“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 come from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and 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 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

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Originally from San Diego, Willie Steele attended San Jose State College from 1942-1943, then finished his schooling at San Diego State. While best known for his skills at the broad and high jump, Steele also played multiple other sports including baseball, football, and boxing. In 1942, he set the college’s field jump mark record with a 25’7” jump, which stood as the record until 1966, earning him the National Junior Broad Jump title. In 1945, Steele competed in the Allied Track and Field Championships at the Foro D’Italia stadium in Florence, Italy and won both the broad and high jump events. While at school, Steele batted .310, and after graduation from San Diego State he made the 1949 second All-CCAA baseball team as a first baseman. He competed in the 1948 London Olympics and won gold in the long jump. Steele served as an Army Private First Class in the Fifth Army in World War II. He became a director in Oakland’s Parks and Rec Department, and retired in 1988. Steele passed away on September 19, 1989.
Willie Steele wins first place in broad jump and in the hop, step, and jump competition at the PAA track meet in Berkeley.
SECONDS AND THIRDS MAY DECIDE WINNER OF CLOSE CONTEST; TWO TEAMS EVENLY MATCHED

Spartan Rhiney May Be Slowed by Leg Injury

By Niels Nielsen

Two of the greatest college track teams in the nation clash when the Fresno State Bulldogs meet the San Jose State Spartans in a dual meet this afternoon on Spartan Field at 4 o’clock.

Both teams have fine records. San Jose hasn’t lost a dual meet this season, while Fresno has only lost to the University of Southern California Trojans. In the large meets in which both teams have appeared, San Jose has come out on top. The Spartans finished ahead of the Bulldogs in the San Francisco Olympic club indoor meet and again Saturday in the PAA championships where they scored 25.5-9 points to Fresno’s 33.5-6.

However, eliminating the hop, step and jump which was won by Willie Steele (and which is not included in an ordinary meet), the two teams would have been tied.

Rhiney Injured

Coach Winter’s hopes for a win took a serious slump when Bill Rhine pulled a leg muscle during practice Thursday. Rhine didn’t run in the PAA and still has quite a limp. Originally he was counted on for quite a few points, competing as he did in the 220 yard dash, 440 yard run, 220 yard low hurdles and the relay. How many of these events he will be able to enter and how well he will do in those he does enter is one of the big question marks of the meet.

Fresno Milers Tops

Fresno is conceded first and second in the mile and two mile, where Art Cazares and Bobby Malden rank among the top runners in the country; while San Jose has a prospect in the broad jump, formed by Bill Smith, Willie Steele and Chishimi Akahai.

The rest of the events are pretty well open, with the exception of the sprinter in which Fresno has one man, Al Jackson, who should go a good place in both the quarter and furlong.

Coaches’ Juggling

It will be interesting to see the results of the second-guessing of Coaches Winter and Flint Hanner. Hanner will run quadrangular for Mariposa in the 600 and 880, and will enter Madrid in the half mile as well as the mile and two mile.

Winter plans to hold Cade Towns out of the mile so that he can save everything for the two-mile grind and perhaps give Madrid a battle. Winter will run Bill Ingram in the 440 and quarter-mile with Ralph Kauffman in the shot put, and entering Ed Clark who has been out with a bad shoulder in the javelin.

In the policy of the coaches juggling their entries, Coach Winter recounted, “We’ve both gasping and if either of us doesn’t guess right, it may be just too bad.”

Willie Steele competes against Fresno State in the broad jump.
Willie Steele and two of his track teammates attempt to break San Jose State records in the annual inter-fraternity track meet. Steele goes for a record in the broad jump, for which he needs to surpass the 25-foot mark.
Willie Steele heads to New York with fellow Black Spartans Bill Smith and Thelmo Knowles to compete in the National AAU track meet. Steele competes as the Pacific Coast champion in the hop, skip, and jump event.
Spartan Daily

June 18, 1942

Willie Steele prepares for a weekend of track events in New York.
Willie Steele’s meteoric rise to college sports fame is compared to writer Horatio Alger’s concept of “rags-to-riches,” with special focus on Steele’s football prowess.
Willie Steele competes in a boxing bout in the 165 lb. class, handily beating his opponent.
Coach Bud Winter prognosticates about the future of his three track stars, including Willie Steele who is returning to compete while the possibility of military service looms.

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 saw 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 season, we expect to give the best teams in the nation a run.

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 red-head is depending upon.

“I have set up three marks to strive for this year. 9.4 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 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 no 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, 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.
La Torre yearbook

1943

Willie Steele is pictured as a member of the football team, with a detailed description of a game in which Steele scored at least one touchdown.
After leaving San Jose State to serve in the military, Willie Steele competes in the Allied Track and Field Championships at the Foro D'Italia stadium in Florence, Italy. He wins both the broad and high jump events.
Spartan Daily

March 8, 1946

Willie Steele's record-making broad jumps continue to be the stuff of legends even after he leaves San Jose State for the military.
After his military service, Willie Steele returns to the United States, but not to San Jose State, going instead to his hometown college, San Diego State, where he continues his success in sports.
While at San Diego State, Willie Steele competes against San Jose in basketball.
Willie Steele also competes in track and field events for San Diego State, playing against San Jose again in 1948.
Willie Steele remains a strong contender from San Diego State while being celebrated for his 100-yard dash record at San Jose, in a race he ran while wearing his football uniform.