

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.