“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

The “Black Spartans (1907-1948)” exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San Jose 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
Thelno Knowles attended San Jose State College from 1941-1943, and from 1946-1948 following service in World War II. He majored in Philosophy. He was a member of the campus Cosmopolitan Club, and spoke on the topic “Is This Democracy?” at the Student Center in 1943. He was a record-holding member of the track team, and competed in the AAU Championships in New York along with fellow Black student track athletes Irving Smith and Willie Steele. In 1943, Coach Bud Winter said of Knowles, “There is no man in the nation with a better chance to run a 4-minute mile.” In 1945, while serving in World War II, Knowles won the European Championship at Frankfurt, Germany. During his Senior year, Knowles traveled to Los Angeles with four other track team members to compete in the invitational Coliseum Relays held by USC. In 1948, he was a captain on the SJSC varsity track team. In addition to track, Knowles took part in novice campus boxing matches. He graduated in December 1948.
Sports editor Bill Morrow offers his opinion on Thelmo Knowles's name while clarifying that his name is spelled "Thelmo" and not "Theimo" as it is often misspelled.
THRILLING EVENTS

Possibly the more thrilling events were the mile relay, the two hurdle races and the battle for third place in the 100 yard dash between Hank Ruiz of San Jose and Mike Kershaw of Fresno, which Ruiz won by a couple of inches.

In the last lap of the relay Knowles and Joe Shropshire of Fresno got off to an event start. Shropshire sprinted out into an early four-yard lead but going into the last turn Knowles turned on the heat and as they came into the home stretch they were neck and neck. Knowles kept opening up his stride and won by less than two yards. His time for the quarter mile was 48.8.

Spartan Daily
May 6, 1942

Theino Knowles runs the quarter mile in 48.8.
Thelmo Knowles breaks a record in the half mile and contributes to a relay team victory.
SAN JOSE REPRESENTED ON TWO TRACK
FRONTS THIS WEEKEND; CINDERMEN
INVADE LOS ANGELES AND MODESTO

KNOWLES MAY WIN
Knowles is the boy the southern California experts will have their eyes on. He is one of the best middle distance men to be discovered on the Pacific coast since Ben Eastman trudged the distance a number of years ago. The Negro star is compared with John Woodruff of Pittsburg because of his long ground-eating stride. Knowles is given a good chance to cop the event at the AAU meet tomorrow by many of the bay area and southern California newsmen.

TEAM AT MODESTO
The rest of Coach Winter’s track squad will be competing at the Modesto Relays. Smith, Kaufmann and Knowles are not expected to get back to the Northern California Relays in time to compete. It was Winter’s notion to fly to the evening meet but plane reservations are still uncertain and therefore the three top stars of the Spartans may not be able to appear.

All but two San Jose men will be entered in the open division. Jim Jackson and Frank Roberts will be Spartan entries in the Freshman high jump and javelin events.

Frank Minini of San Jose, Ed Stanso of Stanford, and Jean Lamoure of Fresno State will compete in the shot put. This event should be one of the best of the meet. Stanso will be rated favorite, although Minini lost to the Stanford weight star by a mere half-inch in the Fresno West Coast Relays last week.

Spartan Daily
May 22, 1942

Thelno Knowles’s speed and stride gain attention as he prepares for an AAU meet.
Spartan Daily

May 25, 1942

Theino Knowles breaks a record in the 880 yard run.

Davis Defeats Smith At Los Angeles; Knowles Takes 880

THREE-MAN SQUAD SCORES 16 POINTS TO TIE CALIFORNIA FOR SECOND PLACE AT SOUTHERN PACIFIC A. A. U. TRACK MEET; FRANK MININI IS DOUBLE WINNER IN WEIGHT EVENTS AT MODESTO

San Jose State’s track team opened a double offensive as it entered meets on both the southern and northern fronts and scored 16 points to tie the University of California for second place in the Southern Pacific A. A. U. track and field meet and placed among the leaders in both the freshmen and open classes at the Northern California Relays in Modesto Saturday.

Bill Smith’s hopes for a victory over Hal Davis, California sprint sensation, faded again as Davis pulled up in the final 15 yards to nip the flying Smith at the tape in the featured century at Los Angeles. This is the fifth time Davis has beaten Smith and it is possibly their last meeting this season. The winner’s time was 9.8, which is slow compared to the 9.4 that they turned in at the West Coast Relays, but the Coliseum track is slow and there hasn’t been anything better than 9.7 done there in a decade.

Smith came back to capture the broadjump with a leap of 24 feet 2 1/2 inches, and in doing so defeated Mel Bieker of the University of Southern California.

Theino Knowles cut a tenth of a second from the school record when he came home the winner in the 880-yard run in 1:53.9. He won from Fulton, the Stanford freshman who defeated him in the P. A. A. and Smith of U. S. C.

Ralph Kruftman, the third man of the trio to invade the southland, earned his bread and butter with a second place in the 220-yard dash behind Botsfield of Pasadena Junior College. A rather hurriedly thrown together track squad did well enough to gain second place be-
Sports Editor Bill Morrow describes Thelmo Knowles as one of the students in the “nucleus of this greatest-ever track team.”
La Torre Yearbook

1942

Thelno Knowles is pictured as a member of the track team.

The track team gained recognition as one of the most prominent in the state. The team was known for their exceptional performance in track and field events. Thelno Knowles was a member of the track team and contributed to the team's success.

The annual track meet was held on May 18, 1942, at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The event was attended by thousands of spectators and featured the top track and field athletes from Southern California. The meet was highlighted by the presence of world-class athletes, including Thelno Knowles, who were competing for various schools and clubs.

The meet featured a variety of events, including sprints, hurdles, long jump, and the three-mile run. Thelno Knowles participated in the three-mile run and showed exceptional endurance and skill. The event was marked by the presence of world-class athletes, including Thelno Knowles, who were competing for various schools and clubs.

The meet was held on a beautiful day, with the Los Angeles Coliseum bathed in warm sunlight. The crowd was enthusiastic, cheering on the athletes as they competed in the various events. Thelno Knowles was one of the standout performers, showing exceptional skill and determination in the three-mile run.

The meet was a huge success, and the audience was treated to an exciting day of track and field events. The athletes demonstrated their skill and dedication, and the meet was a testament to the power and passion of track and field sports.
Spartan Daily

June 5, 1942

Thelno Knowles accomplishes a record-breaking broadjump.

Delta Theta Omega Wins Inter-Frat Track Tourney Third Straight Year

Two school records fell by the way yesterday afternoon when Thelno Knowles established a new mile mark of 4:23.2 and Willie Steele leaped through the air in the broadjump to come up with a mark of 25 feet 7 inches.

Knowles beat the old mark of 4:27.2 set by Vin Ruble in 1940 and thus added the number two record broken to his credit.
Thelma Knowles is honored at a party hosted by the Cosmopolitan Club with fellow Black Spartan track star Willie Steele.
Three San Jose Track Stars Go East This Week

San Jose State’s great trio of track stars — Bill Smith, Thelmo Knowles and Willie Steele — will leave late this week for the National AAU meet in New York, where they will compete for the Southern California Athletic association team.

All of these men will be eligible to enter the junior and senior championships as none of them have ever won an AAU title.

Collectively they are capable of scoring about 50 points. Smith and Steele both have marks better than anyone else in the broad jump and stand a good chance of finishing one-two. Steele is Pacific Coast champion in the hop, step and jump and should finish high in that event.

Smith has two 9.5’s in the 100 yard dash, and Knowles has the coast’s best time of 1:53.8 for the half mile, which makes him a pre-meet favorite.

Three SJS Track Stars Compete In AAU This Weekend

Bill Smith, Willie Steele and Thelmo Knowles, three of the outstanding performers of Coach Bud Winter’s Spartan track team, will compete in the AAU championships in New York tomorrow and Saturday.

Running for the Southern California Athletic association, these men are expected to gain points in at least four events, with the possibility of placing first in at least two of them.

Steele and Smith form the most formidable broadjumping combination in the country, both having done 25 feet or better. They hold the best jumps in the country and stand an excellent chance of finishing one-two. Steele is also Pacific Coast champion in the hop, step and jump and should place among the leaders.

Smith’s second event is the 100 yard dash in which he has been running a constant close second to California’s Bud Davis. Smith has recorded two 9.5’s for the century and followed Davis to the tape by less than a foot in a 9.4 second race at the West Coast Relays. On the basis of these performances, Smith rates one of the favorites in this race.

Thelmo Knowles, the third member of the trio, although only a freshman, has the best time on the Pacific Coast in the half-mile. Knowles ripped off a 1:53.8 888 in Los Angeles to defeat the cream of the west’s middle-distance men and earn his trip east. However, it is hard to predict what he will do as he has not been pressed hard and is probably capable of even better time when the competition is tough.

Spartan Daily

June 18, 1942

Thelmo Knowles prepares to compete in the AAU Championship as the holder of the best half-mile time on the Pacific Coast.
Spartan Daily

November 24, 1942

Thelno Knowles wins the Gobble Trot, taking home a turkey as the first place prize.
Spartan Daily

December 11, 1942

Thehno Knowles wins a technical knockout in a novice boxing competition.
BUD WINTER GIVES DOPE ON OUTLOOK FOR TRACK TEAM: “WE WILL TAKE U.S.C. BY 1945” -- NATIONAL A.A.U. CHAMPS SMITH, KNOWLES, AND STEELE RETURN

By DICK FRY

“We will take USC by 1945.” Those were the words of track coach Bud Winter as he discussed the cinder outlook for the coming season.

Certainly not the most pessimistic coach in the game, Winter said he expected the Spartans to enjoy one of the most successful seasons of their history in the coming year. “Unless something goes wrong in the reserve program and all the boys are pulled before the end of the year, we expect to give the best teams in the nation a run for their money,” Winter said.

Winter has three national junior AAU champs returning to backbone his squad this year and with their help he expects to build an outfit superior to last year’s team.

Bill Smith, Thelmo Knowles, and possibly Willie Steele are the boys that the redhead is depending upon.

“I have set up three marks to strive for this year: 94 in the 100, 25 ft. 10 inches in the broad jump, and 6 ft. 7 inches in the high jump,” Bill Smith quoted Winter as saying.

FOUR-MINUTE MILER

“In my opinion,” Winter said, “there is no man in the nation with a better chance to run a four-minute mile than our own Thelmo Knowles. Last year Knowles ran the distance in 4:23 without training for the distance.” Primarily as a half-miler, the San Jose State edition of long John Woodruff, set this mark at the inter-fraternity meet last spring quarter.

At present Winter is having more difficulty arranging meets for his boys than he is trying to hold his squad together. “Although as yet neither the AAU nor the NCAA meets have been cancelled, it begins to look as though transportation difficulties may prevent us from entering,” he said.

HINDRANCE AN ADVANTAGE

“However, this same hindrance may give us an advantage in scheduling some of the larger schools in the district who have been forced to give up their extensive road trips and who must look for local talent to provide competition,” he added.

Meets with Stanford, California, Fresno, S. F. State, the indoor PAA and the outdoor PAA, St. Mary’s Pre-Flight, California Aggies, and the Olympic Club are now on the fire, and more are expected to come up before the season really gets under way.

Practice will open in three weeks at Spartan stadium. This late start will enable the cindermen to miss the majority of the late rains and to continue their practice sessions without interference to the opening of the active season.

January 5, 1943

Spartan Daily

Coach Bud Winter opines that “there is no man in the nation with a better chance to run a four-minute mile than our own Thelmo Knowles.”
Cosmopolitans Meet Tonight

“Is This Democracy?” will be the topic of a panel discussion at a meeting of the Cosmopolitan club tonight at 7:30 in the Student Center.

Waneta Lowe, chairman, announces that Thelno Knowles and Bill C. Smith will discuss the question, after which refreshments will be served.

All interested students and faculty members are invited to attend the meeting.

Spartan Daily

February 25, 1943

Thelno Knowles discusses the question “Is This Democracy” for a panel discussion hosted by the Cosmopolitan Club.
Thelno Knowles wins the 1000-yard run in the annual Olympic Club Indoor Track Meet.

March 15, 1943

Spartan Daily
Thelmo Knowles is called by the Army Reserves to serve in World War II.

Spartan Daily

March 18, 1943

Spartan Daily

March 29, 1943
Keeping his promise to Coach Bud Winter, Thelmo Knowles returns to the San Jose State College Track Team after serving in World War II.

**VOWING TRACKMEN RETURN TO STATE**

By DICK FRY

So they say to me, "what do you want, Bud, blond?" and I says, "yeah..."

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 get letting off fine an organization get but without something of a fight so he invited the service-bound athletes to stay in 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 independence goes, suggested that the boys give him the hand on returning to State after the war. And, they said, "Bud, you've got your deal with the老板 of a hundred and the design description on a few and we won't go back on our words but you don't know the feelings of some to return there."

Today, one of his boys is back and many of the others are on the way. Modern by name, the Spartans track team is beginning to take on a healthy edge and the happy days of victories and prestige are back in Stanford and Pauley State again. Thanks, Bud, for the bit of moral support.

Contrary to the opinion of many of the top military authorities of the country, Winter says war doesn't condition legs. In fact, he reports that his boys, although many or them performed considerably while in service, are tasting more trouble getting into shape than ever before. With the first meet of the season coming up April 9, Winter is expected to present the Spartans in top form.

Among some of the meeters returning are Bill Byrne, the standout sprinter; Thelmo Knowles, winner of the half mile race and first in the mile with Vern Cawley, CCAA first place man, and the man who raised the pole vault competition in a British meet, by breaking the old pole in the skies and Larry O'Gleason, reinstated junior-winner for the local during the 1942 season by showing sterling performance of the meet and second place winner in the annual meet, will also return this quarter.

Those who have reported to Winter with intentions of returning to school in the fall include hurdlers, Bud Yerige, shot-putter, Frank Rice, distance man, Bob Lagerman, sprinter, Ralph Kaufman, and student acer Ewold Clark.

Bill Smith and Willa Steele, two very outstanding performers of the E. U. Senate have written that they will not be able to return. In the recent meet, in which the Spartans were losing to Southern California and Arizona in attending San Diego State, Winter intends to work in surprise in an event which he was known to be the spring quarter the year, the train- ing period will be cut short.

**SPORTS SLANTS**

By CHARLES COOK

Tab ducky Thelmo Knowles as the man to beat this year in the half mile. A color copy of famed "Long John" Woodruff, Knowles has the build and stride as the world record holder. He participated in several meets while in service but, like so many other track men, he gained in the best of condition. Track Coach Bud Winter plans to curb the condition of Knowles and the rest of his charges in order to bring them along slowly and thus "point" for the more important meets of the season.

Not much can be expected of the team, at least until late May, in regard to record breaking times and distances. However, the Spartans should be loaded with enough power to cap the conference tournament to be held here May 11.

Surfaced with potential talent in the form of eight or nine former junior college champions, Winter's only worry now is to bring them back into a semblance of their pre-war condition. Rigors of the service and lack of competition surely have added a burden even to the most talented of athletes.

A handy man to have around on any team is Billy Rhine. Known for his exploits in football, Rhine is counted on for a fat share of points in any meet against any competition. He managed to nab high point honors in practically every meet he entered while serving with the Merchant Marine.
Thelno Knowles brings home wins in a meet against Stanford.
Spartan Daily

May 24, 1946

Thelno Knowles travels to Los Angeles for the Coliseum Relays invitational as the “fastest half miler on the coast.”
Thelno Knowles
Withdraws From SJS Track Squad

San Jose State's track stock took a nose-dive today as Thelno Knowles, ace half-miler and Coach Bud Winter's leading hope for national recognition, withdrew from the squad because of a leg injury that has failed to respond to treatment.

Knowles, holder of the school record in both the 880 and the mile run, ran third behind John Fulton and Ralph Gold in the Coliseum Relays last week which saw Fulton set up the best mark in the nation this year at 1:51. Track fans on the coast were looking forward anxiously to the coming PAA meet in Berkeley next month for a return match between Fulton and Knowles and the possibility of a new American record in the half mile.

Coach Winter will lead a five man team to the Pasadena Games Saturday. Bob Likens, Vern Cooley, Don Smalley, Ray Overhouse and Woody Linn will make the trip by car Thursday or Friday.

Spartan Daily
May 29, 1946

Thelno Knowles withdraws from the track team due to a leg injury.
Spartan Daily

June 12, 1946

Thelno Knowles receives a Varsity letter at the San Jose State College Athletic Awards.
Thelmo Knowles wins first place in the San Jose State College cross country meet.

Winter Greets Promising Squad in First Cross Country Turnout

A cross country run, first event of its type since the war, will be among the sports highlights at San Jose State college this season. According to an announcement by coach Bud Winters, the run is scheduled for the near future, and a sign-up rally is to be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the office of the Men's Gymnasium. All hands are requested to turn out.

Prospects for the forthcoming endurance grind are good. The list of expected entries is studded with the names of great and near greats of past track seasons. Promises of a good race are enhanced by the appearance of such names as those of Richard Vierra, national JC two-mile champ; Thelmo Knowles, national AAU title holder in the jr. half-mile; Murray Collins, State high school champion; Eugene Hayes, SC mile; Tom Bull, Pomona JC record holder; and Len Ralston, marathon runner and Olympic Club 10,000 meter man.

In expressing his hopes for a generous turnout for the event, Coach Winters asks all prospective entries not to be afraid of the competition. "We want to see Olympic champs in the making, and to get a foundation for things to come," he says. Meets are being lined up with Stanford, California, and the University of Idaho. The '47 track season holds a store of bigger and better competition for San Jose cinder men.

Spartan Runners Defeat Compton

Long striding Thelmo Knowles of San Jose State college came through with a surprise performance Saturday morning by winning the cross-country meet 25-31, between the Spartans and Compton junior college. Knowles was clocked in 16:02.3 over the three and two-tenths mile course.

Close behind Knowles was little Richard Vierra of the Spartans who was timed at 16:04.1. Ed Hart, of Compton, the pre-race favorite, finished third in the time of 16:08.9.

In previous cross-country meets, Knowles' best showing was a fourth place, but when the runners came through the gate and on to the track of Spartan field, Knowles was out in front, and outlasted the vain attempts of Vierra and Hart to win first place. Knowles' sparkling victory gives Coach Bud Winter's cross-country runners two straight wins against no losses.

Other Spartan runners who placed were Don Branson, fourth; Benny Chavez, seventh; and Len Ralston, eleventh. Chuck Jackson of the Spartans came in 14th place, while Douglas Flautt finished in 15th spot.
Thelno Knowles wins second place in the annual Turkey Trot, taking home a goose as a prize.
Track Practice continued on an accelerated scale this last week as the six competing teams were training hard for the coming Interclass Track meet which is being held in the Spartan stadium Friday and Saturday March 11-12. Coach Bud Winter already has selected the six teams and their captains. The squads are led by Thelma Knowles, Bob Likens, Woody Linn, Tom Birmingham, Merle Knox, and Connie Varneck.

Linn's Men
Among those working hard is Woody Linn. He hopes to participate in the 35 pound weight event this season. Linn also is concentrating on the discus and several of his teammates tab him as one of the best 10 men in that event. His squad is the favorite to capture the meet.

Thelma Knowles is expected to go great guns in the 440 and 880 events. His men are gunning for the title in the Interclass meet and are expected to give the Linn trackmen a rugged time for the title.
Thelmo Knowles will be making his final appearance under San Jose State colors when he enters the NCZA and AAU meets in several weeks. There is an outside chance long striding Thelmo will earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic team, but the terrific competition this year in his specialty, the 880, will probably prove too much.

Knowles has been churning up the cinders on track ovals since he was a freshman at Santa Monica high. His best time for the 880 that year was 2:15, but by 1941 he had lowered this mark to 1:55.0 less than a second off the interscholastic record.

**Wins State Meet**

In 1941, his senior year, Knowles ran off with the California State High school meet, setting a record of 1:55.6 that still stands.

The following year, Knowles entered San Jose State and helped Bud Winter's first year as Spartan head coach his most successful one. Knowles cut several seconds off his previous best 880 time and won the junior division of the AAU in 1:52.8, especially outstanding for a freshman.

One of the most unusual races Knowles ever competed in also took place in '41. He entered a special 880-yard run and finished about six inches ahead of Les Mc-Mitchell, NCZA mile champ that year. He was disqualified, however, for throwing his arms out in spread eagle style as he hit the finish tape.

**Wins European Title**

Knowles followed practically the whole San Jose State track team into service in 1943. He still competed when possible and two years later won the European Championship at Frankfort, Germany.

In 1946 Knowles returned to San Jose but as was the case with so many athletes, found it difficult to regain pre-war form.

Last season, however, Knowles began to hit his stride and finished the year by placing fourth in both the NCZA and AAU meets. His times of 1:51.6 and 1:51.8 were the two best he has ever recorded. This year, Knowles ran 1:54.8 for his top official mark, but clipped off an unofficial 1:52.8 in a relay lap.

Although the 880 has always been his principal race, Knowles anchored many a Spartan relay team to victory in his four years at State, and several times tripped in the 440, 880 and mile relay. He has always been a great competitor, and providing he's in top shape, Knowles can not be counted out of the national meets or Olympic trials.

*SPARTAN DAILY*

June 14, 1948

Thelmo Knowles prepares for his final competition as a student of San Jose State College.
La Torre Yearbook

1949

Thelno Knowles is pictured as a member of the graduating class.
Thelno Knowles Weds At Chapel in Del Monte
Hayes-Knowles

Miss Dorothy Hayes and Thelno Knowles, former students at San Jose State college, were married Saturday, Jan. 15, at St. John's chapel in Del Monte. Miss Hayes is from Carmel and was a commerce major while attending college. Knowles is from Santa Monica. While at San Jose State college he majored in philosophy and was active in sports. He holds the CCAA record for the 880 yard run.

Bob Lawrence, business major here, was best man.

The couple plan to make their home in Berkeley where Knowles will do graduate work at the University of California.

Spartan Daily
January 19, 1949

Thelno Knowles marries Dorothy Hayes, making plans to move to Berkeley and attend graduate school.