

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.