

## 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."<sup>38</sup>

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

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<sup>38</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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.<sup>39</sup>

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

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<sup>39</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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. March 19 33		
Degree	B. S., Commerce	Diploma		Left School	19		
Reason for Leaving	XXXXXXXXXXXXX						
Classification							
ENTRANCE RECORD:	Lincoln High School, Kansas City, Mo						
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 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		
Phys 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		
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 (Withdrawn). E, failure; I, incomplete; W, withdrawal. I certify that the preceding information is correct. Howard D. Gregg, Superintendent.							

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.<sup>40</sup>



<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.

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<sup>41</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *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.