Black Spartans (1907-1948)

Curators
Carli V. Lowe, University Archivist
Kate Steffens, Special Collections Librarian

Artist
Yeab Kebede ('22, Digital Media Arts)

Graphic Designer
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"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" represents ongoing research in SJSU Special Collections & Archives identifying documentation of Black experiences throughout SJSU history. This exhibit is the first of several installments. Much of the information we have comes from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and the La toile yearbooks. With too few exceptions, Black Spartans’ stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. This is reflected in the language and focus of the articles. We invite you to read critically.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio. Locally, “the deed to virtually every home in San Jose” included restrictions against Black and Asian residents known as “restrictive covenants” (Spartan Daily, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events.

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" is an invitation to the community to join us in surfacing these stories, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students’ lives. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

Carli V. Lowe - University Archivist
Kate Steffens - Special Collections Librarian

Exhibit Curators Statement

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Artist Statement

Yeab Kebede
'22 Digital Media Arts

The "Black Spartans (1907-1948)" exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San José State University and the Bay Area at large. Until recently, the significance of Black bodies in Bay Area history (as well as U.S. history) was overlooked. Unless it was associated with the struggles of civil rights leaders, athletes, or celebrity-personas, the story of a graduate from a state school wasn’t valued because we weren’t part of the mainstream culture. As a Black Spartan myself, I was deeply connected to these individuals that started out just like me. I saw a reflection of myself and my community throughout the process of making these mixed media portraits and came to realize how important it is to know your history because it becomes a catalyst for knowing who you are.

My work explores the intricacy of identity and the role culture, tradition, and history play. These portraits are embodiments of our Black Spartans, they are visual representations of the colorful and captivating lives they led. Through this work, I hope to influence other artists and individuals to take part in researching and finding out the infinite layers of what it means to be Black. Our history is beyond our struggle. We are the blueprint.

Yeab Kebede
'22 Digital Media Arts
William Lewis attended San Jose State College from 1934-1939. He majored in Physical Education and was active in multiple sports, including as a fullback in sophomore football, and as a guard in freshman basketball. In December 1935, Lewis was one of 19 football players who were handpicked to travel via cruise ship to Hawaii to play against Kamahamoa. In 1938, Lewis and fellow Black students Don Presley and Lloyd Thomas performed the “Truckin’” dance craze of the time as part of the Spartan Revue.
Spartan Daily

October 15, 1934

William Lewis is called an “inspiration to his team” in a freshman football game against Stanford.
William Lewis is pictured as a member of the freshman football team.
Bull Lewis packs the ball around right end for a seven yard gain as the Fresno Babes defeat San Jose 20 to 6.
William Lewis is pictured as a member of the freshman basketball team.
Spartan Daily

October 14, 1935

William Lewis “scores twice for State” in a game against Hawaii.
William Lewis is “once again the hero of Sparta’s attack” in a game against College of Pacific.
Spartan Daily

November 18, 1935

William Lewis plays a pivotal role in a football victory against Nevada.
Spartan Daily

November 18, 1935

William Lewis, "sensational sophomore football star," is named among the winners of the Community Chest popularity contest.
William Lewis scores two touchdowns in a game against San Diego State.
William Lewis travels to Honolulu with the football team.

Spartan Daily

December 3, 1935

William Lewis travels to Honolulu with the football team.
Spartan Daily

December 8, 1935

William Lewis joins the basketball team led by incoming captain, Lloyd Thomas.
William Lewis is listed 4th among the “All-Spartan Mythical Sports Eleven.”
William Lewis is pictured in action with his teammates showcasing the team’s readiness to play the University of San Francisco Dons.
William Lewis is pictured in the 1937 La Torre Yearbook as a member of the football team.
Upon his return from playing football with the San Jose State team in Hawaii for the third time, William Lewis calls the islands "absolutely the finest place in the world."
La Torre Yearbook

1938

William Lewis is pictured as a member of the football team.
William Lewis performs with fellow Black Spartans Lloyd Thomas and Don Presley at the annual Spartan Revue.
ANNUAL JUNIOR PROM
AT AUDITORIUM
JANUARY 21

Only 350 Bids To Be Printed,
Announces Holtorf

Color... an atmosphere of spontaneous gaiety
and Bob Beal's twelve-piece orchestra playing
rhythms against an impressive background of
silver and gold will be the highlights of the an-
nual Junior Prom to be held in the spacious San
Jose Civic Auditorium Friday evening, January 21.

An unprecedented sale of bids to the Prom, ac-
claimed as the most ambitious college dance of
the year, has been revealed by the committee in
charge, headed by Prexy John Holtorf.

To avoid overcrowded floor conditions, the
number of couples allowed to gain admittance into
the auditorium has been limited to 350. Extra
check room facilities have also been promised by
the Junior classmen.

Bids, which are being sold at $1.25 per couple,
may be obtained from the Controller’s office or
from junior salesmen including John Holtorf,
Elaine Johns, Paul Baughman, Bill Lewis, Arthur
Eldridge, Don Tuxford, Arthur Heinsen, Dorothy
Curry, Edmond Cary, Leonard Herman, Jack Hil-
ton, Mary Harris and Pinky Garcia.

Spartan Daily
January 17, 1938

William Lewis helps to sell bids to the junior
prom.
William Lewis is pictured as a member of the basketball team.
William Lewis "cinches ding-dong battle for San Jose" in basketball game against College of Pacific.
William Lewis is pictured as a member of the basketball team.