Exhibit Curators Statement

“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 Torre 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

Artist Statement

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 lead. 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
Don Presley attended San Jose State College from 1937-1940. Presley was active in several sports, including football, heavyweight boxing, and track and field. In 1938, Presley and fellow Black students William Lewis and Lloyd Thomas performed the “Truckin’” dance craze of the time as part of the Spartan Revue. That year he and his dance partner also won “Leading Campus Dancers” at the Press Club contest at the Student Union. In 1939, he lettered in Varsity Football. After graduation, Presley had a short career as a professional heavyweight boxer, from 1940-1941.
Spartan Daily

January 11, 1937

Don Presley is pictured in action in the All-College Boxing Tournament.
Spartan Daily

February 2, 1937

Don Presley is mentioned as preparing to “do a take-off on Duke Ellington” as part of a show put on by the Physical Education majors called the “Spartan Revue.”
Spartan Daily

May 13, 1937

Don Presley takes first place in shot put, discus, and low hurdles.
Don Presley competes in the hammer throw for the first time and places second with a throw of 30 feet and 6 inches.
Don Presley prepares to play in a guard position in a football game against Cal Tech.
Spartan Daily
December 27, 1937

Don Presley is described returning with the football team from a game in Hawaii.

As They Saw It...

Returning Members Of Hawaiian Football Party Give Their Impressions Of The ‘Pacific Paradise’

By WALT HECOX

Big Don Presley, lackadaisical, and with an easy going grin, ambled down the gangplank with a comparatively frail orange draped ridiculously across his shoulders, stood out as a happily humorous highlight of the jubilant group of San Jose State college football players who returned from Hawaii Wednesday.

Statements from returning grid- ders, managers, and coaches give some idea of the mixed emotions they felt as they arrived in San Francisco.

COACH DUD DEGROOT, after exchanging greetings with those who were waiting for him on the dock, answered questions about possibilities of his returning to the University of Hawaii as head coach with a blunt, ‘That was just a lot of newspaper baloney. Started by Island papers and carried on over here. I have heard nothing about it. We had a fine trip, and will definitely return next year.’

BULL LEWIS, senior fullback, was exuberant. ‘Those islands are absolutely the finest place in the world. This is three trips for me, and I think I’ll make another that will be permanent.’

GEORGE DOLPHIN, senior manager in ’36, who has spent a year in the Islands, felt differently. ‘My stay in the Islands was a wonderful experience,’ he said, ‘but my return to good old California is even more wonderful. I’ll take the Golden Gate over Diamond Head any day.’

HERM ZETTERQUIST, soph righthalf, replied to questions with, ‘Fine trip. Never felt better in my life.’ But he grinned sheepishly when BOB BRONZAN, soph tackle countered with ‘Nuts. He was sick all the way over and all the way back.’

JOE CUSTER, Mercury Herald Sports Editor, said, ‘The Islands are all they are cracked up to be. And don’t take that DeGroot rumor too lightly.’

NORM SANDERS, senior quarter, said, ‘Glad to be back...’ then glancing at Connie. ‘Exceptionally glad!’ while DON HILL mumbled incoherently in the background. ‘What a place.’
Don Presley is pictured as a Lettermen.
La Torre Yearbook

Don Presley is pictured as a member of the boxing team.

BOXING

Don Presley is pictured as a member of the football team.
Don Presley is pictured as a member of the track and field team.
Don Presley is anticipated to demonstrate the “frenzied and careless characteristics of truckin’” with fellow Black Spartans William Lewis and Lloyd Thomas at the upcoming Spartan Revue.

Spartan Daily

January 17, 1938
Large Crowd Sees Don Presley, Partner Named Leading Campus Dancers At Press Club Contest

Harlem Hi De Ho Type Of Truckin’ Taking College By Storm.

With spectators numbering more than twenty times the contestants, a Truckin’ contest was held in the Student Union yesterday noon.

Since such general interest in the Harlem brand of hi-de-ho highland-flinging has taken the college by storm, the Press club took this opportunity to decide once and for all this week just who are the best truckers on the San Jose State campus.

Don Presley and his partner proved to be the best couple of the hour, and was awarded a free bid to Saturday night’s Press Dance. A bid was also given to Myrtle Washington, best woman, and to “Monk” Martin, best man.

Spartan Daily

February 25, 1938

Don Presley “and his partner” win a Truckin’ dance contest held in the Student Union.
Spartan Daily

April 7, 1938

Don Presley is pictured in action as he prepares for a track meet against the Olympic Club.
Don Presley adds two inches to his already recordbreaking shot put mark.
Don Presley continues to break records in shot put.
THE ANSWER

Dear Mr. Lloyd Thomas:

In answer to your claim that Bill Van Vleck is not the only mustached boxer in the United States and that Don Presley should have been included, I give you the following information:

1. Two weeks ago Presley’s mustache was snipped off by his football team mates. You should know that.
2. At the time of my claim, he had not grown another.
3. He has not boxed for the college for the past year and a half.
4. You could never classify his four (4) wisps of brush hair as a mustache. His upper lip always looks barren and deserted.

Hoping this will satisfy your claims,

As Ever,

Ben Melzer.

Spartan Daily

November 7, 1938

Don Presley’s facial hair briefly becomes a matter of public debate.
Don Presley is declared the winner in a boxing match against Ben Warmer of the YMCA team.
Don Presley, the widely heralded San Jose State heavyweight, lost his first bout in outside competition the other night when the team battled Cal. Aggies. And many local fans who predicted such a bright future for the Spartan were disappointed. The reason for his loss is obvious; Presley has only experienced three bouts in his career.

Although Presley has been on the receiving end of more favorable publicity than any other fighter on the team, publicity doesn’t make a fighter—it’s more likely to ruín him. The publicizers went overboard on Don because of his burly frame and his other accomplishments in athletics; he’s the type that sports writers and fans like to write and talk about. This is no fault of Don’s, but it should show him that he will have to train a little harder than the average boxer to compensate for the enormous publicity given him.

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Spartan Daily

March 7, 1939

Don Presley loses in a boxing match against Cal’s team.
Don Presley wins 56 pound weight; sets shot record

EDWARDS FIELD, Berkeley, April 26—San Jose State’s 12-man team piled up 14 4.5 points to place fourth in the nineteenth annual running of the Pacific Association A.A.U. meet, and saw the San Francisco Olympic Club carry off the team title again.

The Spartans took a minor share of the prize money as the Olympic Club, California (running unattached) and Stanford teams divided most of the glory.

PRESLEY STANDS OUT

Led by big Don Presley, who took an unexpected first in the 56 pound weight-tossing event, the San Jose tracksters gained nothing but valuable experience. Presley, the jack of all trades on the Spartan team, placed fourth in the shot with a put of 49½", to break his week-old record of 48' 10½".

Tony Sunseri and Al (Mickey) Finn, San Jose’s pole vaulting twins, both went out at 13 feet, and had to be satisfied with a three way tie for fourth place. Warmerdam of the Olympic Club, who won the event at 14 feet 5½ inches, attempted to break the world’s record, but three trials at the height of 14 feet 11½ inches found it too high for even Warmerdam to clear.

Spartan Daily

May 1, 1939

Don Presley is heralded for yet another record-breaking shot put performance.
Don Presley, giant Spartan guard, is the winner of this week’s Ace Bagby “Pen of the Week” award, according to the judges.

Another flip of the coin was necessary to determine whether this week’s fountain pen should go to Presley or to Bob Bronzan, another giant in the Spartan stand against Santa Barbara State, it was announced.

Bagby announces that one more pen of the week award will be made following the Drake game.

Spartan Daily

October 31, 1939

Don Presley is awarded the “Pen of the Week,” which appears to have been a short-lived recognition of success in athletics sponsored by a local fountain pen company.
Don Presley is pictured among the “Heart of San Jose Spartans” football team.
Don Presley demonstrates a “characteristic boxing pose” in advance of a tournament in Sacramento.

March 8, 1940

Spartan Daily
Don Presley continues to have success in shot put and discus.
Don Presley is one of only two students to be awarded letters in three sports: football, boxing, and track and field.
Despite being criticized for a lacking aggression, Don Presley wins technical knockout in the Amateur Athletic club qualifiers, going on to win the title.
PRESLEY WINS A.A.U. TITLE

Beats Nordeen In Three-Round Boxing Match For Amateur Crown

FIGHTER ENDS COLLEGE CAREER

By D.J. Presley, 225-pound football, boxing and track star, brought to a fitting climax his three years of boxing Monday night when he captured the Northern California Amateur heavyweight title.

UNANIMOUS DECISION

The former Los Angeles high school football and track star, who won a unanimous decision over Charles Nordeen of the Golden Gate Athletic club in the feature bout of the evening.

The win marks Presley's first major title ever won by the colossus who starred at the track was now added to his record.

The victory also ended his collegiate championship.

PREVIOUS MATCH

He was matched with leisure by professional promoters who have been following the career of the versatile athlete. Presley has signed with Abner Hoffman, former manager of Max Schmeling, one-time world's heavyweight champion, it has been reported.

Presley closed his collegiate career last month when he captured the shot put and discus titles of the California Collegiate Athletic Association, as well as the hammer throw title.

He had been a member of the state team for the second consecutive year. Presley is the school record holder in the shot put with a throw of 10 feet 11 1/2 inches.

Spartan Daily

June 13, 1940