Black Spartans (1907-1948)

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 1918-1919, 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 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
Edward Homer Soulds attended San Jose State College from 1941-1942. He competed in several sports, including football, boxing, and wrestling. In 1941, Soulds was honored with a Service Award for wrestling. In World War II, he was a Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and went on to become a Lieutenant Colonel during further service. Soulds is the author of the book “Black Shavetail in Whitey’s Army” which describes his 20 years in the military and his experiences with racism while serving his country. He went on to work for the California Youth Authority and California Human Resources Development.
Battle royals to fit all phases of the manly art of self-defense featured the novice bouts last night. Best hour of the evening for thrills and punching power came to a sudden end in the final round when Uber Tucker stretched Swede Lundberg, 171-pounder, in the gong sounded. Tucker was awarded the decision after Lundberg carried the fight to him in the first round.

Another "bout" was chained up by Howard Gambill and Dave Richardson. 145-pounder Dick Halverson outboxed his man as Halverson landed the crisper punches to edge the inside. Bob Payne and Bill Triplet proved too of the better known on the card and employed more than usual amount of skill. Bob Payne, 135-pounder, was over the ever-growing Al Nez. Triplet fought off a last round rally by his man, Joe Andrews, 155-pounder, after building up an early lead with a solid left hooking left.

The opening bout, when Bob Wehren, shifted Dave Stephenson in the second round of their 123-pound class battle, was the final bout when Heavyweight Walter Mazzone met to Bob Ashcraft, the outside forced the packet gun. The comedy bout of the evening occurred in the 135-pound class. Bill Soulds, favored George Hoikas no less than nine times with some long range punching, featuring a wicked left. Hoikas came to life at the end of the final round, however, and hurched Soulds to knees, but too late to do anything further about it.

Bill Harris and Bud Riedaus met in a free boxing match in the 227 pound division which was our show. The judges awarded Riedaus the decision. The above proved to be the better bout of the evening.
RIGHT HALF: A varsity candidate last season but not able to quite make it, negro Ed Soulds starts today. Soulds is one of the ruggedest men on the field. Followed by Dierker and Felse. A made-over end, Bert Robinson will be in for the Home Guard. Robinson has shown loads of ability and is fast. Followed by Cornett and Klinger.

EDGE TO HOME GUARD.

Spartan Daily

May 23, 1941

Edward Soulds plays in a starting position on the football team.
Edward Soulds wins a Spartan Service Award for wrestling.
Edward Soults is pictured as a member of the wrestling team.
Edward Soulis is pictured as a member of the football team with fellow Black Spartan Woody Gibson.
Edward Soulds publishes a book about his experiences in the Armed Forces.