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K-State Keepsakes: King at K-State: Remembering Martin Luther King Jr. 50 years after his historic campus visit

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KING at K-STATE

Remembering Martin Luther King Jr. 50 years after his historic campus visit

On the brisk morning of January 19, 1968—50 years ago this month—civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. gave an All-University Convocation speech titled “The Future of Integration” at Ahearn Field House at Kansas State University. In his last university address before his assassination on April 4, 1968, King reflected on the nation’s struggle for racial justice and the challenges that remained.

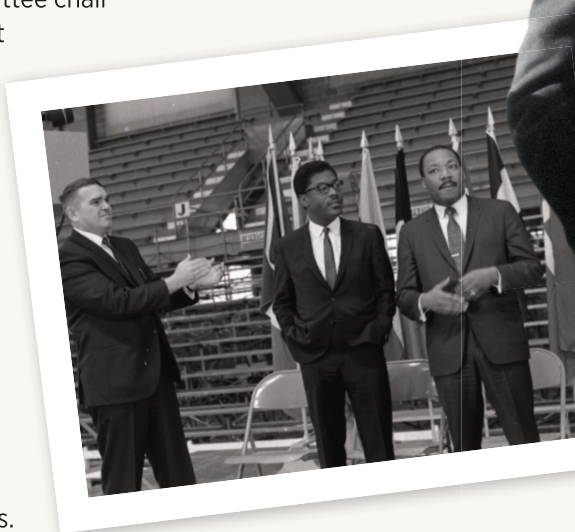
KING’S VISIT

King flew into Kansas City, where Convocations Committee chair William W. Boyer met him. In a recent email, Boyer noted he “was surprised [King] was alone without anyone with him. Nor was there any indication of his fame—just an ordinary unpretentious person.” After a charter flight to Manhattan, Boyer drove King to campus.

James McCain, K-State’s president from 1950 to 1975, walked with King past protesters as they

entered the field house. Significant issues on campus at the time included the Vietnam War and the campus’s recent prohibition of discriminatory housing practices in Manhattan, matters that percolated in the minds of the 7,200 attendees. President McCain limited his introduction to ensure King had the requisite time to speak, concluding by calling King a “distinguished American and great citizen of the world.” The audience then gave a 20 second ovation before King began his remarks.

After reviewing some of the progress of African Americans over the centuries, King summarized, “It seems to me that the realistic position is that we have made



Above: William W. Boyer welcomed King and his executive assistant, Bernard Lee, to K-State.
Right: King with President McCain.





Until recently, the only known photos of King's visit were black and white. These images were found in archives records titled "Photographic Services photographs."

James McCain, K-State President; Homer Floyd, director of the Kansas Human Relations Commission; and George Haley, Kansas State Senator, were on the podium with King.

significant strides in the struggle for racial justice, but that we have a long, long way to go before the problem is solved." He then addressed poor housing conditions, unemployment and underemployment of people of color: "The fact is that most of the poverty stricken people in our country work every day, but they make wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of economic life of our nation." In focusing on these societal challenges, King suggested legal, ethical and moral responses.

He began with morality and ethics: "I would be the first to say that we will never have a truly integrated and brotherly society until men and women rise to the majestic heights of being obedient to the unenforceable." He then connected them with the legal realm, suggesting, "It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated.

It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that is pretty important also." King concluded his remarks by stating his belief that the day would come when African Americans would experience equality and freedom.

What impression did King leave on those who heard his words? Boyer had admired King for years, yet he remembered he was "unprepared for the eloquence and power of his lecture when [he] sat on the Ahearn stage completely mesmerized by [King's] greatness." It was evident King was a powerful speaker who effectively used eloquence and a

touch of humor to address the serious societal ills he sought to correct. Even today, 50 years later, many of his remarks remain relevant. In addressing today's problems, may we remember King's closing words: "With this faith [in justice and truth] we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."

A recording of the speech King gave to the crowd of 7,200 is available in the Morse Department of Special Collections reading room.



The Richard L.D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections at K-State Libraries preserves and collects the history of Kansas State University. K-State Keepsakes are compiled from the photos, diaries, memorabilia and documents that are available to the public in University Archives.