

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

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MUSIC AND PLACE ON OKLAHOMA CITY'S DEEP DEUCE

MUSIC AND PLACE ON OKLAHOMA CITY'S DEEP DEUCE

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By

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MUSIC AND PLACE ON OKLAHOMA CITY'S DEEP DEUCE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

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PREFACE

Without knowing exactly where I was, I first encountered the Deep Deuce in the winter of 1993. A cultural geography field trip led myself, three other students, and our professor, Dr. Robert Rundstrom, on an exploration of Oklahoma City's cultural landscape. We stopped the car on Northeast Second Street and proceeded to walk up and down the deserted block, taking pictures and speculating about the history of the vacant buildings. Even though I knew the buildings were abandoned (or so I thought at the time!), I couldn't shake the feeling that I was somehow intruding on someone else's territory. This feeling stayed with me throughout my subsequent research, continually reminding me that I was an outsider to the place and the community I was studying.

This thesis represents only one of many possible interpretations of the Deep Deuce. An African-American researcher, or any else for that matter, might view and present certain aspects of this story differently. It is important to acknowledge the value of different perspectives to place-narratives and to recognize our own biases as researchers. While doing so does not necessarily result in what would be considered "objectivity," it allows the researcher to point to the possible limitations of his or her study. Fortunately, the richness of place allows, even insists, that others tell this story as well -- each perspective adding new layers of meaning and insight to the landscape.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It's not easy to find the stretch of Northeast Second Street known as the Deep Deuce. On a street map, Northeast Second appears to begin east of Interstate 235, as an eastward extension of Robert S. Kerr Boulevard (figure 1). In truth it begins not at the highway but five blocks west, at the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. Wedged between these transportation corridors, in a maze of one-way streets, are the seemingly forgotten blocks of Northeast Second Street that once formed the heart of the African-American community in Oklahoma City (figure 2).

To the eye, not much remains -- six boarded-up brick commercial buildings and a church, Calvary Baptist (figure 3). In a textbook example of urban decline, the activities and people that filled with life these and other buildings along Second Street in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s have since migrated to the north and east. In their place are parking lots and building foundations overgrown with weeds, testimony to the unfulfilled promises of urban renewal.

A look around in the Summer of 1994, however, reveals that the area has not been completely abandoned. Although the church building needs a few repairs, its congregation still meets every Sunday, and Reverend Davis keeps office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In fact, Calvary is listed on the National Register of

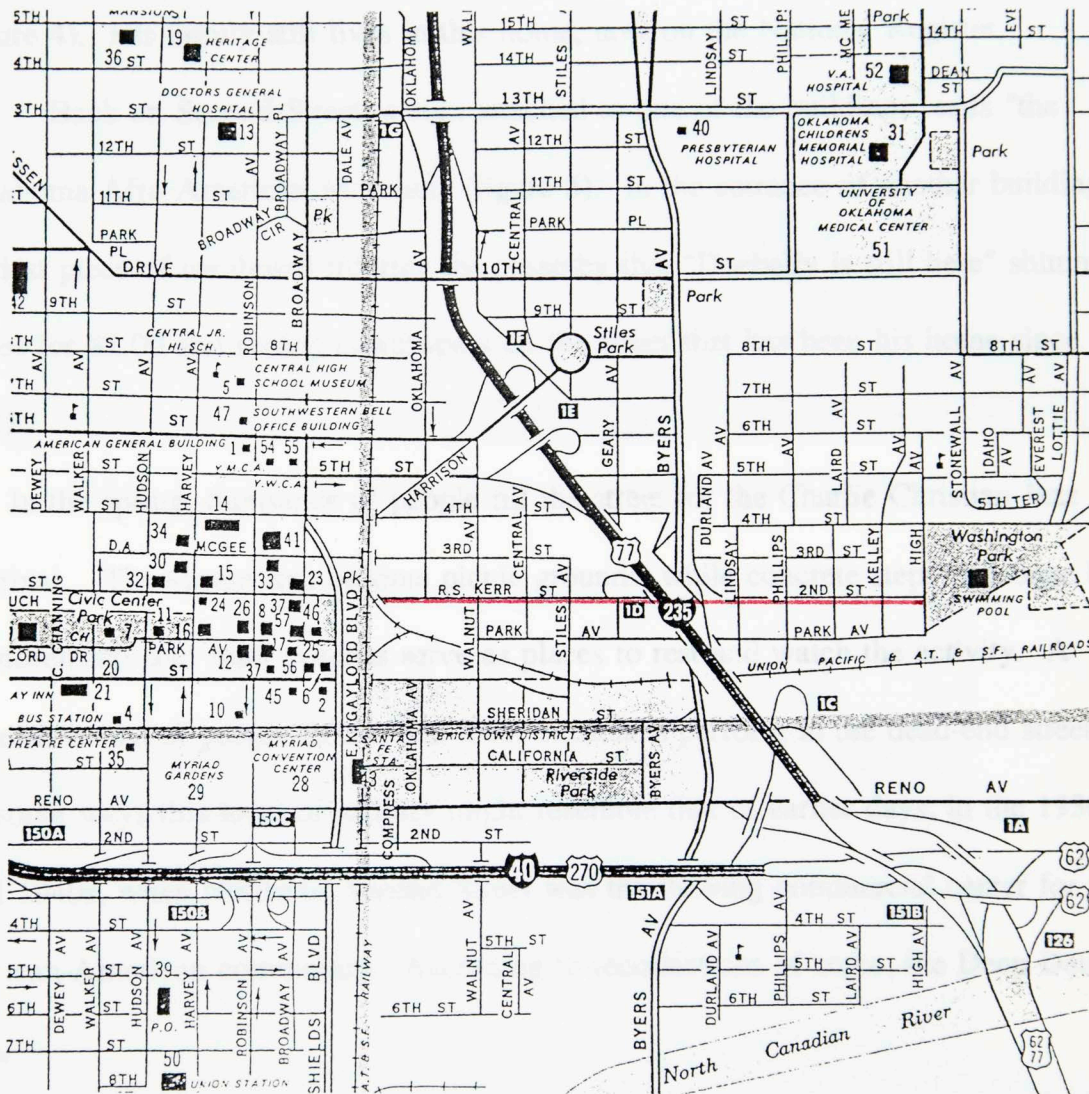


Figure 1. 1993 Street Map of Oklahoma City (source: H. M. Gousha Company).

Historic Places for its architecture and for its association with the African-American community's struggle for civil rights.

Just a block north on Third Street a beautiful two-story, Italianate house, the Luster Mansion, was built by a prominent African-American businessman in the 1920s (figure 4). His family still lives in this home, now on the National Register.

Back on Second Street, a sign attached to one of the buildings reads "the Oklahoma Afro-American Museum" (figure 5). In the entrance of another building, a modest piece of cardboard informs the passerby that "Doebelly is still here" shining shoes for \$2.00 and selling newspapers on the street that has been his home since 1923.

In the spring, thousands of people fill the street for the Charlie Christian Jazz Festival. The vacant lots become picnic grounds, while concrete steps that once led to storefronts and front porches serve as places to rest and watch the activity. A diverse crowd of people dance, and local musicians perform in the dead-end streets. In some ways this level of activity might resemble that of earlier days, in the 1930s and 1940s, when Northeast Second Street was the thriving commercial center for the African-American community. According to recollections of some, the Deep Deuce was

"Wonderful!" "It was great, I never saw anything like it." "There were so many people...walking, talking...all day and all night." "Deep 2 was something." "a Negro sanctuary" "It was heaven."¹

¹Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce* (Oklahoma City: Black Liberated Arts Council, 1994): 15. Arnold was quoting Oklahoma City African-American residents over the age of sixty.



Figure 2. Northeast Second Street as it appears today (photo by author).



Figure 3. Calvary Baptist Church (photo by author).



Figure 4. Luster Mansion (photo by author).



Figure 5. Home of the Afro-American Museum (photo by author).

Such reflections by former residents, and the continued interest in the physical remains of Second Street provide insight into the importance of the Deep Deuce for those who knew it. It was the center of a community that, although severely circumscribed by segregation, provided for its own economic, social and cultural needs. The result was a unique and meaningful place. Looking at the former center of an African-American ghetto from this perspective contradicts many preconceptions of what segregated life must have been like. Given the extreme negative consequences of racial discrimination, how is it possible that the former residents of Oklahoma City's Northeast Second Street remember the place so fondly and continue to celebrate its history?

This thesis explores the role of music on Northeast Second Street within the political and social context that shaped the African-American community in Oklahoma City. The approach is qualitative, seeking to illuminate rather than explain, and brings together the topics of segregation, place, and music. Tracing the development of segregation in Oklahoma City will show that the Black ghetto was more than just the spatial outcome of large-scale institutional and structural forces. Within the conditions that these forces created, human agency manifested itself in a myriad of ways to create a meaningful place. One important way was music. Music played a vital function in nearly all aspects of community life on Northeast Second Street -- its education, entertainment, and economy -- just to name a few. Moreover, as a means of cultural expression, music carried great significance in the lives of African-Americans. The combination of experiences and meanings that are associated with music on Second

Street created a sense of place inseparable from, though not necessarily visible in, the abandoned buildings and empty lots that now remain.

Segregation

Although several northern cities were home to a sizable Black population prior to 1900, most Black urban communities remained rather small. A high proportion of the Black population worked as domestic servants to middle and upper-class whites and therefore lived dispersed throughout the city. It was not until social and economic conditions in the post-emancipation South worsened, and industrial opportunities in the North expanded after the turn of the century, that Black ghettos became firmly established as part of the urban landscape. Academic studies on the nature of African-American city life began as early as 1899 when W.E.B. Du Bois published his descriptive analysis of Philadelphia's Black community.² Based on intensive fieldwork that included door-to-door surveys as well as detailed observation, Du Bois presented information on a wide range of topics concerning everyday life for urban African-Americans. His study is remarkable not only for its sheer volume, but also for its timing relatively early in the historical development of distinct, racially segregated areas within the city.

In the early 1920s, sociologists at the University of Chicago began to study the growth of cities as a manifestation of natural ecological processes. Taking their cue from work in biology in particular, founders of what would be called "The Chicago

²W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: a Social Study* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899).

School” sociologists like Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Roderick McKenzie, formulated theories of urban ecology. Their approach described urban expansion in terms of extension, succession, and concentration, and postulated that social disorganization came about as a result of population growth in excess of the natural rate that a city could accommodate without disturbing its “metabolism.” Burgess considered mobility to be the quantitatively measurable “pulse” of a community’s growth wherein areas of high mobility indicated an unhealthy condition.³ These seemingly natural processes manifested themselves in the form of differentiated concentric zones centered on a city’s central business district, the “Loop.” Immigrant slums emerged in the zone in transition (also referred to as the zone of deterioration) surrounding the Loop, and were characterized by poverty, degradation, disease, crime and vice.⁴ Included in this formula were the “Negro” ghettos that resulted from the massive influx of southern Blacks to northern cities. According to Park and Burgess, “these Blacks represented the latest group of migrants involved in the ‘interaction cycle’ that led from conflict to accommodation to assimilation.”⁵

The publication in 1945 of St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* represented a shift away from the Chicago School’s organic theory of city

³Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925).

⁴Ibid., 55.

⁵William Julius Wilson, foreword to *Black Metropolis*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xlvii.

growth. Collaborating with anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, Drake and Cayton sought to answer the following questions:

To what degree is the Negro subordinated and excluded in relation to white people in the society, what are the mechanisms by which the system is maintained, and how do the lives of Negroes reflect this subordination and exclusion?⁶

Cayton and Drake introduced the reality of the color line that limited Black occupational, residential, and social mobility, and added an ethnographic study of the everyday lives of Black Americans in Chicago to traditional sociological inquiry.

Black Metropolis paved the way for others like Robert Weaver⁷ to address specifically the institutional forces such as the Federal Housing Authority and racial covenants that led to and perpetuated the existence of Black ghettos.

When quantitative analysis spread through academia in the 1950s and 1960s, spatial statistics became a rich field of inquiry within geography. Richard Morrill took early steps in the application of these methods to the study of Black residential areas. Drawing on a theoretical foundation provided by the Chicago School, Morrill explained ghetto expansion as a process of diffusion based on the ideas of invasion and succession. Only hinting at structural influences like discrimination in the real estate industry and in financial institutions, he asserted that "In ghetto expansion, the process is reduced to replacement of passive white 'deserters' by active Negro migrants."⁸ As the African-American population grew, according to Morrill, it would

⁶W. Lloyd Warner, a methodological note to *Black Metropolis*, 769.

⁷Robert Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1948).

⁸Richard Morrill, "The Negro Ghetto: Problems and Alternatives," *The*

"invade" previously established white neighborhoods, forcing the latter's abandonment. Within this conceptual framework, Morrill proposed a model for predicting the extent and intensity of ghetto expansion through the use of spatial statistics. A self-described activist for racial equality, Morrill's depiction of Black residents as aggressors nonetheless reflected the prevailing attitudes of mainly white social scientists.⁹

Ironically perhaps, an article by Harold Rose immediately followed Morrill's in the 1965 volume of *The Geographical Review*, beginning what would be a long list of publications outlining the origins and patterns of Black residential areas and simultaneously countering established theories of Black residential growth.¹⁰ Although his first article specifically addressed the development of all-Black towns, Rose soon shifted his focus to Black residential areas within a city. He rejected the idea of Black invasion, instead proposing that the inherent racism of white populations was the instigator of ghetto expansion. Using census demographic data at the block level, Rose mapped the pattern of territorially-based Black social communities on a national scale, and developed a model to explain and predict ghetto formation within a particular urban system. This model included three basic components: 1) a demographic component, 2) a producer component and 3) a consumer component. The demographic component used population growth within a defined ghetto space to

Geographical Review 55 (1965): 359.

⁹Richard Morrill, author's response in "Classics in Human Geography Revisited," *Progress in Human Geography* 17 (1993): 352.

¹⁰Harold M. Rose, "The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function," *The Geographical Review* 55 (1965): 362-381.

estimate housing demand. The producer component accounts for housing vacancies produced by white abandonment of areas in, or adjacent to, the ghetto space. This component is based on the premise that the leaving rate of whites is a function of the increase in the proportion of Black households in a block. The consumer component measures the probability of a given block to receive a Black home seeker and is determined by the rate of Black household formation based on marriage rates.¹¹ Rose used these three components to determine the spatial pattern of Black occupancy over a ten year period. Instead of a white perspective on a Black dynamic, Rose offered a Black view of a white process - suburbanization.¹² Without abandoning his interest in forecasting ghetto growth, Rose provided a more descriptive, holistic view of the spatial behavioral aspects of Black ghetto life in 1971.¹³ As one of the first monographs published by a geographer to specifically address Black residential areas, this examination of the social, economic and political impacts of ghettoization could be seen as a precursor to his later work dealing with violence in Black America.¹⁴

Despite their opposing conceptual frameworks, Rose's and Morrill's early works were similarly positivistic, and both met with opposition from Marxist and humanistic

¹¹Ibid. "The Development of an Urban Subsystem," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60 (1970): 1-17.

¹²Ceri Peach, Commentary 2 in "Classics Revisited," 350.

¹³Harold Rose, *The Black Ghetto: A Spatial Behavioral Perspective* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971).

¹⁴Harold Rose, *Race, Place and Risk: Homicide in Urban America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

geographers in the early 1970s.¹⁵ Notably, David Harvey wanted to overthrow the Quantitative Revolution's lack of social concern via his Marxist perspective. He complained that

mapping even more evidence of man's patent inhumanity to man is counter-revolutionary in that it allows the bleeding-heart liberal in us to pretend we are contributing to a solution when in fact we are not.

According to Harvey, the bid rent curve used to explain the urban land market also explained the formation of overcrowded, low income areas within a city. According to the bid rent theory, urban land use is determined by competitive bidding for land, with rents typically being higher near the center of the city. The poor sector of a population has a steep bid rent curve due to its inability to afford the transportation necessary to live away from its place of employment. The poor population must therefore reside on high rent land (assuming that employment is concentrated in the city center) and must compensate by decreasing the quantity of space consumed. Segregation was not so much a racial problem as it was an inherent fault in a capitalistic society.¹⁶

The humanist perspective, on the other hand, criticized all positivistic tendencies to reduce human behavior to a predictable set of measurable responses to given inputs. David Ley, for example, added the richness of experiential, subjective inquiry to enhance understanding of Black urban neighborhoods. Based upon an inductive analysis of existing literature and his own early experience with a Black neighborhood,

¹⁵Ceri Peach, "Classics Revisited," 350.

¹⁶David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1973).

Ley found a behavioral model for the Black community in the analogy of the frontier outpost. From both an external and an internal perspective,

The Black community would seem to be another example of a community enmeshed in a hostile environment and following the classic adaptive processes of internal organization to meet its challenges.¹⁷

A frontier outpost was selected as a "pure situation" analogy of Black community life, a simple and generalized model of the environmental setting that removes the unique and retains common themes. Some examples of the themes common to a frontier outpost are uncertainty, danger, hostility, self-sufficiency, regulation and order.

Through subsequent participant observation, official statistics and a questionnaire survey, Ley tested this model against the reality of daily life in a Black residential area in Philadelphia. He discovered that although the frontier outpost might describe inner city behavior, it is appropriate at the individual level, not the community level.

While a frontier outpost requires internal consensus, individuals in a Black neighborhood tend to maintain their own sense of uncertainty, hostility and self-sufficiency that is not necessarily shared by others within the community. In fact, these feelings may well be directed towards other people or places *in* that neighborhood. The conclusions provided valuable insight into the spatial and non-spatial behavior of inner city residents, and illustrated the relevance of subjective inquiry.

Although quantitative spatial analyses of segregation continued, recent works focus on the social consequences of almost a century of institutionalized residential

¹⁷David Ley, *The Black Inner City as Frontier Outpost*, (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1974), 105.

segregation. In particular, current debate centers on whether the spatial segregation of the underclass is a product of cultural and individual characteristics or is, instead, the result of overriding structural conditions. In a special volume of *Urban Geography* devoted to this subject, the authors explore the thesis posited by William Julius Wilson¹⁸ that "aspects of underclassness are primarily an outcome of macrostructural economic forces impacting vulnerable communities."¹⁹ These articles emphasize the structural forces that lead to urban pathologies such as unemployment, teen pregnancy, and neighborhood depopulation. Most recently, sociologists Massey and Denton clearly set themselves within the structuralist camp by exploring the role of the real estate market's creation and maintenance of residential segregation as the direct cause of the impoverished conditions that characterize America's inner cities.²⁰

The primary deficiency of this literature is that, with the possible exception of the humanistic studies, researchers focus solely on the ills of "ghetto life," and define the residents of such areas solely as victims of discriminatory structural forces. No matter how pervasive problems in racially-segregated neighborhoods may be, there is more to the people who live in these communities than simply their association with the negative outcomes of racial segregation. Recognition of the full breadth of human experience that exists in the Black ghetto emerged recently in a new body of work

¹⁸William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁹Harold Rose, "The Underclass Debate Goes On," *Urban Geography* 12 (1991), 492.

²⁰Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

referred to as "New African-American Urban History." An issue of the *Journal of Urban History* dedicated to this very topic emphasizes individual agency in the creation of African-American communities. Within institutional barriers imposed by racial discrimination, individuals and communities have nonetheless asserted their right to respect and recognition. Instead of the previous emphasis on "white control of Black life," a new focus has emerged on Black working-class life, culture and community, including Black participation in labor and radical movements, African-American sports, Black festival behavior and the use of streets and public spheres.²¹

Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball exemplify this shift to intra-community issues in their historical study of the symbolic and social use of the Richmond, Virginia landscape by the African-American community. Brown and Kimball explore the history of Black community life in the city so that

more than merely fixed residential and work patterns mapped on linear blocks, we see city space as an amalgam of fluid public spaces and institutions culturally defined by the inhabitants.²²

In such studies, the "New African-American History" not only fills a void left by prior segregation studies, but also seems to fit in well with the study of place in geography.

²¹Kenneth Goings and Raymond Mohl, "Toward a New African-American History," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (1995): 286.

²²Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball, "Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond," *Journal of Urban History* (1995), 314.

Place

Edward Relph provided a synthesis of the study of place in geography and other disciplines with the publication of *Place and Placelessness* in 1976.²³ He defines place as "a specific landscape, a set of social activities, and webs of meanings and rituals, all inseparably intertwined."²⁴ The enemy of place according to Relph is "The Instant Environment Machine," two main examples of which are corporatization, which seeks to commodify place, and telecommunications, which blurs the uniqueness of particular places. Relph calls for those who actually live and work in them to create places from the inside out.

Critics complain of Relph's subjective view of place and non-places. Sime, for example, points out that the McDonald's restaurant that Relph calls "obviously ridiculous and absurd" might well be a meaningful place to someone else.²⁵ Dennis Crow cites Relph's bias toward places high in the urban hierarchy due to their architectural, cultural, demographic, political or economic importance. Crow specifically refers to Oklahoma City as a place that, for Relph, must be one of "the dreaded places of placelessness, alienation, and cybernetic inefficacy."²⁶ Relph does

²³Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

²⁴Edward Relph, "Modernity and the Reclamation of Place," in D. Seamon, ed., *Dwelling, Seeing and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993): 24-40.

²⁵Jonathan D. Sime, "Creating Places or Designing Spaces?" in *Readings in Environmental Psychology*, ed. Linda Grout (Boston: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1995), 27-41.

²⁶Dennis Crow, "My friends in low places: building identity for place and community," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994):403-419.

not apologize for his seeming subjectivity, but sets it squarely within the methodological debate that pits his humanistic phenomenology against positivistic analysis. Moreover, while he does express an apparent preference for environments or buildings that please his aesthetic sensibility, Relph's fundamental argument is that the built and natural environment does not create a meaningful place in and of itself. Citing the example of a working-class community's strong attachment to place in a visually-dreary landscape of row housing and factories, Relph concedes that "indeed, good forms may not always be necessary for the development of communities with a strong sense of place."²⁷ Relph might well argue that any planned or designed environment, including sprawling Oklahoma City and the cartoonish fast-food restaurant, will become a place only through the day-to-day interplay of those who experience it.

Yi-Fu Tuan juxtaposed the concepts of space and place. Space is experienced directly as the area in which people move, and place is the concretion of value that results from experiencing space.²⁸ He later added the role of narratives to the process of place-making, whereby "words have the general power to bring to light experiences that lie in the shadow or have receded into it, and the specific power to call places into being."²⁹ Through songs, myths, journals and speech, sites acquire meaning and

²⁷Edward Relph, "Modernity and the Reclamation of Place," 35.

²⁸Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

²⁹Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (19), 686.

character that may transform the perception of their visible characteristics. Both the creation and transmission of narratives, therefore, can become means both of experiencing the landscape and creating a meaningful place. The narrative-descriptive approach to place-making is particularly appealing in that it focusses not on explanatory theories, but on portraying the rich complexity of what we see around us. Moreover, looking to narratives -- written, oral, or otherwise -- to understand place shifts the importance away from historical accuracy to the important question of what does a place *mean* to the people who know it?

Music

As a narrative form itself, and also as an experiential process, music can be a useful tool for understanding the creation of place. Work in the geography of music has emphasized music as a cultural artifact while virtually ignoring its potential as a means of experiencing place. Some efforts address music style as the cultural product of a particular place or region. Warren Gill, for example, explores the creation of a musical phenomenon known as the Northwest Sound within the regional context of the Pacific Northwest.³⁰ By considering the interaction between cultural, social, economic and geographic factors, Gill proposes the Northwest Sound as a result of both structural forces and human agency.

Other studies in music geography rely on a more systematic treatment of music, focussing in particular on the source areas for and subsequent diffusion of musical

³⁰Warren Gill, "Region, Agency, and Popular Music: The Northwest Sound," *The Canadian Geographer* 37 (1993): 120-131.

styles and artists.³¹ George Carney has traced the origins and development of Oklahoma jazz artists, giving overdue credit to a widely-unrecognized source of musical talent. Using data collected primarily from biographical dictionaries and jazz encyclopedias, Carney details and maps the distribution of birthplaces, regional ballroom venues, and first migration destinations for forty-eight jazz artists born in Oklahoma from 1900-1945. While providing a valuable compilation of data, this type of analysis fails to provide an understanding of the circumstances that have influenced and have been influenced by the diffusion of music.

Finally, geographers have used song lyrics as texts for understanding the creation of place images. For example, F. M. Henderson examined the portrayal of New York City throughout almost a century of American popular music.³² This approach falls squarely within the narrative-descriptive perspective advocated by Yi-Fu Tuan.

Few, if any, attempts have been made, however, at examining music as a means for experiencing place. Music be examined as a part of place-making rituals and narratives and can provide a means for experiencing a particular place. Lily Kong points out that, as a "medium through which people convey their environmental experience, "music can illuminate the process through which mere space is

³¹Larry Ford, "Geographic Factors in the Origin, Evolution, and Diffusion of Rock and Roll Music," *Journal of Geography* 70 (1974): 455-464; George Carney, "Bluegrass Grows All Around: The Spatial Dimensions of a Country Music Style," in George Carney, ed., *The Sounds of People and Places* (New York: University Press of America, 1987): 159-197.

³²F. M. Henderson, "The Image of New York City in American Popular Music: 1890-1970," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 30 (1974): 267-279.

transformed into a meaningful place.³³ Music is not just an outcome of experience but also a medium of experience that conveys simultaneously both the activities and the meanings Relph defines as two of the necessary elements in the creation of place. As a form of spectacle, music may draw on or reproduce the symbolism of place. This ties in directly to the narrative-descriptive approach proposed by Tuan. Current trends in geographical research of popular music largely ignore the social and political context of music and do not acknowledge the role of music in the socially-constructed nature of space and place experience.³⁴ In this sense, the role of music on Northeast Second Street provides a perfect example of how the interaction between culture, politics and geography can transform the landscape into a meaningful place.

Segregation, Place, and Music in Oklahoma City

The answer to the earlier question -- why Northeast Second Street is a meaningful place to those who knew it -- may lie at the intersection of the history of segregation, the meaning of place, and the historic role of music in the African-American community. The academic literature on all three elements ends at the same point: a need to examine how the cultural aspects of community life, within a racially-segregated neighborhood, play a part in place-making. While a predictor model such as Rose's may offer a generalized explanation for the spatial aspects of black neighborhood growth, it would not take into account more unique local factors like the

³³Lily Kong, "Popular Music in Geographical Analysis," *Progress in Human Geography* 19 (1995), 184.

³⁴Ibid.

enterprise of Black residential developers, or the legal battles waged by Black citizens against institutionalized discrimination. The model would even more certainly ignore the cultural richness of the community that developed within the spatial processes it sought to predict. On the other hand, considering the cultural and social aspects of African-American community life in Oklahoma City solely as unique phenomena would dislocate the place from its larger structural context and would disassociate it from the common ties shared by racially segregated communities throughout the country. My study, therefore, considers the rise and decline of Northeast Second Street from the perspective of both segregation politics and the cultural and social importance of music. The history and geography of the place known as the Deep Deuce begins with the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889 and continues to this day, reflecting both the structural influences that worked to define the community's boundaries and the agency of the people who created a meaningful place therein.

Chapter 2

Building Deep Deuce

Throughout American history, African-Americans have been confronted with a society that has attempted to limit their freedom and rob them of their individuality and culture. From stripping slaves of their African names and forbidding the use of languages other than English to relegating entire communities to the least desirable portions of the urban landscape, the majority white society has sought to confine all aspects of African-American life. It is a mistake, however, to assume that African-Americans acted merely as passive victims of racial injustice. They have, instead, continually found ways in which to exert control over their destiny and over the landscape not only by asserting their individual and collective strengths but also through the expression of their cultural identity.

The Promised Land

The opening of Indian Territory for non-Indian settlement in 1889 was an attempt to meet the ever-growing American demand for land. With Oklahoma being presented by the railroads and other promoters as a geographic utopia, is it any wonder that the land runs and lotteries appeared to many as the answer to post-emancipation confusion? The 1889 Oklahoma Land Run in the Unassigned Lands in particular

provided an opportunity to make a completely new start in a place largely free from the political history of the southern states and the increasing industrialization of the North. Full of the hope of finding that perfect piece of land they could call their own, African-Americans took their place alongside thousands of white settlers on April 22, 1889. It was a land of opportunity imagined as fertile and rich. More than the promise of land itself, however, there was a promise of freedom extended to anyone willing and able to make a new start here.

W. L. Eagleson, an African-American politician from Kansas City, and others like him had orchestrated an extensive advertising campaign throughout the southern states promoting the promise of a new life waiting in Oklahoma. He spread the word to those struggling to find their place in a society that after twenty-five years continued to reject their free status:

There never was a more favorable time than now for you to secure good homes in a land where you will be free and your rights respected. Oklahoma is now open for settlement. The soil is rich, the climate favorable, water abundant and there is plenty of timber.¹

Oklahoma was seen as a golden opportunity to take control of and create a society free of the white racism that kept African-Americans bound socially and economically. Seeing no hope of changing conditions in the South, Edward McCabe, another Kansas City politician and founder of the all-Black town of Langston, envisioned Oklahoma as

¹"The Emigration Scheme of a Kansas Colored Politician," *Washington Bee* (July 1889), quoted in Arthur Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans, a History: 1541-1972* (New Orleans: Edwards Printing Company, 1972).

a future all-Black state.² Oklahoma came to be a land of hope, the Promised Land, for thousands of African-American pioneers.

Black Settlement in Oklahoma City

In 1891, the first African-American school in Oklahoma City opened its doors in a two-room camp house in an abandoned wagon yard at the corner of Reno and Harvey avenues, two years after the first settlers founded the city. Territorial policy provided for the local option to segregate schools. By 1897, this was no longer a mere option but a requirement based on the 1896 "separate but equal" ruling of the United States Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Although not yet formalized in territorial laws, customary segregation further limited the African-American both socially and economically. Clusters of African-Americans residences were located throughout the city primarily in areas near the railroads, in close proximity to work and near the cheaper housing that resulted from undesirable pollution and noise. Segregation was already emerging in the commercial sector with booming business establishments that serves the African-American community concentrated along the Santa Fe Railroad just south of Main Street between Reno and Grand avenues.³ Starting with its first publication in 1899, city directories designated businesses and residences owned or occupied by "Colored"

²Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans*.

³Edward Pugh, "Spatial Consequences of Public Policy on the Evolution of the Black Community; a Case Study of Oklahoma City, 1889-1974" (master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1977), 104.

persons. The institutionalized racism that led W.L. Eagleson, Edward McCabe, and thousands of other African-Americans to relocate to Oklahoma was not as easy to transcend as they had hoped. Indeed, the territorial government sanctioned it.

A former military reservation situated on a small hill just east of the Santa Fe tracks must have provided a splendid view of the newborn city's growth (figure 6). When the land was taken by the city in 1893, it was, in part, the view and proximity to the growing business district that led the Military Addition, to become a desirable residential area for the city's elite. Touted as the "best real estate ever offered in Oklahoma," lots went to the highest bidder with the promise that they would "double in value in 60 days."⁴ With the increasing demand for space in the fast-growing city, the value was likely grounded primarily in the reality of land speculation. "Miss Oklahoma City has outgrown her present gown and has needed a new one as every tuck in the old garment had been let out."⁵ With the Military Addition being the first land outside the original city limits to be platted, future demand was virtually guaranteed.

Amidst the promotional excitement, plans were already underway for the coming of the Choctaw railroad, Oklahoma City's long awaited connection to St. Louis.⁶ The tracks would run east-west right through the middle of the Military Addition, just

⁴Advertisement, *Daily Oklahoman*, 24 September 1894.

⁵"The Rich Reserve," *Daily Oklahoman*, 24 August 1894.

⁶"Oklahoma's Queen," *Daily Oklahoman*, 24 August 1894.

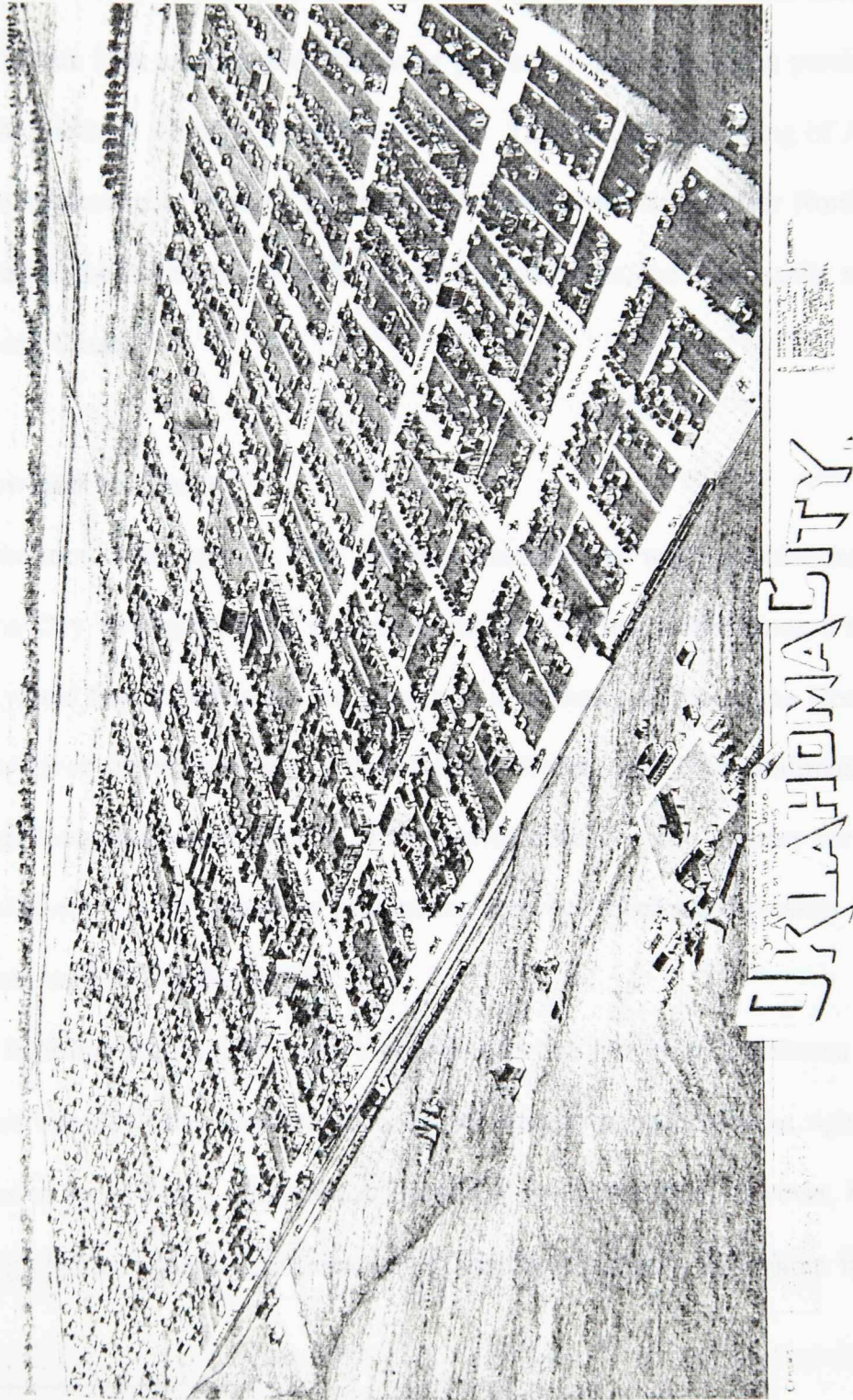


Figure 6. Artist's Drawing of Oklahoma City in 1890. The military reservation is visible at the bottom center of the drawing (source: Stewart 1974).

south of First Street. With new subdivisions soon opening to the north, it did not take long for the Military Addition to seem less and less desirable as an elite address. Black residents took advantage of the lower property values and began purchasing land in the Military Addition as early as 1903.⁷ This was the beginning of African-American settlement in the area that would become known as the Near Northeast, and would lead to the development of Northeast Second Street, the area locally referred to as the Deep Deuce.

Jim Crow and Statehood

By the turn of the century, both African-American and white populations of Oklahoma City were growing at a phenomenal pace. While trolley lines, a new university, and new subdivisions led growth in a northerly direction, the North Canadian River and the addition of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad in 1903 discouraged expansion to the south. The growing clamor in the territory for statehood would refocus attention locally on segregation and race relations, especially in the future state capital, Oklahoma City.

The Enabling Act of 1906, which provided for the joining of Oklahoma and Indian Territories into one state, also provided that all citizens should have the right to vote, regardless of race. Many white citizens began to feel threatened, however, by the increasingly active political participation of African-Americans throughout the nation.

⁷*Warden-Ebright Directory of Oklahoma City, 1903* (Oklahoma City: Warden-Ebright Printing Company, 1904).

The rise of racial tensions set the stage for the attempt to include Jim Crow laws in the state constitution, the very laws Black settlers had wanted to escape.

In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court supported the provision of "separate but equal" facilities for the races and left the determination of issues pertaining to racial discrimination to individual states. When the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention convened in 1906, delegates under the leadership of "Alfalfa Bill" Murray expressed concern that if the constitution did not incorporate suffrage exclusion and other Jim Crow provisions, thousands of African-Americans from adjoining states would flood into Oklahoma.⁸ They were confronted, however, with President Theodore Roosevelt's proclamation that although he wanted to admit Oklahoma to the Union during his administration, statehood would not be granted if Jim Crow laws were added to the Constitution.⁹

Meanwhile, Black citizens of Oklahoma vehemently protested the inclusion of a Jim Crow clause in the constitution. They organized their own Constitutional Conventions and issued a proclamation encouraging

the colored people throughout the two territories [to] organize clubs in every county township, city, town and hamlet within the two territories, for the purpose of defeating the most vicious instrument that was ever written and called a constitution and offered to a free people of the U.S. of America.¹⁰

⁸Arthur L. Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans, a History: 1541-1972* (New Orleans: Edwards Printing Company, 1972), 137.

⁹Oscar Fowler, *The Haskell Regime: the Intimate Life of Charles Nathaniel Haskell* (Oklahoma City: Boles Printing Company, Inc., 1933): 173.

¹⁰*Oklahoma Guide*, 21 March 1907.

Although the final version of the constitution retained the right of Blacks to suffrage, it also included provisions for segregated schools. The general election of September 17, 1907 resulted in the adoption of the Constitution by a wide majority.

Seeing this Constitution as a precedent for future policies that would further limit African-American opportunities, a Black delegation immediately set off for Washington, D.C. to implore the president not to sign the proclamation of statehood. The Promised Land was following the example set by Jim Crow racism throughout the country. Although Roosevelt seemed sympathetic to their cause, he would not grant their request.¹¹ On November 16, 1907 the Constitution became law in Oklahoma, setting the stage for institutionalized segregation of the races. Yet at this early time, it was clear the African-American community in Oklahoma would not cede without a fight its rights and its vision of an Oklahoma Promised Land.

Segregation Ordinances - The "Ghettos" Emerge

In 1910, the state capital was removed from Guthrie to Oklahoma City. In the three years after statehood, the city's population had doubled from 32,452 to 64,205.¹² The African-American population had similarly grown from 3,569 to 6,712.¹³

Although the constitution itself did not call for complete segregation, economics, prejudice, and custom continued to limit African-American movement in Oklahoma

¹¹Arthur L. Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans, A History: 1541-1972*.

¹²Bureau of the Census, *Abstract with Supplement for Oklahoma, 1910*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913).

¹³Edward Pugh, "Spatial Consequences," 112.

City, resulting in the emergence of several distinct African-American neighborhoods (figure 7).

One such neighborhood was Westtown, the second largest African-American area, located along an old meander scar of the North Canadian River, between McKinley Street, Clergen Street, Main Street and Reno. Flooding of the North Canadian frequently forced residents to seek higher ground, a factor that made Westtown unappealing to whites and drove property values low enough for African-Americans to afford.¹⁴ This area was primarily residential with only a few businesses and a church¹⁵ and was located within easy access to employment at the city Farmer's Market as well as to the warehousing, industrial and commercial activities that were growing west of the city.

Just west of the Santa Fe Railroad, south of the Frisco and Rock Island tracks, Southtown became home to poor rural African-American, Mexican and white immigrants.¹⁶ Like Westtown, this area suffered due to its location on the floodplain of the North Canadian River. The housing conditions were inadequate and most amenities were lacking.¹⁷

¹⁴Edward Pugh, "Spatial Consequences," 116.

¹⁵Fred G. Fulkerson, "Community Forces in a Negro District in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma" (master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1946), 14.

¹⁶Golda Slief, "Health and Social Conditions in One Hundred Families," (master's thesis: University of Oklahoma, 1948), 12.

¹⁷Edward Pugh, "Spatial Consequences," 118.

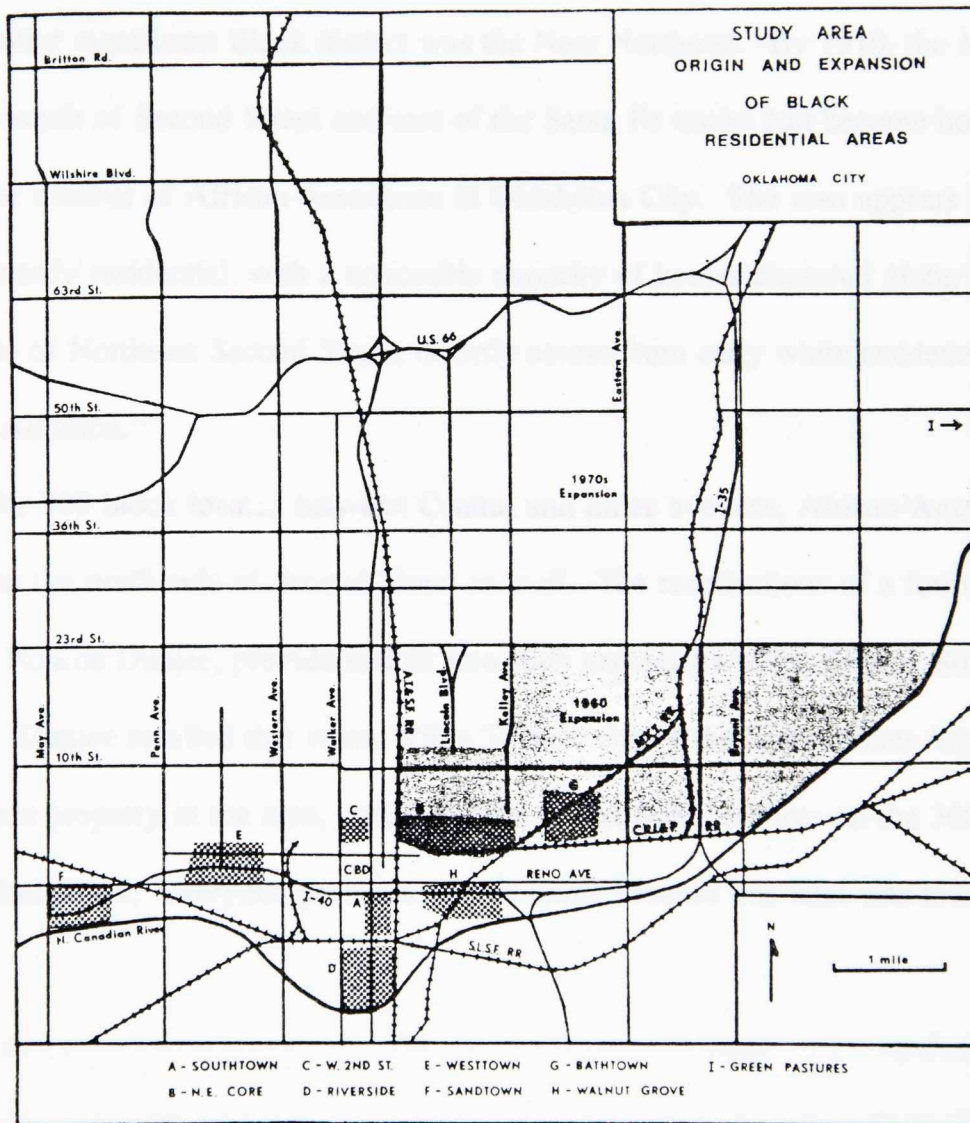


Figure 7. Origin and Expansion of Black Residential Areas (source: Pugh, 1977)

Sandtown was located just south and west of what were the city limits at the time. along what is now May Avenue. Just north of the river, along what is now May Avenue, the area got its name from the loose sand that blew across the unpaved streets. The houses in Sandtown were described as being unpainted and in need of repairs.¹⁸

The most significant Black district was the Near Northeast. By 1910, the Military Addition south of Second Street and east of the Santa Fe tracks had become home to the largest number of African-Americans in Oklahoma City. The area appears to have been primarily residential, with a noticeable majority of homes clustered along the south side of Northeast Second Street, directly across from early white residents of the Military Addition.¹⁹

On the 300 block located between Central and Stiles avenues, African-Americans resided on the north side of Second Street as well. The recollections of a former resident, Roscoe Dunjee, provide insight into such exceptions to the Second Street division. Dunjee recalled that when Willis Tucker, one of the first African-Americans to purchase property in the area, traded his lots on 1st Street for lots on the 300 block of N.E. 2nd Street, "everyone pronounced him crazy because this land was low and in

¹⁸Fred G. Fulkerson, "Community Forces."

¹⁹*Wardine-Hoffhine Directory of Oklahoma City, 1910* (Oklahoma City: Wardine-Hoffhine Printing Company, 1910).

a pasture."²⁰ This property Tucker acquired eventually became some of the most valuable commercial property in the African-American community of Deep Deuce.

In 1916, Segregation Ordinance #1825 for Oklahoma City established both public and private segregation. The ordinance prohibited persons of either the Black or white race from living on a block occupied by 75 percent or more members of the opposite race. With segregated areas already well-established, this measure essentially set Northeast Second Street as the northern boundary for African-American residences. The ordinance also officially segregated schools, churches, theaters, and dance halls.²¹

Only a year later, in *Buchanan v. Warley*, the Supreme Court of the United States found a similar ordinance in Louisville, Kentucky unconstitutional. Despite this ruling, another segregation ordinance for Oklahoma City, # 2027, appeared in 1918, this time setting Northeast Fourth Street as the northern boundary for blocks with a majority of African-Americans. The increasingly crowded conditions in the Near Northeast were already pushing these imposed boundaries. When the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. brought legal action against the city in 1919, the white populations' only legal recourse was to continue discrimination in the form of restrictive covenants on plats and neighborhood agreements specifying to whom a property owner might sell.

In 1917, Roscoe Dunjee started *The Black Dispatch* newspaper, giving the Oklahoma City's African-American community a common voice. As editor of this

²⁰Roscoe Dunjee, "Oklahoma Celebrates 65th Anniversary of 'Run'," *Black Dispatch*, 24 April 1954.

²¹Edward Pugh, *Spatial Consequences*, 123. *Dispatch*, 5 March 1965.

local newspaper, Dunjee led many of the campaigns against discrimination, and he financially supported those members of the community who found themselves confronted with the limitations imposed by segregation. William Floyd is a legendary example. A shoemaker who tried to move onto property he had purchased on the northeast corner of Northeast Second and Central, Floyd was arrested four times a day for occupying his property, and Dunjee bailed him out each time with instructions to go back and try again. When *William Floyd vs. the City of Oklahoma City* went to federal court in Guthrie in 1919, Floyd won his case, moved into his house and established a long-standing business on the same property."²²

"Hold that Line!"

Following World War I, the nation witnessed an increase in racial tensions and the solidification of urban ghettos. The rural-to-urban migration that marked the years preceding World War I only intensified after it ended. The war also brought increased industrial production and the availability of jobs in large cities and it led to the end of the European immigrant labor pool. For urban African-American communities in general this meant more job opportunities in cities. While more and more people arrived, the areas in which they were able to find affordable housing and an accommodating social atmosphere remained fixed. Living conditions decayed as density increased. At a time when African-American communities needed room to

²²Jimmy Stewart, "Roscoe Dunjee," *Black Dispatch*, 5 March 1965.

expand, racial tensions across the nation led whites to fight what they feared was Black "invasion" into their neighborhoods, further exacerbating the problem.²³

As migration continued, housing pressures within racially-segregated areas became intolerable. Overcrowding and the resulting deterioration of sanitary and social conditions drove middle-class Black families across the color line into adjacent white neighborhoods. Their moves escalated a growing pattern of racial violence.²⁴ The Ku Klux Klan claimed over four and a half million members nation-wide by 1924.²⁵ Angry mobs of whites often resorted to rock-throwing, gunshots, cross burnings, and physical attacks. More dramatic instances resulted in the bombing of African-American homes and businesses.

Oklahoma was not immune to the impact of these racial developments. In 1921, Tulsa, ninety miles northeast of Oklahoma City, gained national attention for a three-day race riot that resulted in at least 36 and possibly as many as 150 deaths. Between thirty and forty blocks of Tulsa's African-American Greenwood district, including over a thousand homes and the entire Black business district, were looted and burned by an angry white mob.²⁶ That same year, a Black non-union worker in an Oklahoma City packing plant was lynched by nine union-labor white men.²⁷ In 1923, a grand jury

²³Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 30.

²⁴Ibid., 34.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶R. Halliburton, Jr., *The Tulsa Race War of 1921* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), 19.

²⁷Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: An Oklahoma City History* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, 1974), 206.

investigation resulted in the impeachment of Oklahoma Governor Jack Walton who, aside from his overuse of martial law and machine guns, was well-known for his opposition to Ku Klux Klan activities.²⁸

Renewed efforts by white property owners to control African-American expansion in Oklahoma City led to the formation of the East Side Civic Club in 1925. Such neighborhood clubs were springing up throughout the country as a means of combating the perceived Black invasion. Outraged by the conversion of Bryant Elementary from the white Oklahoma City school district to the Black Oklahoma County "separate" district, members of the club sought "to prevent the spread of the Negro section north and west of its present boundaries."²⁹ A map published under the headline, "Hold that Line!," showed the boundary the East Side Civic Club hoped to enforce (figure 8).

The city's first comprehensive plan appeared in 1930 and seemed to reinforce the ideals held by the East Side Civic Club. Prepared by Hare & Hare City Planning consultants from Kansas City, the plan claimed that "as in most of the cities of the central and southern states, the principal racial problem centers about the Negroes."³⁰ Referring to the African-American community as a "necessary and useful element in the population," the city plan concluded that while "it is to the advantage of each race that living areas be segregated, the white race should be much interested in the welfare

²⁸Ibid., 204.

²⁹*Daily Oklahoman*, 25 May 1926.

³⁰Hare and Hare, City Planning Consultants, *Report of the City Planning Commission, Oklahoma City* (Oklahoma City: City Planning Commission, 1931), .23.

"Hold That Line!" - 1926

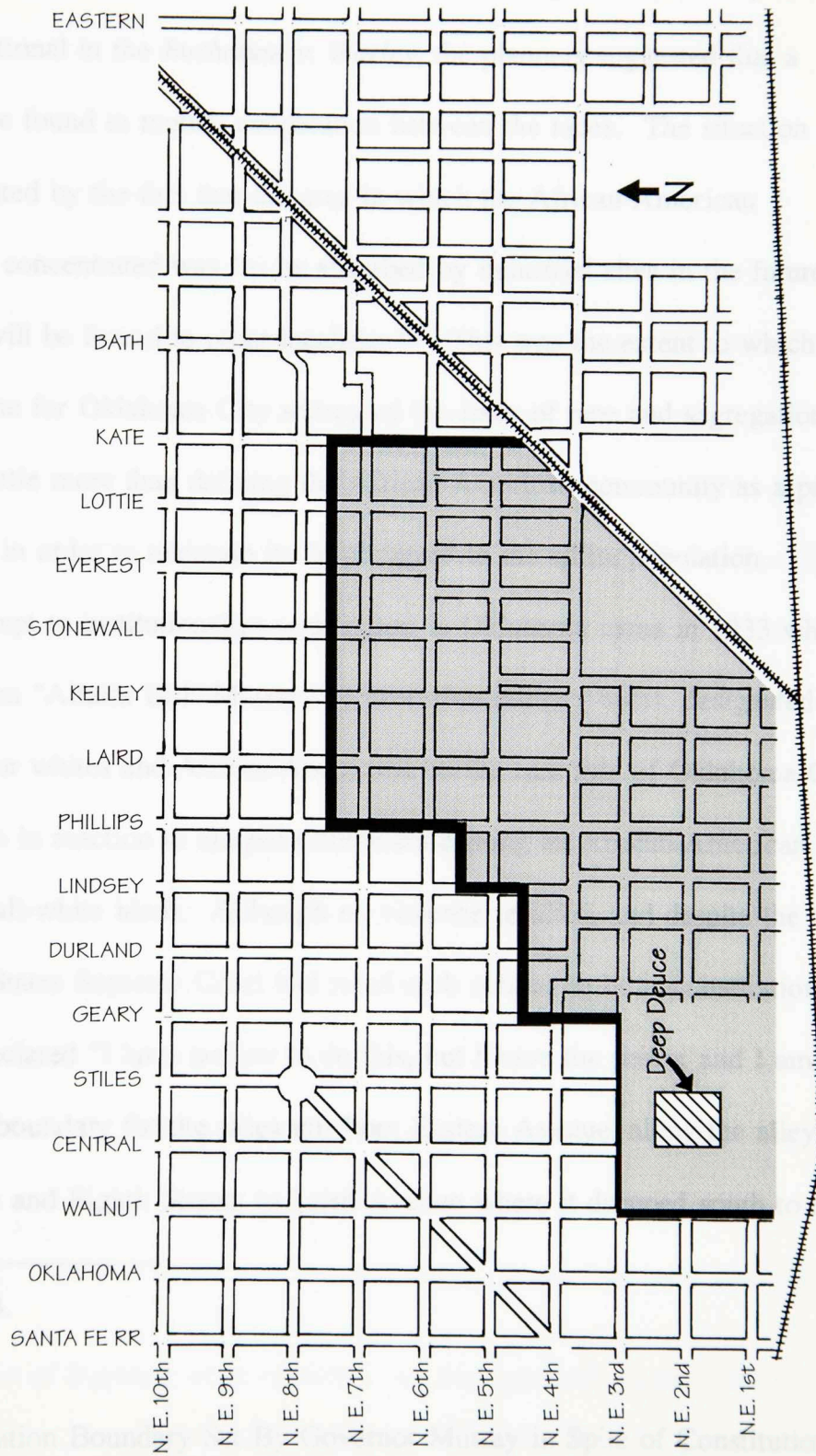


Figure 8. "Hold that Line!" (source: *Daily Oklahoman*, 25 May 1926)

of the Negroes because of the close contact resulting from the employment of the Negroes as servants in various capacities.³¹ Because segregation by zoning had been ruled unconstitutional in the *Buchanan v. Warley*, the planners suggested that a solution could be found in mutual cooperation between the races. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the area in which the African-American community was concentrated was "to be absorbed by industrial sites in the future and the population will be forced to other localities."³² This was the extent to which the Hare & Hare plan for Oklahoma City addressed the issue of race and segregation, accomplishing little more than defining the African-American community as a problem to be dealt with in order to maintain its "usefulness" to the white population.

A final attempt to institutionalize segregation in Oklahoma came in 1933 when Governor William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, by executive military order, designated separate zones for whites and African-Americans on the east side of Oklahoma City. This action came in reaction to alleged trouble concerning an African-American family moving into an all-white block. Although no violence resulted, and despite the fact that the United States Supreme Court had ruled such actions to be unconstitutional in 1919, Murray declared "I have no law to do this, but I have the power and I am going to do it."³³ His boundary for the races ran from Eastern Avenue, along the alley between Seventh and Eighth Streets to Laird Avenue where it dropped south to the

³¹Ibid., 24.

³²Ibid.

³³"Segregation Boundary Set By Governor Murray in Spite of Constitutional Guarantee," *Black Dispatch*, 4 May 1933.

alley between Sixth and Seventh Streets. It progressed west and south in this manner until it reached Walnut Avenue between Second and Third Streets, at which point it continued south until it reached the North Canadian River (figure 9).

"The Advantage in a Disadvantage"³⁴

The surprised African-American community reacted with confidence. There seemed to be little doubt that, in light of the Supreme Court ruling, Governor Murray's line would be rejected by the city council. That same week *The Black Dispatch* published the entire text of the Supreme Court's decision on segregation "for the benefit of Governor Murray."³⁵ An editorial referred to the efforts of the East Side Civic Club to support the boundary as a "silly un-American movement,"³⁶ and it emphasized that if the segregation zone were to become a city ordinance Black residents would indeed take the matter to the state Supreme Court.

For a while it appeared that the African-American leaders were correct. When Governor Murray asked the city council to address his action and the problems on the east side, the council quickly passed the buck and requested that the mayor appoint a committee to study the problem. Even though one city official stated "that he assumed that the passing of the matter up to an unofficial committee meant the

³⁴Editorial, "The Advantage in a Disadvantage," *Black Dispatch*, 28 September 1933.

³⁵"Decision of Supreme court of U.S.A. on Segregation," *Black Dispatch*, 4 May 1933.

³⁶"East Sixth St. Trouble," *Black Dispatch*, 11 May 1933.

Governor Murray's Segregation Line - 1933

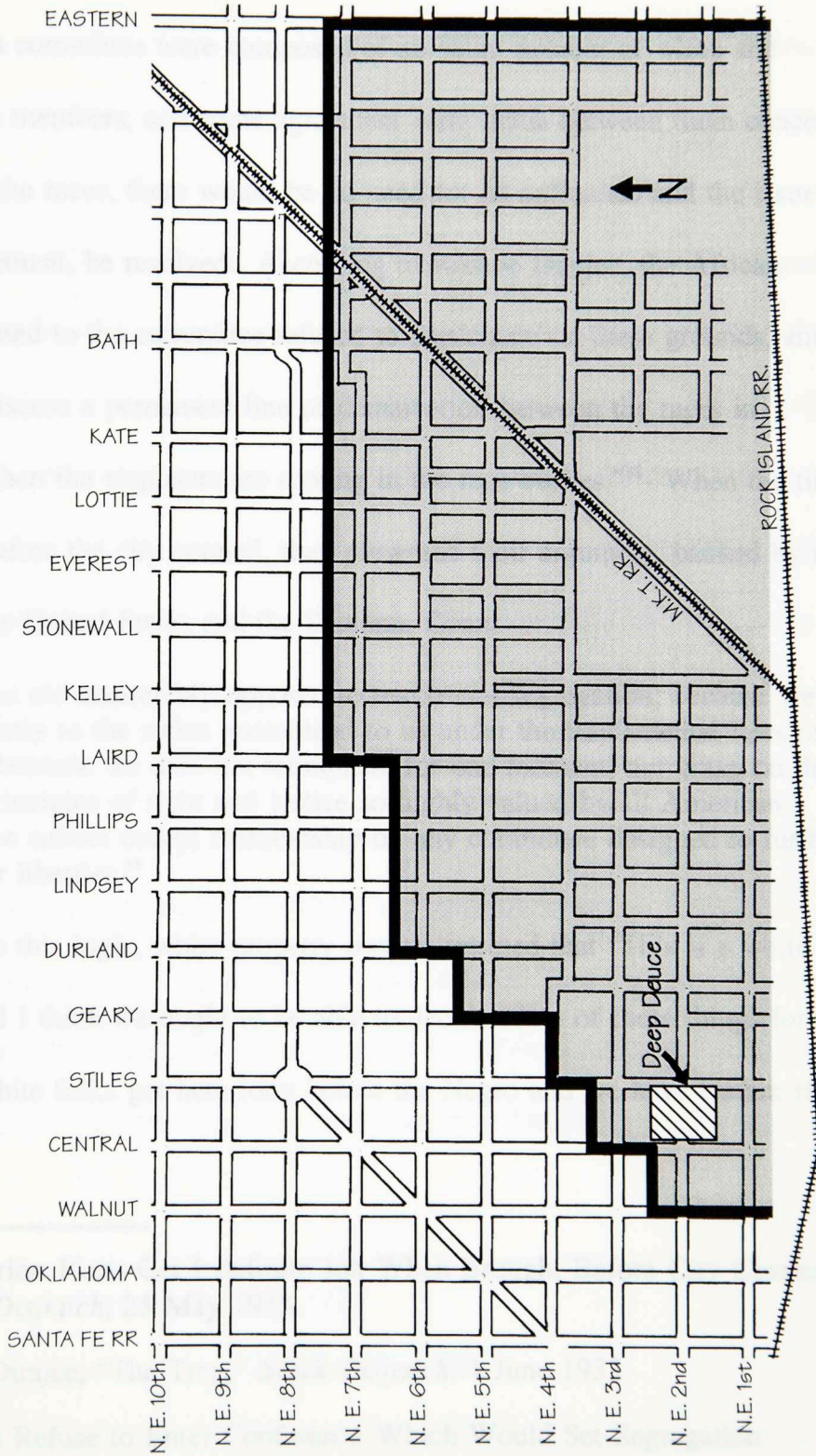


Figure 9. Governor Murray's Segregation Line (source: *Oklahoma City Times*, 7 July 1933).

dismissal of the entire matter by the governing agencies,"³⁷ the editor of *The Black Dispatch* suspected it was an attempt to get around the issue of constitutionality.

If the Mayor's committee were composed of an equal number of white and African-American members, and some agreement were made between them concerning the separation of the races, there would be no need for an ordinance and the issue would, for the moment, be resolved. According to Roscoe Dunjee, the African-Americans appointed to the committee refused to participate on these grounds, and would "meet to discuss a permanent line of demarcation between the races in Oklahoma City when the elephants are rooting in the rose bushes."³⁸ When the time came to appear before the city council, they presented their argument, backed by the Constitution of the United States and the Supreme Court:

Because we are unalterably opposed to residential segregation; because we adhere strictly to the rights guaranteed to us under the fundamental laws of the land; and because we dare not relinquish, for one moment, our grasp on those salutary principles of right and justice so highly valued by all American citizens, we cannot accept membership on any committee designed to further restrict our liberties.³⁹

In response to this logic, white property owners retorted that "This is a white man's country and I think we ought to be able to decide some of these things for ourselves. We white folks got here long before the Negro and we have certain rights

³⁷"Segregation Plans Get Indefinite Jolt When Brought Before City Council Tuesday," *Black Dispatch*, 25 May 1933.

³⁸Roscoe Dunjee, "The Trap," *Black Dispatch*, 1 June 1933.

³⁹"Negroes Refuse to Enter Conference Which Would Set Segregation Boundaries in City," *Black Dispatch*, 1 June 1933.

to which they are not entitled."⁴⁰ Surprisingly, the city council unanimously passed an emergency segregation ordinance restricting occupation of a block to that of the majority race. As promised, the matter did go to the State Supreme Court where, in November, 1935, the ordinance was rejected and the city admonished for its misuse of police power.⁴¹

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Northeast Second Street continued to prosper as the commercial center of the African-American community in Oklahoma City (figure 10). After having fought the ordinance battle only a few years earlier, by 1935 the African-American community had firmly established its own economic, social and political foundation. As early as 1921, a single block of the Second Street was home to the local newspaper, two drug stores, a theater, six restaurants, four cleaners, a music store, a cafe, an undertaking company, three barbershops, two tailors, a grocery store, two taxi companies, a billiard parlor, an oil and gas company, a shooting gallery, a dance hall, and several medical offices.⁴²

Although de facto segregation proved to be extremely effective in limiting African-American expansion and opportunity, and in amplifying cramped living conditions, segregation also set up a ready market for African-American entrepreneurs. For example, S. D. Lyons owned a hotel, two apartment buildings, a cafe, a grocery

⁴⁰"Zoning Board Hears Segregation Debate Between Warring Factions in Second Ward," *Black Dispatch*, 20 July 1933.

⁴¹Allen v. Oklahoma City, November 26, 1935

⁴²*Polk's City Directory of Oklahoma City, 1921* (Kansas City: R. K. Polk & Company, 1921).



Figure 10. Northeast Second Street, c. 1921
(source: Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office).

store, a millinery shop, a furniture store, a beauty shop, and, most important, the Lyons Hair Care Products manufactured in his own backyard. Lyons shipped his East India Hair Grower across the country, with advertisements featuring "a woman whose long hair hung across her bosom."⁴³ When Lyons built the first brick house in the area, *The Black Dispatch* ran a photograph of Lyons next to his Cadillac in front of his home. "The Mansion," as it came to be known, had been built in 1929 at a reported cost of \$25,000.⁴⁴ Another example of early Black success, Dr. W. H. Slaughter, owned several businesses on Second Street, including his own medical practice, a pharmacy and Slaughter's Hall, the most popular dance hall on the east side.⁴⁵

Dr. W. L. Haywood came to Oklahoma City in 1908. On route from Indiana to California, the surgeon had become sick and was temporarily detained in Guthrie, Oklahoma to seek medical care. In Oklahoma City he met Dr. Slaughter who encouraged him to stay. By 1910 Haywood was the chief African-American health officer of Oklahoma County, a position he held for fourteen years. He edited the health column for *The Black Dispatch* for over ten years, covering a wide range of topics dealing with health and hygiene. In 1921, he established the Utopia Hospital at 415 N.E. First Street, believed to be first African-American hospital west of the

⁴³Freddie Williams, quoted by Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*, 15.

⁴⁴Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Mississippi.⁴⁶ When the hospital opened it had only two beds, and by the time it closed twenty-five years later it had a capacity of fifty beds.

These are only a few examples of the many ways in which individuals in Oklahoma City's African-American community exerted control over their environment amidst the continued efforts to limit their spatial and economic growth. Over a period of approximately forty years, African-Americans had settled in a new state, battled segregation policies both in and out of court, and simultaneously had built a thriving community. The economic, social and cultural vitality that characterized Northeast Second Street throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s testifies to the reality of human agency working sometimes within, and more often despite, national and local structural forces.

⁴⁶United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places, "Haywood Building, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma."

Chapter 3

Experiencing Deep Deuce

In addition to taking political and economic control of their communities, African-Americans also asserted themselves culturally through music. Both nationally and locally, music provided a language for commenting upon and reacting to their social milieux. While the historical development of African-American music styles corresponded to social and political transformations in American society, music itself played an important role in the formation of individual communities. According to Burton Peretti, the creation of jazz is

a story of expanding creative alternatives, energized by new educational resources, profit-making opportunities, and social connection in urban America; but it is also a story of individual and group aspirations stymied, and sometimes crushed, by a partially undemocratic society that upheld policies of exclusion, unbridled economic competition, and atomizing individualism.¹

On Second Street, the historical importance of music has become intertwined with the landscape. By taking a look at the different locales associated with music, it is possible to understand how this one aspect of culture has come to define the Deep Deuce. A walk down Northeast Second Street in Oklahoma City at the height of its activity in the 1920s, 1930s, or 1940s, would reveal not only spaces associated with

¹Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

music, but also the *place* of music in the community. While different buildings and locations defined the musical spaces of the Deep Deuce (figure 11), the activities and people that filled them created a musical place. On the Deep Deuce the cultural, political and social meanings of music became an integral part of the urban landscape.

Bridging the Gap: The Aldridge Theater

Located on the north side of Second Street one building east of Central Avenue, the Aldridge Theater opened in 1920 under the ownership of Zelia Page Breaux (figure 12), the music teacher for Douglass High School, and her business partner A. Whitlow.² Just as its newly stuccoed white exterior must have gleamed next to the red brick facades that typified most commercial buildings on the block, the evening glow from the theater's large marquee surely caught the attention of passers-by. Posters framing the entrance enticed crowds to experience vaudeville shows and musical performances of touring companies as well as local musical and theatrical shows. When there was not a stage show in town, "people would load up their families and go to the Aldrige for a movie and a chance at winning the \$100 drawing held every Friday night."³ Not only did the theater provide a site for a wide variety of cultural activities, but its association with Breaux sets the Aldridge at the very foundation of music on Second Street and illustrates her ability to partially alleviate the tension that persisted within the community between those who valued African-American folk culture and those who rejected it in favor of more mainstream white culture.

²"Thousands Attend Opening of New Aldridge," *Black Dispatch*, 7 February 1920.

³Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.

Music on the Deep Deuce

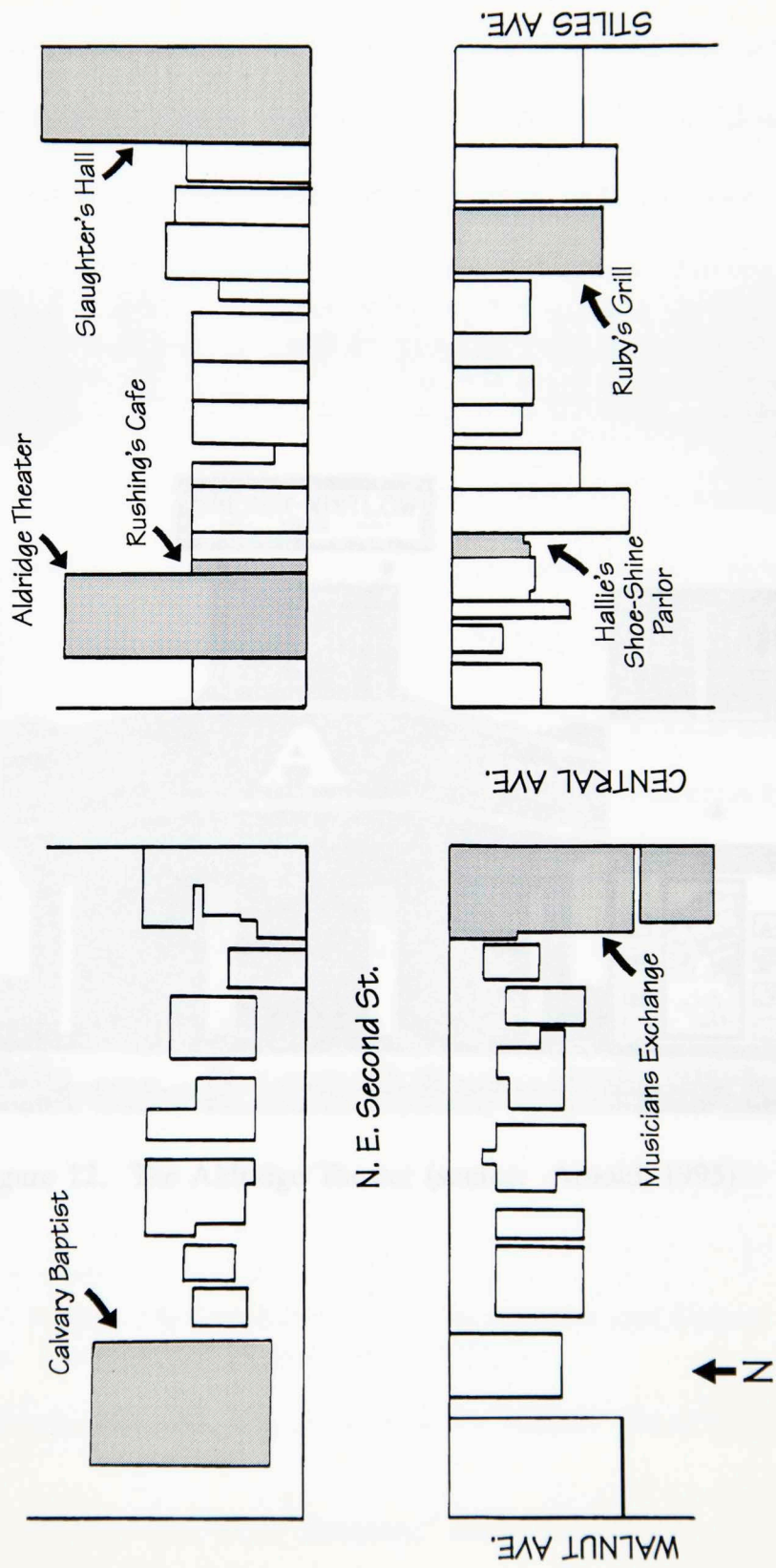


Figure 11. Music on the Deep Deuce.



Figure 12. The Aldridge Theater (source: Arnold, 1995)

It is certainly true that not all African-Americans considered the growing popularity of jazz to be a positive contribution to society on the part of their community. To many, the lifestyle that seemed to go hand in hand with jazz musicians and the dance halls where they performed was one of crime, alcohol and sexual promiscuity. Jazz was inseparable from group dancing.⁴ As a local columnist for *The Black Dispatch*, Drusilla Dunjee-Houston was outraged by dancing, claiming that it "panders to passion." She lamented that dancing, even that taught in the schools, corrupted children by "stirring sex impulses."⁵

Yet it was not necessarily the music that was the problem so much as the venues in which it was experienced. According to Brown and Kimball, locations within the urban landscape carry particular moral associations. In Oklahoma City's African-American community of the 1920s and 1930s this also seems to have been the case. The spaces in which dancing occurred, for example, could help determine its relative acceptance. Freddye Williams editorialized in 1937 that the respectability of high school proms was being compromised by their location and the lack of control over who attends. She was concerned that when the affairs were handled by professional promoters in large dance halls, "just anyone off the street" could pay the admission price and be allowed in.⁶ A few years later, Josephine Strode claimed that "the reason

⁴Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race and Culture in Urban America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 34.

⁵Drusilla Dunjee-Houston, "On or Off with the Dance?" *Black Dispatch*, 3 September 1931.

⁶Freddye Williams, "The 'Prom' Situation," *Black Dispatch*, 17 June 1937.

so many of our children behave so badly is that all of the freedom and recreation they get is done in dives and in surroundings where the animal passion is stimulated in them."⁷

The Aldridge Theater served as a common ground to show that music of all sorts - whether classical, blues, jazz, or opera - had a place on Second Street. It was Zelia Breaux (figure 13) who helped to bridge the gap between those who considered jazz music immoral and those who considered it an expression of the African-American experience. From jazz to classical, the wide variety of events held at the Aldridge was a direct reflection of Breaux's influence and the ideals for which she stood.

Zelia Page grew up in a family that valued the importance of education. Her father, Inman Page, in 1887 became the first African-American to graduate from Brown University. He came to Oklahoma to become the president of Langston University in 1898, and in 1918 he moved to Oklahoma City where he served as principal of Douglass High School. Ralph Ellison, a Douglass student during this period, wrote highly of Page's commanding presence. But perhaps Zelia had an even more profound an impact on both Ellison and Oklahoma City.

After receiving a Master's Degree from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Zelia Page began teaching music in 1898 as the head of the Music Department at Langston University. In 1918, she accepted a position as Supervisor for Music for Colored Schools in Oklahoma City where she succeeded in establishing a revolutionary music curriculum. Any student could learn to play an instrument and

⁷Josephine Strode, "Youth Needs In Recreation," *Black Dispatch*, 19 October 1940.



Figure 13. Zelia Breaux
(source: Archives and Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society)

participate in the marching band, the orchestra, or the brass quartet. Douglass High School's students performed in yearly operettas and in the Glee Club. Harmony and music appreciation were offered in grades nine through twelve.⁸ Her plan also called for a music teacher in every classroom of the elementary schools so that by the fifth grade most students could sing songs in parts and could read major scales in most keys.⁹

Since jazz music was not allowed in the public schools at that time, Breaux's students were trained in classical European techniques. They learned how to read the music of Mozart, Chopin, Bach, and Liszt and they marched to the rhythms of John Phillips Sousa. On May Day children from all of the Black schools assembled on a baseball field, "the girls in white dresses and the boys in blue serge knickers and white shirts, and there to the music of the Douglass High School Band . . . competed in wrapping dozens of maypoles and engaged in the mass dancing of a variety of European folk dances."¹⁰

In the Spring of 1934, the Aldridge presented "Milinka of Astrachan", an elaborately staged operetta by the Douglass High School chorus featuring "Beautifully costumed Russian Cossacks, stirred by impending revolution at the hands of radical Bolsheviks."¹¹ In January of the same year, the local African-American newspaper

⁸Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

⁹Anita Arnold, *The Legendary Times and Tales of Second Street* (Oklahoma City: Black Liberated Arts Council, Inc., 1995).

¹⁰Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 137.

¹¹*Black Dispatch*, 19 April 1934. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 190.

promoted the upcoming performance at the Aldridge of Walter Barnes and his Royal Creolians. The band was a "red hot aggregation . . . of clean cut young men who possess a bountiful talent in the art of music, who display a courageous effort of perfection in American's most chosen melody - modern jazz rhythm."¹²

Ralph Ellison later wrote of the tension that resulted from the classical training they received from Mrs. Breaux, and the music he heard in his own community.

The folk tradition demanded that I play what I heard and felt around me, while those who were seeking to teach the classical tradition in the schools insisted that I play strictly according to the book and express that which I was *supposed* to feel.¹³

It was a European-oriented musical education, however, that provided Breaux's students with the ability to compete against white musicians at the professional level. After school, the students could always go to a show at the Aldridge where Breaux brought in the finest of classical musicians, and where vaudeville performers and traveling performers would play jazz and the blues, music that came from the heart instead of a printed page.

Jamming: Hallie Richardson's Shoeshine Parlor and Other Hangouts

Across the street from the Aldridge was Hallie Richardson's 10' by 20' shoeshine parlor and magazine store. Weighing in at over 300 pounds, Hallie had attended Douglass High School and played on the football team. His place was a crucial source on Second Street for shoeshines, but for other commodities made scarce during

¹²*Black Dispatch*, 11 January 1934.

¹³Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) , 190.

prohibition as well. Count Basie remembered that Big Hallie "used to come into a dance wearing an overcoat, and he was big, fat Hallie. But he really wasn't as fat as he appeared to be. When he came in, there was some extra fat under his coat, and he would get thinner and thinner as the dance went on."¹⁴ Beyond that, he was well known for his generosity, and was always ready to help out financially when a "pressed soul" would come to him.¹⁵ His place was also a favorite gathering spot for musicians. It was at Hallie's shoeshine parlor where Ralph Ellison described having first heard Lester Young jamming in a shine chair, his head thrown back, his horn even then outthrust, his feet working on the footrests as he played with [members of the Blue Devil Orchestra]; in such places as these, with only musicians and jazzmen present, the jam session is revealed as the jazzman's true academy.¹⁶

There were other places to jam like the "Hole," Honey Murphey's, and the S & H Smoke Shop. Each was treated as a sacred retreat for musicians. The S & H Smoke Shop opened at 316 Northeast Second Street as a recreation parlor with card tables, scoreboards, and a Western Union ticker system for receiving inning by inning baseball reports.¹⁷ When the owner began booking bands and looking out for all "gigs," Edward Christian expressed the hope in his weekly music column that "this will stop the Cats from taking jobs cheaper than someone else."¹⁸ As an informal

¹⁴Count Basie, *Good Morning Blues*, (New York: Random House, 1985): 21.

¹⁵Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.

¹⁶Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 208.

¹⁷"H. & S. Smoke Shope Opens," *Black Dispatch*, 16 May 1935.

¹⁸"Musical Low-Down," *Black Dispatch*, 16 May 1935.

musicians union, the S. & H. Smoke Shop soon became "the musician's stopping place, and where the live ones love to linger."¹⁹

In such places, musicians were free to improvise in the company of peers, each individual beginning to create a musical piece where another ended, in a celebration of both group solidarity and individuality. William Bruce Cameron claimed the jam session was "a ritual of purification - a self-cleaning by the reaffirmation of his own ideals."²⁰ According to David Stowe, the cutting contests that characterized jam sessions were a distinctly southwestern approach to jazz. These contests would pit individual musicians against one another to prove their technical mastery or improvisational creativity. Because it was unacceptable simply to repeat oneself or rehash known melodies and rhythms, these sessions served as laboratories for new techniques and styles.²¹

Opportunity: Rushing's Cafe

Next door to the Aldridge, Andrew Rushing ran a small snack bar, where he sold sandwiches, fruit, candy, and soda. He had owned the property since at least 1905, two years after the birth of his son, Jimmy. His shop was on the first floor and an apartment on the second. The Rushes were a musical family. Andrew played the

¹⁹"Musical Low-Down," *Black Dispatch*, 4 July 1935.

²⁰William Bruce Cameron, "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session," *Social Forces* 33 (December 1954), 177-178.

²¹David Stowe, "Jazz in the West: Cultural Frontier and Region During the Swing Era," *The Western Historical Quarterly* (1992): 53-73.

trumpet with a Knights of Pythias fraternity band and his wife, Cora, was a church pianist and sang in the church choir.²² Jimmy recalled hearing his dad play in a parade a couple of blocks away and exclaiming "Pop's blowing now, mom!"

Although Little Jimmy Rushing played piano and sang locally in the church choir and school glee club, it was his cousin, Wesley Manning, who influenced him the most and who taught him to sing the blues. To his cousin's wide-eyed amazement, Manning would come back with hatfuls of money from playing at sporting houses, where gambling, drinking, and music went hand-in-hand. Longing to hear the blues for himself, Jimmy would slip out of his bedroom and join his friends at a party where he played the piano and sang all night long. Objecting to the path his son was following, Andrew Rushing tried to channel Jimmy's musical talent to the violin. It didn't work and at the age of 20 Jimmy left for California where he made his professional debut at the Quality Night Club, "a favorite meeting place for Hollywood movie stars 'who used to come in and drink cases of gin'."²³

Two years later Jimmy returned to Oklahoma City to help his father out with the cafe. When he wasn't "singing, cooking, and pouring rootbeer,"²⁴ he would sneak next door to the Aldridge to hear whatever band was in town. In 1927, one such band had just returned from playing in Texas, and when Jimmy heard them play at the

²²Hentoff, Nat. "Jimmy Rushing: A Veteran Blues Singer and Writer Tells the Roots, Origins of a Basic Jazz Form," *Down Beat* 24 (6 March 1957): 20.

²³Helen McNamara, "Pack my bags and Make My Getaway," *Downbeat* 32 (8 April 1965), 22.

²⁴William Savage, *Singing Cowboys and all that Jazz* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 25.

Aldridge he asked if he could join them. Walter Page, the band's leader, told him that although they didn't need a pianist at the time, they could use a singer. Jimmy jumped at the chance and became lead vocalist for the Blue Devils.²⁵ According to Ralph Ellison, Jimmy Rushing was a voice for the Black community in Oklahoma City that "evoked the festive spirit of the place."²⁶ It was a "rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it, which sounded in Rushing's voice."²⁷

Sometime in the fall or winter of 1929 Andrew Rushing found a note and a hat that had been left in his cafe by William Basie, the piano player who was in the Blue Devils with Andrew's son, Jimmy. The note was Basie's farewell to the band. "Once a Blue Devil always a Blue Devil," he wrote. He said that he hated to leave, but that he had to go back to Kansas City where he planned to join Bennie Moten's band. Soon after Basie left, the Blue Devils disbanded, suffering from an entertainment market hit by the hard times of the Great Depression. Jimmy followed Basie and joined Benny Moten's band in Kansas City. After Moten's death in 1935, the band regrouped under Basie's leadership and went on to become one of the world's best known jazz bands. Rushing sang lead vocals for the Count Basie Orchestra until 1950 when he started recording on his own.

²⁵Anita Arnold, *Legendary Time and Tales of Second Street*, 27.

²⁶Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 242.

²⁷Ibid.

A career that started behind the counter of his father's snack shop on Second Street led to his inclusion in the United States Postal Stamp series commemorating America's great jazz musicians. His association with the Deep Deuce may be most succinctly summarized by his trademark sign-off: "If anybody asks you who sang this song, tell 'em it was little Jimmy Rushing - he's been here and gone."

Territorial Influence: The Musician's Exchange

In November 1924, *The Black Dispatch* announced the opening of "Oklahoma City's New Hostelry," the M&M Hotel, located on the southwest corner of Second and Central.²⁸ With "twenty-five beautifully furnished, modern rooms," the manager promised to provide "the traveling public of the southwest the best service to be had west of the Mississippi River."²⁹ The M&M was originally managed by W.O. Miller, the operator of a local restaurant. The dining room on the ground floor was equipped with "the very latest sanitary enamel tables" set with real silver. The kitchen arrangement carried with it "the latest in sanitary ideas."³⁰ In addition to serving the community's need for hotel and restaurant accommodations, the building served as the headquarters for the Oklahoma City Blue Devils (figures 14 and 15).

²⁸"New Hostelry Opens," *Black Dispatch*, November 1924.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

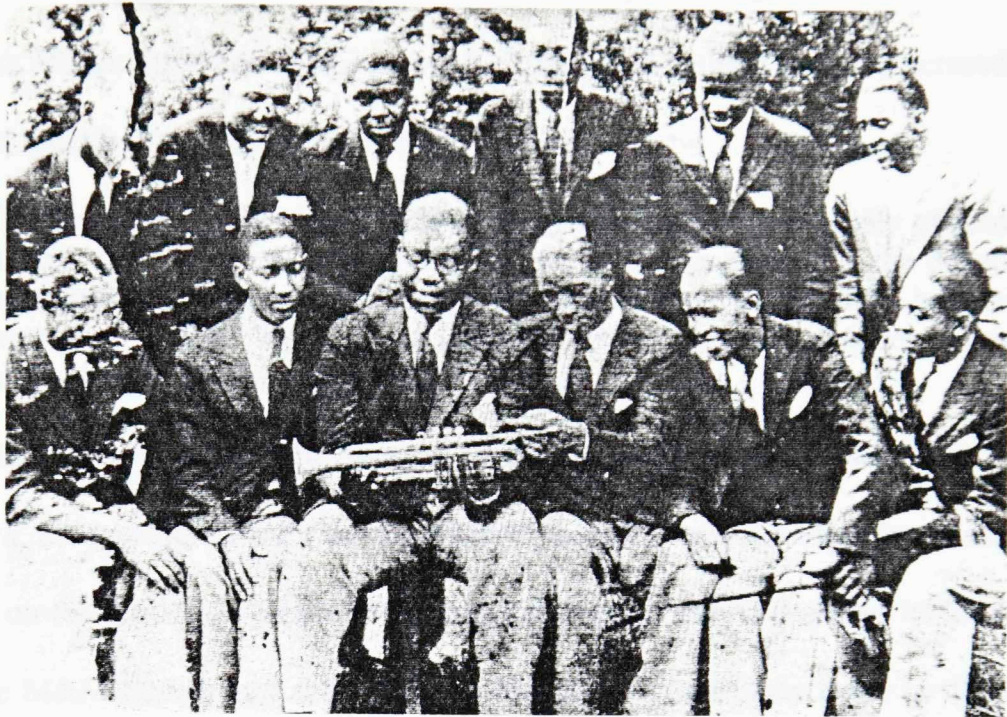


Figure 14. The Oklahoma City Blue Devils (source: unknown).



Figure 15. The Oklahoma City Blue Devils on Stage (source: unknown).

In 1923, four years before they discovered Jimmy Rushing, Ermir "Bucket" Coleman, Walter Page and Willie Lewis had formed the Blue Devils by persuading a group of local businessmen to back their venture.

The backing consisted of a little cash, a set of uniforms, a supply of meal tickets good at a restaurant owned by one of the sponsors, and the donation of a large hotel room that served as a dormitory, messhall, rehearsal hall and recruiting office. When the meal tickets ran out, the musicians ate cheese and soda crackers in their quarters.³¹

According to an advertisement from the January 7, 1926 edition of *The Black Dispatch*, the headquarters for the Blue Devil Orchestra was the Musicians Exchange located on the southwest corner of Second and Central. Since it shared its location with the M&M Lunchroom and Hotel, the M&M was most likely home to the band's donated room as well.

The Blue Devils were a commonwealth band. This meant that all important decisions including hiring, firing, itineraries, and fees were left to a majority vote. Earnings were pooled and divided equally after expenses were covered, and if one of the musicians had a personal problem and needed some cash, the others would chip in to help.³²

Like so many other "territorial" bands of the Southwest, the Blue Devils were a local sensation. They had a strong regional reputation but never broke into the national scene. With a standing contract to play all winter at the white-owned Ritz Ballroom in Downtown Oklahoma City, they also played almost weekly at various

³¹Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 255.

³²*Ibid.*

dances on Second Street, where crowds were reported to be unwilling to leave at the end of the night even after the stage lights went out. The band controlled most of the desirable jobs throughout the state, often playing in Shawnee, Chickasha, Tulsa, Enid, and El Reno. On the road during the Spring and Fall, they travelled throughout Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas in a huge Stoddard Dayton touring car, staying in segregated hotels, rooming houses, or private homes.³³

More than anything, the Blue Devils were known for their "battles." A battle occurred when a visiting band would play opposite a local band in their home ballroom. Often there would be two stages with the bands alternating to see which could get the crowd going the most. The Blue Devils were masters at such battles; and other southwestern bands were reluctant to play against them. One story records that when the Blue Devils heard that a band in Kansas City claimed to be the best around, they sent word that they were coming for a battle. The two bands met at a club in Kansas City and the Blue Devils, as the guests, were allowed to play first. Supposedly, by the time the Blue Devils had finished, the Kansas City band packed up their instruments and went home without playing a single note.³⁴

The high point for the band came in 1929 when the Brunswick-Vocalion label invited the Blue Devils to Kansas City for a recording session. Soon, however, the band started to break up, owed to hard times brought on by the Great Depression. Count Basie and Eddie Durham left to join the Benny Moten orchestra in Kansas City

³³Ross Russell, *Jazz Style*, 78.

³⁴Juanita Bolar, quoted by Anita Arnold in *Legendary Times and Tales of Second Street*.

that year. With the support of Moten, Basie and Durham began slowly to combine more Blue Devil sound with the Kansas City band's style. The next to join them was Jimmy Rushing. Then came Oran "Hot Lips" Page and, later in 1931, Walter Page. By 1932, five out of twelve members of the Benny Moten band were former Blue Devils and four more would join in 1933 when the Blue Devils officially broke up. "The Moten raids," as Moten's efforts to sign talent from rival bands were called, had come to an end. Ross Russell summed up the importance of the Blue Devils:

The group of men who had learned to eat, sleep, travel, and improvise together in one of the most demanding schools of the Southwest was to remain together as a cadre of musicians who would revitalize the Moten orchestra, take part in its finest recording sessions and later, without losing a single member from the tightly knit little group, go on to organize the greatest of all Kansas City bands, the Count Basie Orchestra.³⁵

Recalling the first time he saw the Blue Devils play, Count Basie remembered sensing a team spirit among the band members that came across in their music.³⁶ Their style, grounded in the institution of the jam session, rested on letting individuals improvise solos within a collective framework. Moreover, a quintessential example of southwestern jazz, the Blue Devils played in a rhythmic 4/4 beat that encouraged dancing and became the foundation for the swing style that revolutionized jazz in the 1930s and 1940s. As is typical for both musical styles and musicians, the Blue Devils sound is

³⁵Ross Russell, *Jazz Style*, 87.

³⁶Count Basie, *Good Morning Blues*.

most often linked to the commercial success it found under Bennie, not to its beginnings on Oklahoma City's Deep Deuce.

Transcendence: Slaughter's Hall and the Public Dance

When it came to dancing, according to long-time Oklahoma City resident Jimmy Stewart, Slaughter's Hall was the place to go.³⁷ Dr. William Slaughter built this three-story brick building in 1921 on the northwest corner of Northeast Second Street and Stiles Avenue (figure 16).³⁸ With a pharmacy on the first floor and medical offices on the second, the third floor was a large, open dance hall. A former resident remembers it as resembling "a big empty barn" with a cornmeal polished wood floor, a place to buy sodas -- or beer, depending on the crowd -- and a large stage.³⁹

Dances were held regularly for social clubs, special events and school fundraisers. Sometime private promoters would become involved with the school dances knowing that, were the dances not affiliated with the school, many parents would not let their children attend.⁴⁰ Doebelly Brooks remembers when other people would stand back to watch him dance as he "took the floor" at Slaughter's Hall sporting a stylish patchwork zoot suit.⁴¹

³⁷Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.

³⁸*Polk's City Directory, 1921*.

³⁹Freddye Williams, interview by author, 2 February 1995.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹James "Doebelly" Brooks, interview by author, 8 February 1995.

When the Twenty Club held its annual Christmas Dance in 1929, the members transformed the hall into a winter wonderland, decorating it with a snow house, a winter forest scene, a reindeer drawing a sleigh, and the incandescent glow of candles.⁴² Several years later, in celebration of President Roosevelt's 52nd birthday, Slaughter's Hall was one of three Second Street night spots to join together for a "monster dancing festival."⁴³ Only a few months later, Slaughter's Hall was the setting for an interracial dance sponsored by local communists celebrating May Day.⁴⁴ Dances such as these, along with the regular Friday night dances, were a time for local musicians to play and for the community to come together in celebration. In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison wrote this of his childhood in Oklahoma City:

In the beginning it was in the negro dance hall and night club that jazz was most completely a part of a total cultural expression; and in which it was freest and most satisfying, both for the musicians and for those in whose lives it played a major role.⁴⁵

As the local dance spot, along with the many others that came and went on Northeast Second Street, Slaughter's Hall became part of the community's cultural expression, a place where a band could send dancers "into an ecstasy

⁴²"Twenty Club Gives Annual Dance," *Black Dispatch*, 3 January 1929.

⁴³"Dancing at the President's Recovery Party," *Black Dispatch*, 25 January 1934.

⁴⁴"Reds Stage Big Interracial Dance on East Side Following May Day Pork-Beans Parade," *Black Dispatch*, 3 May 1934.

⁴⁵Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 207.

of rhythm and memory and brassy affirmation of the goodness of being alive and part of the community."⁴⁶

Pride: The Street

Brown and Kimball claim that public space acquires meaning through activities such as parades and other public festivals because such activities serve as presentations of social values.⁴⁷ Susan Smith further asserts that the street itself is an important cultural site that can, for certain groups, "become associated with particular values, historical events and feeling, and might then be seen as a 'specialized zone of pageantry'".⁴⁸ This concept holds true for Second Street as well, where the street provided a route for parades, a stage for musicians, and a dance floor for block parties. Through activities like these, the entire community could claim the public space as its own, inscribing it with values and transforming it into a meaningful place.

Often, street dances would be held on Thursday nights, "maids night off" for those who worked in the service industry in the wealthier, white neighborhoods in Oklahoma City. All day long the women shopped and went to the beauty parlor in preparation for "the walk." By afternoon they appeared, walking from Stiles Avenue to Central Avenue, across Second and back up to

⁴⁶Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 192.

⁴⁷Brown and Kimball, "Mapping the Terrain."

⁴⁸Susan Smith, "Bounding the Borders: Claiming Space and Making Place in Rural Scotland," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 (1993): 292.

Stiles showing off their clothes and their hairstyles, "parading, socializing, stopping in the drugstores when they grew tired to eat an ice cream cone."

Families would load up their cars and go to Second Street just to watch these "fashion plates" walk and talk. The maids sometimes brought along food from their workplace.⁴⁹ This continued all afternoon and well into the evening. Then the streets would be roped off, and up to four different bands would play within the area of one block, all surrounded by crowds of dancers.⁵⁰

According to residents, the two main reasons to have a parade on Second Street were Douglass High School activities and funerals.⁵¹ In June of 1931, the Douglass Band staged a "Denver or Bust" parade to raise funds for a trip to Colorado where they would participate in the Middle Western Association of Elks parade. Band members carried banners with slogans such as "Let civic pride get into your hide, by helping the band" and "We'll find out today just what you think of the Douglass High School Band." In the previous year, a similar campaign allowed the band to perform at the Kansas State Capitol Building where one Black man remarked, "I've always thought Oklahoma was a bad place for my people, but I've changed my mind since I have heard this

⁴⁹Anita Arnold, *Charlie & the Deuce*.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.

band. Such an organization could only come from a good place."⁵² In 1934, the band performed at the World's Fair in Chicago.⁵³

It was an understandable source of pride, therefore, when the band marched down the community's own Second Street. The majorettes (figure 17), twirling and tossing their batons, seemed to put on a special performance when they got to Second Street, "bowing to folks crowding the sidewalks, turning quick, making those little skirts stands out!"⁵⁴ Both Freddy Williams and Jimmy Stewart recalled the pride they felt when the Douglass band would march in city parades. One time, after the Douglass band marched in a parade downtown, eastsiders were treated to a glimpse of the band as they came down Second Street, not in their usual rear position, but "in the mid rank of the line, followed by several white aggregations."⁵⁵

Funeral parades for musicians, such as one for Charlie Christian in 1942, also brought the entire community together on the street. Freddy Williams remembers that the procession would march down Second Street in a manner similar to a New Orleans funeral parade with "people walking, people riding in cars, people who were in bands."⁵⁶ The parade would usually end at Calvary

⁵²"The Douglass High School Band," *Black Dispatch*, 2 August 1934.

⁵³"Douglass 'Hi' Band Marches in Triumph at World's Fair," *Black Dispatch*, 30 August 1934.

⁵⁴Hargene Greenwood, quoted by Anita Arnold in *Charlie and the Deuce*, 20.

⁵⁵"Two Parades," *Black Dispatch*, 7 September 1940.

⁵⁶Freddy Williams, quoted by Anita Arnold in *Charlie and the Deuce*.

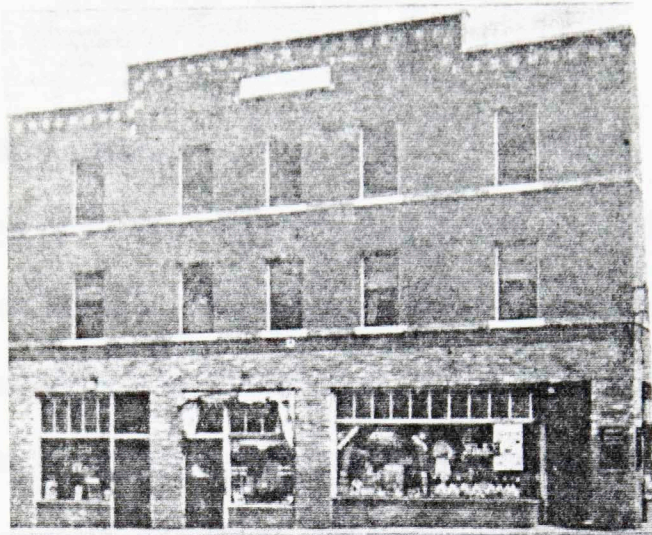


Figure 16. The Slaughter Building (source: Arnold, 1995).

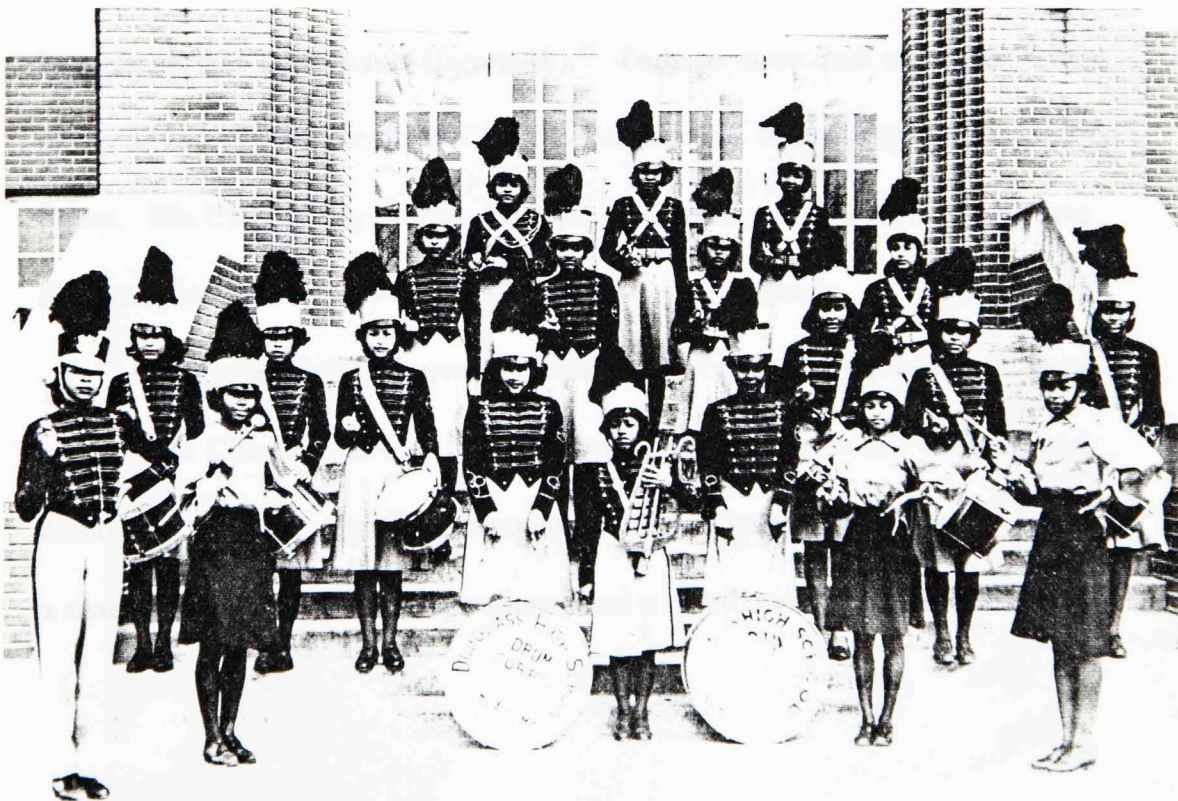


Figure 17. The Douglass High School Drum Corps, c. 1937 (source: Archives & Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society).

Baptist Church, where funerals were often held regardless of religious denomination.

Legend: Charlie Christian

Afternoon rays of warm sunshine streamed through the windows of Calvary Baptist Church on March 9, 1942 during the funeral services for Charles Henry Christain. Thousands of African-Americans from all walks of life attended to pay respect to the twenty-five-year old musician (figure 18). Flowers, telegrams and letters arrived from all over the country. Among them were a blanket of pink sweet peas, yellow jonquils, and lavender stock from the Benny Goodman Orchestra, and a huge guitar of pale and deep pink carnations from local musicians and friends (figure 19).⁵⁷ Perhaps more than any other person or event, the life and death of Charlie Christian has come to symbolize Second Street. His humble beginnings, his rise to success, and his early death have distinguished him as one of Seconds Street's great legends.

The Christian family moved to Oklahoma from Bonham, Texas, in 1918, a year before Charlie was born. The entire family was musically inclined and could play all of the family instruments including two guitars, a violin, a banjo, a mandolin, a bass, a ukulele, a piano, and a trombone. In Texas, Charlie's

⁵⁷"Taps Sound for Charles Christian," *Black Dispatch*, 11 March 1942.



Figure 18. Charlie Christian's Funeral (source: Gary Rhodes).

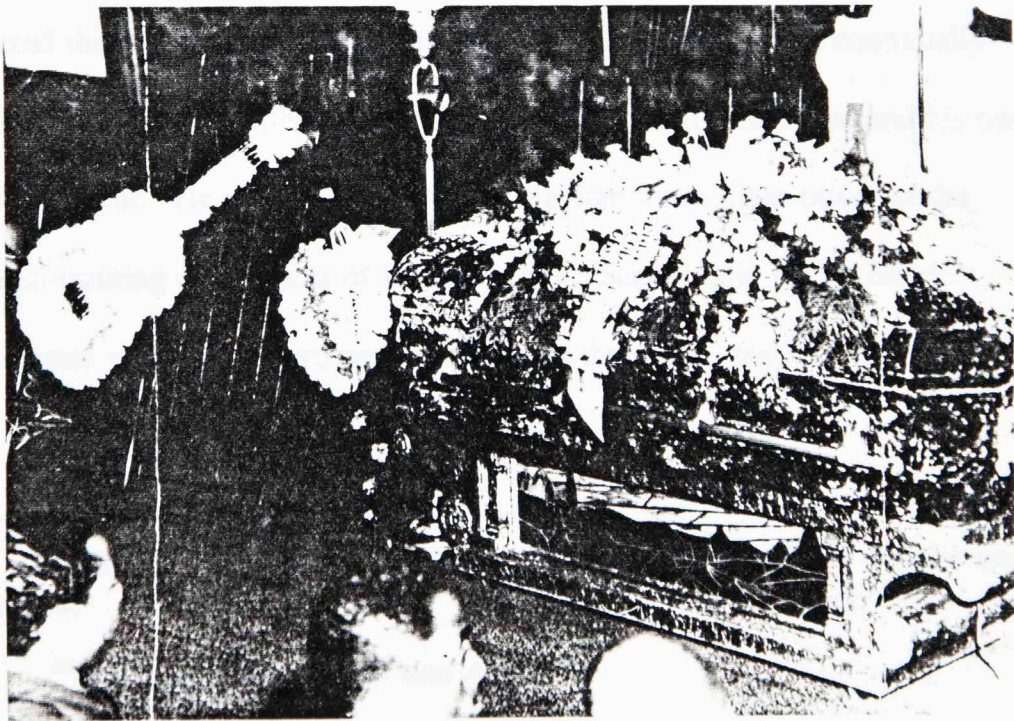


Figure 19. Flowers at Charlie Christian's Funeral (source: Gary Rhodes).

mother and father had made a living accompanying silent pictures in a movie theater, and when they arrived in Oklahoma City they formed their own family orchestra. "It was common to see or hear the family enjoying themselves jamming on those instruments. The family even took its music to the streets, often playing downtown."⁵⁸ Mr. Christian, who was by this time losing his sight, Charlie, and his two brothers, Edward and Clarence, would stroll the white, middle class neighborhoods in Oklahoma City playing serenades on request.⁵⁹

The family lived at 913 Northeast First Street, about six blocks east of Central Avenue, in a wooden tenement that, although "full of poverty, crime, and sickness," was also "alive and exciting," according to Ralph Ellison. It was a place where people "both lived and sang the blues."⁶⁰ Although Charlie rejected the musical education offered in the school system, he continually explored the lessons offered by his family, other local musicians, and his own trial and error. He manufactured his own guitars from cigar boxes in the manual-training department of Douglass High School, and would dazzle classmates with impromptu performances on the school yard.⁶¹

⁵⁸Magretta Christian Downey, quoted by Anita Arnold in *Charlie and the Deuce*, 7.

⁵⁹Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 235.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹William Savage, *Singing Cowboys*, 49.

Charlie (figure 20) began to play professionally with his brother Edward's band, the Jolly Jugglers. From there he skipped around, playing with out-of-town and local bands like Leslie Sheffield and his Rythmaires, the Blue Devils, and Alphonso Trent's Orchestra. In 1937, Eddie Durham came to Oklahoma City with Count Basie's Orchestra. He met Charlie Christian in a local pool hall and introduced him to the electric guitar he had made. The guitar was presenting some problems for Durham. Dance hall owners were afraid it would short-circuit their lights, and spectators were wary, fearing for the life of the performer.⁶² But Christian was fascinated and asked Durham to show him a few techniques. Durham had never seen someone learn so fast. Christian soon bought an electric guitar of his own which he played with Alphonso Trent's Band. Playing with Trent's Band, at the Ritz Cafe in Oklahoma City for \$2.50 a night, also at Ruby's Grill on Second Street, Christian caught the attention of John Hammond.

Hammond was a nationally-known music producer, columnist, and talent scout. He had heard enthusiastic praise of the young guitarist in Oklahoma City and decided to stop by on his way from New York to a recording session with Benny Goodman in California. The twenty-hour trip led him to "a tall young man, thin, dark, and wearing a purple shirt and bright yellow shoes."⁶³ Before an hour had passed, Hammond had decided to place Christian with the

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 106.

then faltering Goodman quartet. So on August 14, 1939, less than two years after he had first picked up an electric guitar, Christian left for California to begin a historic, though brief, career with the Benny Goodman Orchestra.

His first return to Oklahoma City in January of 1940 brought him a hero's welcome. A much advertised jam session at Ruby's Grill sold out far in advance, leaving those who had not secured a table to crowd around the bandstand. The applause from the crowd at the completion of each selection was deafening and everywhere cries of "More!" could be heard. Jitterbugs, who had hardly more space than a dime on which to jitter, danced on unmindful of the crowded floor, lost in the magic of the music. Those who could not find dance space sat in their seats, clapping their hands and swaying rhythmically to the merry makers of swing.⁶⁴

He returned again in August of the same year and one evening, as he gave "the lowdown on his travels and Harlem in particular," the crowd that gathered almost blocked traffic on Second Street.⁶⁵ *Downbeat* magazine had already named Christian to its All-Stars Swing Band in 1939 and, during his August visit home, hailed Goodman's decision to place him as a regular in his band, referring to Christian as "head and shoulders over any guitar player in the country."⁶⁶

⁶⁴Strode, Josephine. "Fans Jam Ruby's Grill to Welcome Charles Christian," *Black Dispatch*, 10 January.

⁶⁵James Stewart, "Jimmy Says," *Black Dispatch*, 3 & 17 August 1940.

⁶⁶Dave Dexter, "Christian Regular in Goodman's Band," *Black Dispatch*, 10 August 1940.

Charlie Christian had soared to fame. But the change in lifestyle was taking its toll on his health.

From a total weekly income of less than \$10 in Oklahoma, he was now pulling down something like \$200 a week, and it seemed that with the combination of working in the big band, jamming at joints like Minton's, and a never-ending supply of chicks, he wasn't getting enough rest.⁶⁷

Sometime in 1940, Charlie started coughing so badly that Goodman sent him to the hospital. An x-ray of his lung revealed his long-existing tuberculosis. His late-night habits only worsened the condition, and he was admitted into the Seaview Sanitarium on Staten Island in the spring of 1941. Although his condition seemed to improve for a while, Charlie contracted pneumonia one night after slipping out with some friends to go to a party. This proved too much for the already weakened musician and Charlie Christian died at the age of twenty five on March 2, 1942.⁶⁸

Charlie Christian's rise and fall mirror's the story of Second Street itself. He developed his talents in an economic and physical environment that offered more barriers than opportunities. Relying on his own talents, however, he developed into a promising young musician, well regarded by others in his community. His success was fueled by white America's growing appreciation for jazz, and it took him away from his community. His innovative mastery of the electric guitar, his meteoric rise with one of the era's most famous bands, and his tragic, early death due to a fatal disease made him a legend that continues to live on Second Street.

⁶⁷John Hammond, "The Advent of Charlie Christian," *Downbeat* 33 (25 August 1966): 22-23.

⁶⁸James Sallis, *The Guitar Players* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982).

The Deep Deuce was in full swing in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (figure 21).

This period was the golden age for jazz across the nation. It was also during the latter part of this period that jazz evolved from being considered primarily the music of Black America to achieving a new level of acceptance by mainstream white society. The Big Band era that flourished just prior to and following World War II commercialized and cleaned-up the image of jazz music and dancing. By this time, the growing popularity of the radio and phonographs had brought the sounds of jazz to audiences that might not have been reached before. In return, the new jazz fans expected sparkling live performances that replicated the recorded songs with which they were familiar. Slick bands led by the likes of Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Duke Ellington emerged in splendor to provide performance after performance of pre-set arrangements. This trend alienated many of the musicians who had developed their talent through the individual improvisation so essential in early jazz.⁶⁹

Not long after this transformation, the African-American community as a whole began to abandon jazz as its representative musical expression. Parallel to the disenchantment with jazz, the locales in which it had blossomed were also cast aside. By the late 1950s, the increasing disinterest in the jazz scene coincided with a major

⁶⁹Burton Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*.



Figure 20. Charlie Christian (source: Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office).



Figure 21. Northeast Second Street, c. 1940 (source: Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office).

population shift away from urban centers on the part of both Black and white Americans. This demographic change precipitated the decline not only of Second Street, but of similar inner-city African-American commercial centers throughout the country, leading to governmental policies that would drastically alter the urban landscape.

Chapter 4
Demolishing Deep Doves

Even during the heyday of Second Street in the 1930s and 1940s, forces were already underway both nationally and locally that would lead to the street's decline. Across the country, discriminatory real estate practices and "white flight" from central cities intensified ghettoization of the African-American population in urban centers. The resulting high vacancy rates and financial disinvestment that characterized these areas accelerated the physical deterioration of inner city neighborhoods. The laws, regulations and policies that restricted the African-American community's opportunity to occupy adequate housing in the first half of the century created the conditions that both federal and local governments later deemed slums. In response, national housing and urban renewal programs assumed the task of slum clearance with the objective of providing residential and economic redevelopment.

In Oklahoma City, these forces aligned with the exodus of African-Americans away from Second Street that resulted from higher income opportunities elsewhere and the general desire for Black families to upgrade their housing, which led to the neighborhood's decline. The street's decline was accelerated in 1964 when Mayor Henry Bellmon lamented in his weekly *Thoughtful* column a "city emergency would exist if the city government were to attempt to demolish the area around Second Street."

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In Oklahoma City, these forces together with the out-migration of African-Americans away from Second Street that resulted from higher incomes, open housing laws and the general desire for black families to upgrade their housing, isolated the once bustling commercial center from the market on which it depended. Evidence that Second Street was beginning to decline appeared in 1946 when Jimmy Stewart lamented in his weekly column that it was a "pity someone wouldn't start a clean-up

campaign down on Second Street. A clean window never did hurt anyone's business and a gallon of paint would sure make a difference on a few of these old huts down this way."¹ Urban Renewal plans in Oklahoma City did not initially focus on the Second Street area itself. The first two projects effected the residential areas immediately northeast of the Deep Deuce, resulting in a large number of residents being uprooted and relocated. The eventual construction of the Centennial Highway only two blocks away would deliver the final blow to the commercial area's economic vitality by physically separating it from the African-American market on which it depended. Just when the physical disintegration of the Deep Deuce appeared imminent, a renewed interest in its cultural heritage, and its music in particular, sparked activities that redefined the area from one of dilapidation needing clearance to one of historic value needing preservation.

Greener Pastures

By 1940, Oklahoma City's population had reached 204,424, nearly twenty times what it had been only forty years prior. With early signs of growth to the south, local real estate developers had primarily led residential growth to the northwest. In 1941, U.S. involvement in World War II sparked a boom in residential construction throughout the city fueled by the job opportunities resulting from war-related industries. Scrapping the trolley system in Oklahoma City in 1946 began a new decentralized growth era characterized by the increasing dominance of the automobile.

¹James Stewart, "Jimmy Says," *Black Dispatch*, 19 January 1946.

While the African-American community that centered around Second Street was experiencing a similar, if not more pronounced need for expansion, such opportunities remained extremely limited. While downtown constricted development to the west, the continued use of racially-restrictive covenants prevented expansion to the north, and the North Canadian River limited development to the south. The only outlet for growth and development was east.

As a first step towards alleviating the growing problem of overcrowding, Green Pastures became the first subdivision developed exclusively for Oklahoma City's Black residents. Ten miles east of downtown and outside the city limits, Green Pastures was explained by its African-American developer:

None of the Negroes wants any trouble with white persons, which might result from overcrowded conditions in the city...But there is no place to go unless we move out of the city, and we think this plan will solve the problem.²

In 1935, construction of new homes offered opportunity those who could afford to move.

Unfortunately, federal financing programs that facilitated white out-migration were not as readily available for the Black community. As part of Roosevelt's "New Deal," for example, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) had been formed in 1933 to assist those who had either lost their home to foreclosure or were at risk of doing so. The HOLC provided funds for refinancing mortgages based on a determination of the stability of the area in which a particular home was located. There were four possible categories of risk, with the highest category representing the most stable, low-

²*Oklahoma City Times*, 27 January 1935.

risk neighborhoods. These areas were characterized by the administration as being "new, homogenous, and in demand in good times and bad."³ The areas classified in the lowest category, those with the highest determined risk, were designated in red on a map, initiating the concept of "red-lining" that became widespread throughout the real estate financing business. Even some neighborhoods with small Black percentages might be rated as hazardous and placed in the lowest category.⁴ Although the direct impact of the HOLC's lending practices may have been relatively small, its role in legitimizing race-based discrimination in lending policies set the stage for future public and private disinvestment in African-American communities across the nation.⁵

Another governmental program that perpetuated racial discrimination appeared with the establishment of the Federal Housing Authority through the National Housing Act of 1937. The FHA loan program, and the Veterans Assistance program that would come seven years later, are largely responsible for enabling thousands of Americans to flee crowded living conditions of the city in favor of clean, well planned surrounding suburbs. The FHA actively supported lending for the purpose of constructing new, single-family homes while it discouraged multi-family homes and rehabilitation of existing buildings, both of which were characteristic of older neighborhoods in general and of African-American neighborhoods in particular. In its

³Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), quoted in Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 51.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

1939 Underwriter's Manual, the FHA stated that "if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."⁶ Again, reinvestment in older, African-American communities was stymied by institutional discrimination and led to the further deterioration of these neighborhoods.

Institutional prejudice against African-Americans was illustrated locally in Oklahoma City when Walter Edwards, an African-American entrepreneur, sought financing for a second all-Black subdivision in Oklahoma City. The city's FHA director responded that "while seeing nothing wrong with their plans for building houses," he felt that "Negroes will never work hard enough, or save enough of what they do earn, to pay off the loans."⁷ Despite this sentiment, in 1939 Hassman Heights became the first Black housing project ever to receive FHA approval, perhaps because it conformed to the government's idea that racial homogeneity led to a neighborhood's stability. Later subdivisions developed for African-Americans followed including Carverdale in 1944, which was marketed to Black G.I.s returning from the war, and Edwards Heights in 1946. All of these new developments occurred in the northeastern section of the city, and although they provided much-needed new construction for the rapidly increasing Black population, they were forced to comply with the socially and institutionally imposed racial restrictions nonetheless.

⁶Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, quoted in Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 54.

⁷Lehman, Paul. "The Edwards Family and Black Entrepreneurial Success," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Winter 1986): 91.

Not until 1948 did the U. S. Supreme Court rule against the constitutionality of racial covenants by declaring them unenforceable through the judicial system.⁸ But the pattern in Oklahoma City was already established. Plans were already underway to relocate the state fairgrounds from Northeast Eighth to the west side of the city, and to build a new African-American senior high school on the original fair site.

Oklahoma City's 1949 Comprehensive Plan designated the area north and east of the original fairgrounds as the "future Negro area" even though both public and private means of controlling racial segregation had been ruled unconstitutional a year earlier. Although not referring directly to racial issues, the plan suggested that the city could control development by limiting the construction of municipal improvements and the provision of public services, and also by strictly enforcing building codes and "minimum standards" housing ordinances.⁹ These planning standards laid the foundation for future efforts to contend with the obvious disparity in housing conditions that existed between the city's white and African-American neighborhoods.

So You're Going to be Moving...?¹⁰

In the twenty years between 1940 and 1960, the African-American population in Oklahoma city grew from 19,344 to 37,529. At the same time, a noticeable out-

⁸*Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948).

⁹Bartholomew, Harland and Associates, *The Comprehensive City Plan* (Oklahoma City: City Planning Commission, 1949).

¹⁰Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority, *So You're Going to Be Moving...? Facts on Residential Relocation*, March 1966.

migration occurred from the near northeast area south of Northeast Fourth Street. Housing conditions for African-Americans in Oklahoma City had gradually improved over the years with new all-Black developments and recently-vacated white properties providing the needed room for expansion. According to the United States Census, 80 percent of Black-occupied residences were single-family homes in 1960 and only 38 percent were considered deteriorating or dilapidated, down from 63 percent in 1950.¹¹ Despite these seemingly positive trends, when the city began surveying its "blighted" areas for potential urban renewal projects in the 1960s, African-American neighborhoods became prime targets for proposed clearance and redevelopment plans.

While the Census definition of dilapidation referred directly to the physical condition of a property,¹² the Urban Renewal criteria for clearance was based on whether the cost of bringing a structure up to minimum codes exceeded the property's value.¹³ If it did, the property was slated for clearance. Because the median value of a Black owner-occupied house in 1960 was \$6,695 and white median home value was \$9,800, the average white-occupied house would be entitled to over \$3,000 more in repairs than the average Black-occupied house before being condemned to clearance. Accordingly, a higher percentage of African-American housing was slated for demolition not because the buildings themselves were necessarily dilapidated, but

¹¹Pugh, "Spatial Consequences," 208.

¹²United States Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census User's Guide* (October 1970).

¹³Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority, *So You're Going to Be Moving...?*

because their property values were substantially less than those of similar houses in white neighborhoods due to continued racial discrimination in the real estate market.

In 1963, less than two years after its formation, the Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority (OCURA) had already applied for and received approval from the Housing and Home Finance Agency to plan its first urban renewal effort, the University Medical Center Project.¹⁴ Only a few blocks northeast of Deep Deuce, the selected area covered more than 238 acres and was bounded by Northeast Thirteenth Street to the north, Northeast Fourth to the south, Stonewall Avenue on the east and Durland Avenue on the west (figure 22). Approximately seven blocks were designated to accommodate expansion of the Oklahoma University Hospital and an additional four blocks were to provide space for a 275-unit apartment complex for medical center personnel.¹⁵ The remaining acreage would either be cleared for new construction, rehabilitated, or acquired by the city for the proposed Capitol Expressway.

Of the 5,157 residents in the project area, 76 percent were African-American. More than half of the area's 1,243 buildings were scheduled for clearance, displacing 773 families, 312 individuals, and 50 businesses. Two hundred of the families would be able to live in Will Rogers Courts, Oklahoma City's only public housing at the time. The remainder of the uprooted residents were offered relocation assistance in

¹⁴"City Medical Area Urban Renewal Study Grant Approved," *Daily Oklahoman*, 15 May 1963.

¹⁵"Hearing to Air Urban Renewal Plans," *Oklahoma City Times*, 2 October 1964.

Urban Renewal Project Areas

With 1960 African-American Population Distribution

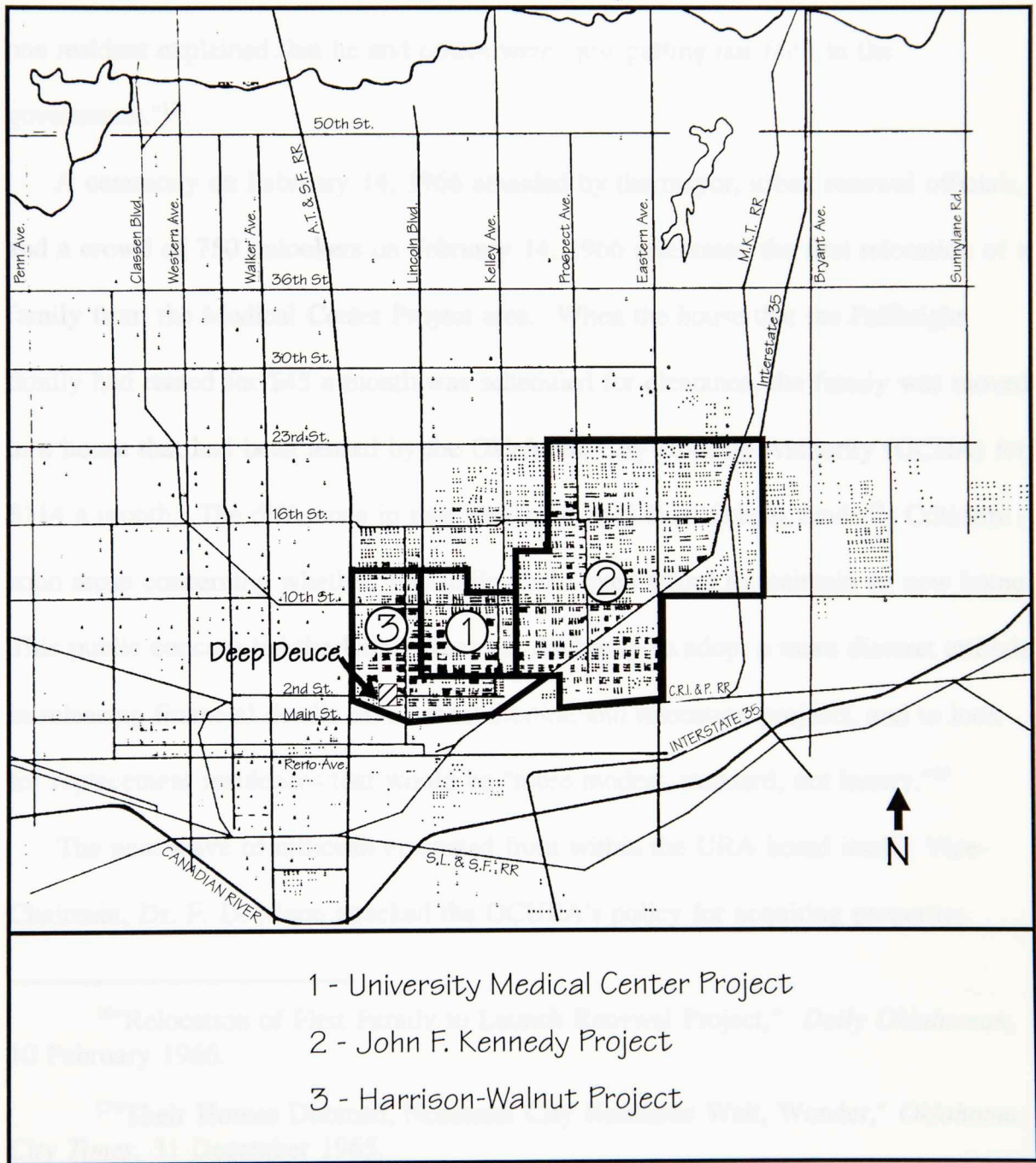


Figure 22. Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Project Areas. The population distribution is based on 1960 U.S. Census data (source: Pugh, 1977).

the form of counseling, sixty days of free rent, and moving costs.¹⁶ Although anxious and uncertain about their future, those who were being displaced seemed resigned to their fate and reluctant to try to change it. Trusting that they would be treated fairly, one resident explained that he and others were "just putting our faith in the government."¹⁷

A ceremony on February 14, 1966 attended by the mayor, urban renewal officials, and a crowd of 750 onlookers on February 14, 1966 celebrated the first relocation of a family from the Medical Center Project area. When the house that the Fullbright family had rented for \$45 a month was scheduled for clearance, the family was moved to a house that had been leased by the Oklahoma City Housing Authority (OCHA) for \$114 a month. The difference in rent was to be paid from federal funds.¹⁸ Criticism soon arose concerning whether the family could even afford to maintain its new home. This public concern led the Urban Renewal Authority to adopt a more discreet attitude in releasing financial details on its rehabilitation and relocation projects, and to look for replacement residences that would be "more modest, standard, not luxury."¹⁹

The next wave of criticism emanated from within the URA board itself. Vice-Chairman, Dr. F. D. Moon attacked the OCURA's policy for acquiring properties

¹⁶"Relocation of First Family to Launch Renewal Project," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10 February 1966.

¹⁷"Their Homes Doomed, Northeast City Residents Wait, Wonder," *Oklahoma City Times*, 31 December 1965.

¹⁸"City's 'Renewal Family' Perched on New Threshold," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10 February 1966.

¹⁹"Renewal Rent Sights Change," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10 March 1966.

scheduled for clearance. The policy allowed the Authority to offer the concurred-in value, the maximum price the government would pay, without informing the resident of the two appraisals conducted on their property. Moon felt that residents were being cheated out of the opportunity to negotiate.²⁰ A related complaint had arisen before, when the National Association of Real Estate Brokers pointed out that "Negro" real estate agents were left out of the urban renewal process. This was primarily due to the fact that in condemnation proceedings the court system recognized only members of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, an organization of white realtors.²¹ Further protest centered on the substantial number of large, well-kept homes that were being destroyed in the urban renewal process.²² Many members of the African-American community began to question whether they would actually be better off as a result of urban renewal.

Controversy continued when Oklahoma City forged ahead with its second urban renewal project. In July 1966, the Department of Housing and Urban Development approved the 1,258 acre John F. Kennedy (J.F.K.) Urban Renewal Project, then the third largest federal urban renewal project in the nation.²³ Located just east of the

²⁰"City System of Appraisals Draws Attack," *Oklahoma City Times*, 14 July 1966.

²¹"White Realtors Given Breaks? Negroes Claim Urban Renewal Snub," *Oklahoma City Times*, 17 April 1965.

²²"Expect Kennedy Renewal Project Approval by July 8," *Black Dispatch*, 10 June 1966.

²³"Huge Eastside Renewal Plan Mapped for City," *Oklahoma City Times*, 30 July 1965.

Medical Center project, the targeted area was bounded by Stonewall and Lottie Avenues on the west, Northeast 23rd to the north, Northeast Fourth on the south and I-35 to the east (figure 22).

Although the J.F.K. plan emphasized rehabilitation of existing structures, one third of the area's 6,000 structures were slated for clearance, displacing 1,616 families, 418 individuals, 155 businesses, and 27 institutions.²⁴ In replacing houses considered "sub-standard" by the city, the OCHA planned to construct a 200-unit apartment complex for the elderly and 200 general-occupancy housing units. The OCHA also planned to buy and rehabilitate at least 200 homes and to construct up to 500 additional homes scattered throughout the J.F.K. area.²⁵

The J.F.K. project effected the African-American community more than any other proposed project. Of the area's 15,447 residents, 92 percent were African-American. Soon the Oklahoma City Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) forwarded a protest to the regional Housing and Urban Development Authority alleging racial discrimination in both the Medical Center and J.F.K. projects.²⁶ The NAACP's five major concerns were: that the relocation project was neither desegregated nor within the financial reach of those effected, that the area surrounding Douglass High School was designated for industrial development, that the

²⁴"Urban Renewal is 'City Heart' Surgery," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8 May 1966.

²⁵Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority, *The Total Approach: the Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority's Sixth Annual Report* (Oklahoma City: Urban Renewal Authority, 1967).

²⁶"City NAACP Files Protest on Renewal," *Oklahoma City Times*, 9 June 1966.

proposal presented to citizens differed from that presented to the city council, that citizen advisory committees were not consulted, and that spot zoning would almost entirely benefit white property owners.²⁷ In response to these and previous complaints, the OCURA agreed to reconsider some proposed industrial land use areas, to provide counseling and assistance to business owners dislocated by the program, to establish a review board that included at least three representatives among residents of the project areas, and to proceed with redevelopment plans for the area south of Northeast Fourth, the Harrison-Walnut area.²⁸

The OCURA had previously neglected the Harrison-Walnut area. It lacked possible financial "credits" that could be used as the required local match for federal funds and would require the construction of public housing units for the large number of displaced residents. Nonetheless, the Deep Deuce area in 1966 was proposed as a needed visual and functional link between the Medical Center and Downtown development areas. With federal funding for Urban Renewal projects coming to a halt in the early 1970s, and with three major projects already underway, it was not until 1975 that plans for Harrison-Walnut reappeared in the Urban Renewal Authority's revised central city plan.

Considered "one of Oklahoma City's worst slum areas,"²⁹ Harrison-Walnut was bounded by the Santa Fe and Rock Island Railroad tracks, Northeast Fourth, Lincoln

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸"Urban Renewal Resolutions are Endorsed," *Daily Oklahoman*, 19 June 1966.

²⁹"Rejuvenation Planned for City's 'Worst Slum'," *Daily Oklahoman*, 25 February 1975.

Boulevard, and Northeast Thirteenth (figure 22). As the fate of nearby neighborhoods was transformed through urban renewal, the Harrison-Walnut area had experienced considerable decline. Problems identified in the area were the large number of houses that had been sub-divided for apartments, the high percentage of vacancy, the difficulty in obtaining financing in the area, and the twenty-eight active oil wells now considered "not compatible with residential neighborhoods."³⁰ To remedy these unacceptable conditions, most of which directly resulted from the city's own past policies, the URA supported the long-planned construction of an expressway along the eastern boundary of the area as the "key element" for Harrison-Walnut renewal efforts, along with a ten-block parking lot and a twenty-five-acre industrial park.

The Urban Renewal Authority had already begun purchasing properties in the Harrison-Walnut area when, in March 1982, the city council commissioned yet another redevelopment study for the area. This time the location of the proposed expressway, the Central Expressway, had shifted alignment from existing roads along the area's eastern boundary to cutting through the middle of existing residential and commercial development. Years of speculation concerning the expressway's location only hastened the deterioration of nearby properties. In the end, the purchase and clearance of hundreds of properties and the completion of the again renamed Centennial Highway in 1989 defined the extent of redevelopment activities in the Harrison-Walnut area. The resulting landscape was the precursor to that which exists today: a few remaining dilapidated buildings and vacant lots, overgrown with weeds.

³⁰Ibid.

The densely populated African-American neighborhoods that had for years been constrained by discriminatory practices felt the impact of urban renewal more than any others. Oklahoma City's 1965 Community Development Program summarized the racial characteristics of its proposed and approved urban renewal project areas as being 50 percent white and 46 percent "Negro." It further explained that "residents of these neighborhoods constitute 10 percent of Oklahoma City's white population, almost 45 percent of other non-whites and 70 percent of the Negroes."³¹ Looking back at the four projects that were actually carried out, moreover, reveals that 69 percent of the targeted area residents were African-American. Excluding the downtown project the number jumps to 79 percent.

As for Northeast Second Street, its location in the heart of the Harrison-Walnut redevelopment area, and its resulting dislocation from the market on which it depended left its fate uncertain. Instead of condemning the place itself the city seemed satisfied merely to cut its lifeline. Surprisingly, despite the area's rapid decline resulting from abandonment and neglect, the 300 block itself remained intact in every redevelopment plan for the area. For the most part, the Deep Deuce itself had avoided the direct impact of the OCURA's wrecking ball.

³¹Oklahoma City Department of Planning, *City of Oklahoma City Community Development Program*, (Oklahoma City: Department of Planning, 1965).

Chapter 5

Re-Creating Deep Deuce

In 1982, when the fate of Harrison-Walnut was being determined by the city, a small number of Oklahoma City African-Americans began taking steps to preserve what little remained of the area known as "the Deep Deuce," and to celebrate the community that created it. The Harrison-Walnut Redevelopment Corporation hired a consulting firm, Entourage, Inc., to prepare a National Register of Historic Places Nomination form for the 300 block of Northeast Second Street. In 1982, fourteen structures remained on the block, including several wood frame buildings, Slaughter's Hall, and the *Black Dispatch* publishing plant. Unfortunately, the nomination was not completed according to National Register guidelines and was not pursued further. Although even potential eligibility for the National Register was enough to protect the area from federally-funded demolition, it could not defend the area from the cycle of abandonment and neglect that leads to rapid deterioration.

Meanwhile, the Black Liberated Arts Council (BLAC) in Oklahoma City organized the Charlie Christian Jazz Festival in 1985. In the first two years, it was held at a local club. Controversy arose in 1987 when Harold Jones, a local band leader, proposed that the festival be relocated to "The Deuce." Many considered Northeast Second Street to be "a place of discarded souls of society," whose

dilapidated, abandoned buildings did not provide an appropriate venue for an outdoor festival. Jones then sought the collaboration of the Harrison-Walnut Redevelopment Corporation to sponsor a massive clean-up effort that would restore pride in Second Street. The board of BLAC soon offered its support and the resulting effort became not only a matter of interest for the local media but a rallying point for the community. Church groups, schools, musicians, and others all helped reclaim Second Street with a week of activities that included a musical kick-off at the Chambers of the Oklahoma City Council, movies at the French Market Cinema, jazz history presentations in the schools, a parade and of course, the Charlie Christian Jazz Festival. An estimated 3,000 people attended, a number that exceeded expectations ten-fold. In 1992 the festival boasted crowds of more than 18,000 (figure 23).³²

The festival re-invigorated local interest in Northeast Second Street and established a set of meanings for it. The ritual of annual festival activities serves, in part, to reinforce the image of the Deep Deuce as a place of music. The three books published by BLAC also tell the story of music on Second Street as remembered by those who knew it. Both the festival and these narratives transmit the value of education, success, community, and culture that has become intertwined with the landscape that remains of Northeast Second Street.

The image of the Deep Deuce have been further preserved through the writings of Ralph Ellison. Best known for his extraordinary novel, *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison also wrote many essays on topics related to African-American culture and,

³²Anita Arnold, *Charlie and the Deuce*.



Figure 23. Scenes from the Charlie Christian Jazz Festival (source: Arnold, 1994)

specifically, his childhood in Oklahoma City. In his essays "Going to the Territory," "The Charlie Christian Story," and "Remembering Jimmy," Ellison paints vivid images of the role of music and musicians on the Deep Deuce:

Often in the late Spring night I could hear Rushing as I lay four blocks away in bed, carrying to me as clear as a full-bored riff on "Hot Lips" Page's horn. Heard thus, across the dark blocks lined with locust trees, through the night throbbing with the natural aural imagery of the blues, with high-balling trains, departing bells, lonesome guitar chords shimmering up from a shack in the alley - it was easy to imagine the voice as setting the pattern to which the instruments of the Blue Devils Orchestra and all the random sounds of the night arose, affirming, as it were, some ideal native to the time and to the land.³³

Ellison's later relationship with Second Street reveals the delicate and personal nature of "place." Years after Second Street had declined, Ellison preferred not to return to Oklahoma City, claiming that it would have been traumatic to see that the environment he remembered so well was gone. He explained, "I don't want to lose my sense of how it was because after all, that's where I came from."³⁴

If Ellison were alive and could return to Second Street today, he might first notice that it is surprisingly difficult even to get to the area that was once the very hub of all social and economic activity for the Black community. After navigating the one-way streets that now lead people away from Northeast Second, he would find little evidence of the vitality that he described in his writings. Slaughter's Hall is gone and so is the Aldridge. The few abandoned buildings that remain seem lonely among the numerous vacant lots.

³³Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 242.

³⁴John Perry, "Deep Second Still Lives in Dreams," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8 January 1993.

Upon closer inspection, however, Ellison might find comfort in the glimmers of life that remain on Deep Deuce. The building that was once home to Ruby's Grill, where Charlie Christian's fans celebrated the musician's legendary homecoming, now houses the Oklahoma Afro-American Museum. The intriguing artifacts visible in the second story windows and the flower planters on the sidewalk conflict with the building's otherwise boarded-up appearance. Two buildings west, Doebelly continues to shine shoes and reminisce about life on the Deep Deuce, although he now lives in one of the few abandoned buildings that remain on the street he describes so vividly. And finally, a large banner that spans the facade of Calvary Baptist to announce the meeting times for Sunday School and the morning service, reminds onlookers that Calvary is still going strong despite the boards that have replaced the building's historic leaded-glass windows that were shattered by the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Second Street is still alive.

But why? Given the extremely negative impacts of racial discrimination that all but obliterated the physical landscape and the community that once characterized Deep Deuce, why do former residents remember Second Street fondly and continue to celebrate its history? The answer may lie partially in the recognition that while places do not necessarily hold the same meanings for everyone, the use of narratives and public celebrations, like the Charlie Christian Jazz Festival, allow people selectively to recreate and reinforce, certain images of place. Undoubtedly, there are many who consider Second Street solely as a reminder of the racial bigotry and discrimination that limited African-American opportunities for so long. But this perspective is

overshadowed by the efforts of historians, community organizers, and writers like Ralph Ellison, whose efforts describe the Deep Deuce as a symbol of African-American cultural, political, and economic achievement.

Throughout the history of Oklahoma City, African-Americans did not simply sit back passively while city officials carved out their fate. On the contrary, they continually asserted their rights and worked diligently to create a vital community within and despite the limitations they confronted. One of the most powerful tools the community had available to it was music. Initially, jazz allowed African-Americans a medium for achieving respect within white society, and for some, jazz was a ticket to economic success. Music on Deep Deuce also allowed residents of all ages -- from the students in Zelia Breaux's music classes to the patrons of Slaughter's Hall -- the freedom to express themselves and to transcend temporarily the bigotry and racism of everyday life.

The individual buildings on Second Street and the narratives associated with them, provide a web of significance that transforms the physical landscape into a meaningful place. The Aldridge Theater provided a bridge between those who appreciated jazz as an expression of Black urban life and those who disliked it for the same reason. And while Rushing's Cafe served as the starting point for individual success, the Musician's Exchange illustrated the collective musical developments in Oklahoma City that also had a national impact. Places such as Hallie's shoeshine parlor allowed musicians a forum for refining their talent, and Slaughter's Hall allowed the community to enjoy the results. Second Street was as a stage on which the community celebrated its

achievements through music and dancing. Finally, the legend of Charlie Christian serves as a tragic metaphor for the Deep Deuce. On any given day, a drive along

Second Street may not reveal these aspects of the Deep Deuce, but through narratives and celebrations they have become undeniably linked to the landscape.

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