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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.