Black Spartans (1907-1948)

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

Artist
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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.

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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
Originally from Los Angeles, Ralph Kaufman attended Hollywood High School before entering San Jose State College in 1941. Kaufman was active in track, and in the Spring 1942 semester, he traveled with the track team to San Diego for conference championships. In 1943, Kaufman left SJSC to join the Armed Forces, and announced his intention to return to school in 1946.
Ralph Kaufman wins the 300-yard dash by three yards in what is dubbed “one of the finest races of the day.”
May 5, 1942

After one of his team members injures his leg, Coach Bud Winter places Ralph Kaufman in the shot put competition in a meet against Fresno State.
VOWING TRACKMEN RETURN TO STATE

By DICK FRY

So they say to me, "what'd ya want, Bud, blood?" and I say, "yeh."

The moral of this story could well be, and is, never give track coach L. C. (Bud) Winter an option on your life. Possessor of one of the finest track teams on the West Coast way back in 1942, Winter couldn't quite see letting go of an organization get lost without something of a fight so he invited the service-bound athletes to dine at his home one night shortly before Uncle gave them the call. During the course of the evening, Bud, never one to give a good track man

a fighting chance as far as an independence ges, suggested that the boys give him the hand on returning to State after the war. And so it was that with the taking of a blood vial and the designation of a secret handshake, Bud unlocked the door and allowed his galaxy of stars to pursue their ways.

Today, some of his boys are back and many of the others are on their way. Slowly but surely the Spartan track team is beginning to take on a healthy color and the happy days of victories over Stanford and Fresno State are again just around the corner. Contrary to the opinion of many of the top military authorities of the country, Winter says, we don't condition legs. In fact, he reports that his boys, although many of them performed considerably while in service, are having more trouble getting into shape than ever before. With the last meet of the season up April 10, this factor is causing the Spartan mentor to lose more than a little sleep. Usually the cinder men have about six weeks in which to train for their first encounter but with all the returning vets staying out of school until the spring quarter this year, the training period was cut short.

Among some of the masters returning are Bill Dyne, the Mid-america service one-man track team, Thelma Knowles, winner of the half mile in several European meets, Vern Cooley, CCAA vaulting champ and the man who raised the pole vaulting competition in a British meet by breaking the only pole in the islands and Larry O'Conner, consistent point-winner for the locals during the 1942 season in the shot, discus and javelin. Eastex Roja, Spartan two mile ace and second place finisher in the 1942 Turkey Trot also returned this quarter.

Those who have reported to Winter with intentions of returning to school in the fall include hurdlers Bud Vorrey, short-gunner Frank Grimes, distance men, Bob Isgren, sprinter, Ralph Kaufman, and javelin hurler Eivold Clark.

Bill Smith and Willie Steele, two outstanding performers of the 25 season have written that they will not be able to return to State. Smith is married and working in Southern California and Steele is attending San Diego State.

Winter intends to work his squad up until the eve of their triangular meet with Salinas JC and the Alameda Naval Air Station next Wednesday.
La Torre Yearbook

1942

Ralph Kaufman is pictured as a member of the track team.