French diplomats; Executive Mansion, Monrovia, Liberia; December 8, 1948.

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(Top image) Jordan's September 21 acceptance letter to Guy Q. DeSchompre, French Minister to Liberia, to attend a reception to honor Jordan at the French Legation in Liberia; September 22, 1949. (Bottom image) Liberian President William V.S. Tubman's letter to Orchid Jordan rescheduling a dinner invite from the Jordans; includes Orchid's handwritten draft reply confirming the new date proposed. August 26, 1949. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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(Top image) Hendrik Jordense, [Harved or Howard?] Jordan, Orchid and Leon Jordan, Lieutenant T. Colwell Jordense; preparing a canopy on the beach; Monrovia, Liberia; February 1948. (Bottom, two images) Leon and Orchid Jordan; Monrovia, Liberia. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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(Four images, clockwise from top left) Pearl Primus dancing, accompanied by two native Liberian musicians; Pearl Primus dancing, accompanied by native Liberian musicians, while others watch; Pearl Primus talking with a group of native Liberians; Pearl Primus recording native Liberian music and dance customs with camera and audio equipment. Source: Leon M.

Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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(Two images) Leon and Orchid Jordan with pieces from their African art collection displayed in their Kansas City home at 2745 Garfield. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan handling the propeller of a Pacer-135 plane; Monrovia, Liberia. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan (sixth from left) with an 11-man police force; Monrovia, Liberia. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Mai Padmore, Griff Davis and Muriel Davis (holding daughter Dorothy Madelyn), Leon and Orchid Jordan, Bishop Brown; at Dorothy's christening; Monrovia, Liberia; September 1, 1953. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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The African Pilot (ship) unloading a railroad car; port of Monrovia, Liberia; December 31, 1951. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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(Left image) Brigadier General Benjamin Davis with his wife, Sadie, seated at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium; inaugural festivities for Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, January 1952. (Middle image) Davis with Sadie, talking to other guests; inaugural festivities for Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, January 1952. (Right image) Mary McLeod Bethune signing an autograph at a brunch in her honor at the Pepper Bird, given by the Liberian Social and Political Movement, January 14, 1952. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Etta Moten, inscribed: "Love and best wishes to Leon and Orchid, Etta Moten, Liberia, 1952." Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Outgoing Liberian Vice President Clarence Simpson, President William V.S. Tubman, incoming Vice President William Tolbert, Jr.; Tubman's inauguration, January 1952. Source: Leon M.

Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Inaugural festivities for Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, January 1952 (six images, clockwise from top left): President and Mrs. Tubman leading the Grand March at the Inaugural Ball; the National Float of Liberia on parade, passing the balcony of the Executive Pavilion where President Tubman looks on; President Tubman receiving an honorary gift from a visiting official; U.S. Marine from the USS Monrovia instructing his Liberian counterpart in the use of a flamethrower; Mary McLeod Bethune (seated, right) receiving a guest at a brunch in her honor at the Pepper Bird, given January 14th by the Liberian Social and Political Movement; masked and costumed “devil dancer” at an outdoor ceremony honoring President Tubman. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Inaugural festivities for Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, January 1952 (six images, clockwise from top left): roadway arch with banner reading in all caps: “Welcome Your Excellency President Tubman And Suite To Provincial Headquarters, Canta”; provincial leaders in native garb toasting President Tubman (far right); Liberian girl, arms crossed, flanked by two Liberian boys; Liberian woman and man in native garb conversing; tribal leader in native garb posing with a couple in formal wear, during a nighttime garden party on the Executive Grounds; Liberian mother, from behind, with baby sleeping in a pouch carrier strapped to her back. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Orchid Jordan, Paris, 1952. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Green Duck Tavern, 26th and Prospect; Kansas City, Missouri. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Charles Moore, Fred Curls, Leon Jordan, Bruce Watkins, Howard Maupin. Source: Black Archives of Mid-America. Research copy available in the addendum of the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Major Cliff Warren. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Freedom, Inc. campaign poster, Bruce R. Watkins, Jackson County Circuit Clerk. Source: Brian Thurn Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Leon Jordan, [early 1960s]. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Ethalyn Gordon, inscribed: “To Sister Orchid, Luck and Success Always, From Lil Sis Ethalyn.” Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Crime scene photo of Leon Jordan’s body shortly after his murder. Source: courtesy Kansas City Missouri Police Department. Research copy available in the addendum of the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Newspaper announcing Leon Jordan’s death. Source: “Leon Jordan Is Slain.” *Kansas City Star*. July 15, 1970. Research copy available in the Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.

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Orchid Jordan at her office in Jefferson City, Missouri. Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri – Kansas City.