"The Forgotten Years" of America’s Civil Rights Movement

Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939-1945

by Kristine M. McCusker

Eager to hear "The Panissie Stomp," "Basie Blues," and "Shorty George," the University of Kansas junior prom committee managed to book one of the nation's most popular bands, the Count Basie Band, for the March 3, 1939, dance. African American students, excluded from KU dances, asked the dance committee and Chancellor Ernest H. Lindley to "be broad-minded and unbiased about the matter" and allow them to see one of their own. As a special favor, the committee and Lindley agreed to this one exception to custom. But on that special night, the black students were "crowded . . . into rooms above the main ballroom so that they might stew some more in their own humiliation," according to a student's letter to the school newspaper, the University Daily Kansan. "Wasn't it a most benevolent concession by the white masters," the student, Saul J. Grosberg, asked a week after the dance, "when they allowed the Negroes to listen in while one of their race was playing?"

Soon after the Basie complaints in 1939, Chancellor Lindley retired after twenty years in that position. As his successor, the Kansas Board of Regents appointed Deane W. Malott. The regents hoped that Malott's business background (he was a former assistant dean of Harvard University's Business School and had worked for Dole Pineapple) would help put the university, still reeling from depression-oriented economic havoc, back on its feet. The regents also hoped his youth and

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Although the University of Kansas had been founded in 1866 as a "monument to perpetuate the memory of those martyrs of Liberty who fell" during the abolitionist battles of the Civil War, the school's white administration and students proved that racism widely existed on campus. They saw no contradiction between the school's antislavery traditions and the strict segregation of black students. During World War II students such as these on the KU campus began to recognize that while all races fought fascism on the European fronts, minorities were not given full democratic citizenship at the university or across the country.
excitement at the challenge of running his alma mater would invigorate the university?

However, among many students who abhorred racial segregation, Malott quickly became notorious as a "remote" "fuddy-duddy" who was "conservative" when it came to racial issues. In February 1941, for example, Malott's administration, following Lindley's paternalistic tradition, granted African American students two hundred dollars for their annual dance. Two black students, Eva Mae Brewer and Ralph J. Rodgers, wrote the Kansan to go "on record as not favoring [that year's] Negro Student Varsity Dance." The protesting students deemed the allocation inadequate compensation for their exclusion from other activities, namely "the right to participate in intramural athletics, the right to the use of the gymnasium and its privileges at convenient times, [and] the right to freedom of movement in the Union fountain." However, Brewer and Rodgers directly departed from Grosberg who protested black exclusion using the language of slavery, by asking not only "for what is ours by right," but also that the "shibboleths" of "democracy" be "convert[ed] into a living vital force" to end discrimination on campus.

Protests by and on behalf of blacks in 1939 and 1941 were part of a long tradition at the University of Kansas. The university had been founded in 1866 as a "monument to perpetuate the memory of those martyrs of Liberty who fell" during the abolitionist battles of the Civil War. Built on top of Mount Oread in west Lawrence, the university was separate and distinct from the town and was a self-contained community unto itself.

In that "free state" spirit, the university accepted black Kansas students from 1870 onward, and in the 1920s it began accepting students from Jim Crow universities, such as those in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri, that excluded blacks. From the first, however,
When Chancellors Frank Strong and Ernest H. Lindley and athletic director and basketball coach Dr. Forrest C. "Phog" Allen revoked those few opportunities for blacks in the 1910s, and especially in the more racially conservative 1920s, black and white students as well as interested bystanders protested. Ed Harvey, for example, wrote Chancellor Strong in 1914 challenging the university's new unofficial policy of excluding blacks from varsity athletic teams. Students involved with the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations (YMCA and YWCA) complained to Chancellor Lindley when Phog Allen excluded black students from the university pool. Many students protested again in 1927 when Lindley segregated the student cafeteria after "black troublemakers" insisted on sitting uninvited with white students whose dominant numbers made their patronage crucial to the cafeteria's survival. Many white students abandoned the cafeteria until Lindley set aside one third of it for segregated black student seating.

Objections to the establishment of these new barriers, although wellmeaning, were sporadic, individualistic, and formed no concentrated movement over a period of time. Chancellor Strong tersely responded to Harvey's 1914 complaint by stating that the university would do its "best to see that the athletics at the University are administered to the best interests of the University and of all concerned." Those best interests seemed to be served with the continued segregation of varsity athletics. The YMCA and YWCA secured "a number of affidavits from both Negro and white students to the effect that Negro and White students had simultaneously used the pool quite frequently" prior to the blacks' exclusion in 1924. They then criticized Lindley who "avow[ed] his support of the present athletic regime." Then in 1927, when Lindley "decided that we [cannot] support the cafeteria at the expense of the state," the YMCA and YWCA again complained, but to no avail.

Outsiders also objected to KU's segregation. An article written by black KU alum Loren Miller appeared in the August 1927 issue of The Crisis, the influential periodical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) edited by W. E. B. DuBois. Miller "bitterly indicted KU" administrators for the new restrictions they placed on black students. He also levied harsh criticism against black students at KU calling them "Uncle Toms" and "cowards" because they seemed willing to live within the new restrictions.

Miller's article prompted an investigation of racial policies and practices at all Kansas universities by Emanuel and Marcel Haldeman-Julius, two prominent mem-


bers of Kansas' socialist community. In January 1928 they announced that the only regents campus with a more oppressive racial policy than KU was the Kansas State Teachers College at Hays which excluded African Americans altogether.  

Students wrote letters to the Kansan, but complained not about the segregation that the Haldeman-Juliuses had found. Instead, they and campus administrators like Chancellor Lindley indicted the Haldeman-Juliuses for an investigation that “did more harm than good” to the racial conditions that administrators, at least, admitted were worsening.  

Soon DuBois joined the chorus of protesters who scorned KU’s racial policy, and in December 1930 he wrote Chancellor Lindley questioning racial restrictions on KU students. Lindley tried to assure DuBois that the “colored student was given full rights in the classroom and library,” and he claimed that “in general, colored students [were] assisted just as wholeheartedly as any of the white students on our campus.” At the same time, Lindley conceded that “the social conditions surrounding negro students [had] not improved, and if anything, [had] grown worse over a period of years.”  

The weak and sporadic protests of the 1910s and 1920s proved fruitless. During most of the 1930s, students, distracted by the Great Depression, seemed to have ignored problems of segregation altogether. But in 1941 Eva Mae Brewer’s and Ralph Rodgers’ comments reflected a change in American thought that began just before World War II—a change that emanated from the highest levels of government. To prepare Americans for the approaching world war, Franklin D. Roosevelt began creating his “arsenal of democracy” to “summon . . . the full moral strength” of the citizens of the United States. In a speech before Congress on January 6, 1941, Roosevelt introduced his “four freedoms”—freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—freedoms, he suggested, the entire world should share. By the time the United States entered the war, FDR had convinced many Americans that World War II was another war fought “to make the world safe for democracy.”  

Blacks and white liberals questioned why those four freedoms did not extend to African Americans. They recognized the classic “American dilemma” that Swed-

12. Lindley to DuBois.  
ish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal pointed out in 1944: the coexistence of democracy and segregation. This discrepancy was potentially harmful to the war effort because the United States’ enemies could equate American racism and its tenets of white supremacy with German fascism. Reacting against this poignant irony, liberals, in historian Peter Kellogg’s words, “sought to justify the integrity of America as a democratic organization” to the Allied community and to its citizens.

Changing demographic patterns in the 1930s and civil unrest early in the war also directed liberals’ attention to these enduring American contradictions. Black migration from the South to the North during World War II and in the 1920s created large blocs of voters in northern cities. Many of those voters deserted the Republican party during the 1930s because the New Deal, although segregated, addressed some of black America’s economic problems. New Deal administrators’ symbolic appointment of blacks to several administrative positions—for example, Mary McLeod Bethune’s appointment as head of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration—also encouraged blacks to vote Democratic. Race riots in Detroit and Harlem in the summer of 1943 proved politically embarrassing both at home and abroad. Clearly America’s dilemma had to be resolved.

African American service in World War II and employment in defense industries raised the expectations of both black veterans and civilians. Long denied the practical benefits of full citizenship and eager to build on the progressive gains of the New Deal, the African American community became more active in antisegregation protests in the early years of the war. For example, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened Roosevelt with a march on Washington unless the president issued a strong antisegregationist statement. To forestall any action that might convince the world America “did a good job of practicing what Hitler preached,” Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941. The order established the Fair Employment Practices Committee, an investigative board that researched African American complaints of discrimination in defense industries.

The atmosphere was becoming conducive to civil rights protest against racial segregation both nationally and at the University of Kansas. In February 1942 Freeman W. Meyer, the son of a minister and a University of Kansas student, organized the KU branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). A Christian pacifist group, FOR’s interracial committee decided comlacement was not acceptable “when racial discrimination, a building stone of Fascism, is widely prevalent in our nation.” An interracial group of students from FOR targeted one specific problem: segregation at the Memorial Union’s restaurant. After investigating the problem, the group found that African Americans were restricted to two corner booths. Segregation at the fountain, a continuation of the policy that Chancellor Lindley implemented in 1927 for “economic purposes,” offended FOR’s interracial committee because it placed “dollars over democracy.”

To Malott, who ordered the restaurant open during vacations because he knew white establishments around the campus excluded black students, the economic justification made sense. He too considered racial segregation to be paramount to the restaurant’s financial success and thus dismissed FOR’s concerns. He communicated those sentiments in a letter to the Kansas Board of Regents in March 1942. Describing FOR as a group of “well-meaning, but misguided, students” who were “zealous” but “ineffective in the community,” Malott explained the white majority’s opinion of racial segregation on campus. It was “normal,” Malott wrote. Students complaining about segregation were the problem, not segregation itself.

Raymond Nichols, the chancellor’s executive secretary, identified Nazi propaganda, not campus segregation, as the reason for FOR’s
Prior to the 1910s when KU athletics became segregated, all students had equal athletic privileges. Ed Harvey, KU's first black football player, is photographed with the 1893 team.

In 1943 when the university housed navy V-12 training programs, the war became a part of daily life at KU. Increasing military presence heightened student awareness of campus segregation and called into question the university's selective brand of democracy.
daring protests. Black students accepted segregation, according to Nichols, and attacks on the "so-called 'race problem'" resembled "propaganda patterns of the Axis agencies" that "may [have] originated from Axis sources." Only Nazis, he wrote, could be so bold as to infiltrate KU and try to undermine the university's stable racial boundaries and consequently its commitment to the war effort."

Although Malott and Nichols, acting on behalf of the university and its "traditions," had ignored FOR's demands, in the spring and fall of 1943 new challenges arose as the campus gained, according to the Kansan, a more military atmosphere. The war accelerated in 1943 and became more a part of daily life at KU. Proud of its war effort, the university housed navy V-12 training programs, and in February 1943 the army named KU as one place where its draftees would be trained. Of a total student population of 4,351 students, 1,150 men were enrolled in these programs. The war's draft also drastically changed the university's demographics as well as its social organizations. Since the war began, Chancellor Malott estimated that the university had lost 7 percent of its enrollment and therefore 7 percent of its potential income. Costs, however, remained virtually the same. The draft also affected participation in men's student organizations. The YMCA, for example, ceased to function from 1943 until the end of the war. The Big Six athletic conference "tried to go ahead with football" but many of the football team's players were seventeen years old, classified as 4-F, naval trainees, or "whatnot." Basketball coach Phog Allen lost six players, two of them starters, in one army call for reserves in February 1943. One of those starters, standout Charley Black, had to get special permission from the army to play in the final championship games."

The war's increasing presence and its democratic ideology motivated student groups and local organizations to adopt more liberal policies toward segregation. The Kansan, which lost at least two editors—news editor James Gunn and sports editor Chuck Elliott—that spring to the draft, recognized that fighting a war to make the world safe for democracy called into question the nation's and the university's selective brand of democracy. From 1943 through 1945, student journalists on the Kansan's staff led the fight against segregation by educating the general student population. Segregation, they told their peers, was analogous to fascism, and KU "did a good job of practicing what Hitler preached." In an article submitted from his army post, James Gunn questioned "Who Fights for Freedom?" All races fought against fascism on European fronts, but only some of these crusaders for democracy enjoyed full democratic citizenship in America. "Speak up for the humanity of the Negro, the Mexican, the Jew, of their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Gunn exhorted. Another cadet asked in a Kansan editorial, "What am I fighting for? What are you fighting for? Freedom! We fight for the freedom to live one's life as one chooses." Other Kansan editorialists echoed the soldiers' concern that segregation was among the gravest issues facing the United States. America needed a "new order" where "racial tolerance" was the resolve for a new year. College campuses were the places to start because "universities [had] always been centers for discussion, for liberal thinking, for leadership." In such a surrounding, the Kansan declared, the role of the student became critical because the student "of today will be the leader of tomorrow. He must be prepared for that responsibility, for upon him will rest the weight of the future of the world." Students must end racism on campus because, as world leaders, how could they "ever expect to get along with the other people of the world, much less guide them, while . . . we are so extremely intolerant of each other?" This resolve encompassed the plight of Japanese Americans, who were excluded, among other things, from college


19. Nichols to author; Nichols to F.M. Harris, March 31, 1942, Malott Papers.
campuses in Kansas and many other states. Recognizing different ways to challenge white racism, some African American students joined national civil rights organizations. One of those organizations, the NAACP, experienced a large membership increase: nationally it had 50,556 members in 1940; by 1946 that number had grown to 450,000. At the same time, the number of branch organizations jumped from 355 to 1,073. One of these new branches, the Lawrence NAACP, was organized in December 1942 by Rosa Sims and her husband, Rev. W. S. Sims. Their son Paul, a KU student, organized his fellow African American students into a NAACP’s Youth Council, which led NAACP protests against segregation at the University of Kansas in March 1943. Petitioning Kansas Gov. Andrew Schoeppel, the Sims expressed their concern that “democracy and equality” were mere words when applied to KU’s black students. Their complaints were specific:

1. That Negro Students are restricted to designated booths in the rear of the Memorial Union.
2. That Negro girls are prohibited from living in the Home Economic Practice House.
3. That qualified Negro girls and boys are not allowed to live in the University residence halls.
4. That Negroes are not allowed to compete in either Varsity or Intramural athletics.
5. That Negro Students are not allowed to do the required teaching at the Oread High School.
6. That other discriminatory and segregational practices are endorsed and maintained by the administration of the University against Negro students.

The Sims demanded that the governor and the legislature “initiate an investigation of the entire system of Jim Crow and discriminatory practices against Negro students.” If neither corrected the situation, the Sims would use legal action to eliminate “these unfair and un-American practices at the states leading education institutions.”

Malott addressed the NAACP’s concerns in a private letter to Governor Schoeppel. He explained that segregation in the union, “a custom . . . of many years’ standing,” had made possible “the two races living side by side without undue hardship.” Responding to the NAACP’s second complaint, Malott stated that white women lived in the Home Economics Practice House for several weeks at a time, practicing their homemaking skills. From the chancellor’s perspective it was obvious that black women could not live in the house too; white women “live in close quarters, share two bedrooms and one bathroom together, and it is impossible to inject a negro into that situation.”

23. Since issues of loyalty and patriotism as well as racial prejudice permeated the various state and national policies directed against Japanese Americans, their wartime experiences relative to Kansas colleges and universities fall outside the scope of this study. For examples of student protests, see “Not All American Citizens Are Free to Enter State Schools of K,” University Daily Kansas, January 3, 1943; “Racial Discrimination is Unjust to Large Numbers of Nisei,” University Daily Kansas, September 27, 1944.

tion." Similarly, black students could not live in the residence halls because the "parents and students of Kansas are not ready to live in intimate contact with the Negro." For the same reasons, African Americans were excluded from participating in intramurals and teaching at the university high school. In addition, Big Six regulations required that varsity teams be segregated. Malott told Schoeppe that he feared that "we are in for considerable trouble because they [black students] have become more aggressive of late." Not wanting to "rile the waters," he acquiesced to his perception of the white majority's prejudices. 25

While the NAACP protested black segregation in all facets of campus life, some varsity track athletes specifically targeted segregated intramural and varsity track teams. In March 1943 Frank Stannard, a champion hurdler on the varsity track team who had won all-Kansas high school honors at Lawrence High School, and members of the intramural team "The Blanks" circulated petitions to allow Roger Whitworth, a black runner, to participate in the intramural track and field championship. Public protests, including the petitions and editorials in the _Kansan_, forced intramural officials to relent, and Whitworth not only participated but helped his team win the championship by nearly forty points. 26

Stannard and several of his varsity teammates wanted Whitworth to run against other teams at the 1943 Big Six Indoor Track and Field meet in Kansas City, a move endorsed by the track coach. A "gentlemen's" agreement, however, among conference universities precluded Whitworth's participation. When the conference formed in 1927 and 1928, all members agreed to exclude blacks from varsity teams out of respect for Missouri and Oklahoma. 27 Racial intolerance and "separate but equal" doctrines kept these Jim Crow institutions 100 percent white. Athletic department heads at KU never questioned the policy. Phog Allen, basketball coach and athletic director when KU entered the Big Six, and current director E. C. Quigley were both against integration of KU's athletic teams because of their personal prejudices and for practical reasons. Varsity sports teams would have to work out two playing combinations, one for schools that accepted black athletes and one for those that did not. Neither were Allen nor Quigley liberal in their racial views, and neither was willing to allow blacks on their teams. 28

In February 1943 student athletes protested that Whitworth, an American citizen soon to be fighting for his country, should be able to compete in the Kansas City meet. Other liberal students, "favor[ing] negro participation in the Big Six," petitioned W. W. Davis, KU history professor and Big Six representative. Since "Negro men are good enough to pay taxes and to serve in our armed forces," the petition stated "it [was] only fair, therefore, that they should be allowed to compete in intercollegiate sports." Davis met with other Big Six representatives and made a motion "against barring colored athletes from conference sports," according to _Kansan_ editors, "but no one seconded the motion and it was shelved." 29

The war's dramatic presence on campus also prompted some students to protest the Red Cross segregation of donated blood. Complaints began in April 1943 when two students protested in an angry letter to the _Kansan_ editor: "this policy of the Red Cross ... defeats its purpose of obtaining the greatest possible amount of blood donations ... [and] contributes to racial discrimination by imitating the Nazi theory of the Aryan superman." A few others simply refused to donate blood to what they considered a racist process and organization. In response the _Kansan_ wired the Red

25. Rachel VanderWerf, telephone interview with author, May 13, 1992. VanderWerf, wife of former KU chemistry professor Calvin VanderWerf and secretary of the YMCA in 1945, mentioned Malott's need to maintain a certain public stance in order not to anger either important alumni or the legislature. This stance included a publicly conservative position on racial issues. It should also be noted that the Lawrence NAACP papers mention nothing further concerning the complaints to Scheppe and Malott; the petition itself did not appear in their papers but was found in Malott's papers. Microfilm copies of the Lawrence NAACP records from the Library of Congress are available in the Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.


27. The universities in the Big Six were the University of Kansas, Kansas State University, University of Nebraska, Iowa State University, University of Missouri, and University of Oklahoma.

28. "Resolution Necessary for Repeal of Reactionary Ruling Never Passed," _University Daily Kansan_, February 26, 1943; Griffin, _The University of Kansas, 661_.

Cross national headquarters questioning its collection procedures. The Red Cross replied that, according to policy set by the military, it was deemed advisable to mix Caucasian and Negro blood indiscriminately and therefore “blood from Negro donors” was “so designated.” The secretaries of war and navy said they enforced this policy because “whitemen in the army and navy prefer white blood.” Sometime later, one incredulous writer wondered if a seriously wounded soldier “would waste his few conscious moments in demanding the case history of the blood about to be transfused in his veins to save his life.”

While students critically assessed Red Cross policies, other white student groups questioned the validity of segregation everywhere on campus. Women’s political organizations led the charge—in word if not always in deed. The limited number of men on campus forced the creation of a new government: in April 1943 the Men’s Student Council (MSC) and the Women’s Student Government Association (WSGA) combined to form the All-Student Council (ASC). The ASC’s new constitution contained a critical clause that stated “no regularly enrolled student shall in a discriminatory manner be denied the privileges of membership.”

Although Etta Moten, a 1931 graduate of the University of Kansas, never sang with the university’s glee club, her outstanding talent earned her a starring role and great acclaim in the Broadway musical Porgy and Bess.

The ASC and both student political parties realized that African American integration was not only humane and democratic but a potent political tool as well. Campaign platform planks for the Women’s Independent Greek Society (WIGS) and the Progressive Women’s Cooperative League (PWCL), issued just after the ASC’s creation, pledged both parties to “work for equality.” These parties believed that not only should the new student council “represent and include every student interest group” and “work for the inclusion of colored students in all campus activities,” but they insisted that “Negro students as members of the SGA (Student Government Association) and the Memorial Union should have equal rights and privileges in all campus activities and organizations.” But while their objectives were good, their focus was narrow: neither coalition, for example, included any of KU’s three black sororities. However, an African American woman, June
Mack, ran with the PWCL and won a seat in the student senate.\textsuperscript{32}

In a letter to the \textit{Kansan}, chemistry student Paul W. Gilles challenged the ASC and the women's political parties to desegregate all campus activities using the new nondiscriminatory clause. Gilles suggested that "the obvious place to start is at the Junior Prom." He added that "additional action on the other problems," namely the Home Economics Practice House and intramural sports must follow. His comments to the \textit{Kansan} and petitions, probably started by concerned KU students resolving that "all students, regardless of race, color, or creed, [must] be included in all university activities, and that this policy [must] take effect immediately in connection with the Junior Prom," prompted the ASC to desegregate school dances in time for the April 12, 1943, junior prom.\textsuperscript{33}

The ASC rechanneled its energies into new challenges after the desegregation of the dance. Peggy Davis, PWCL member and ASC president, appointed a committee in November 1943 to investigate allegations that the university's band and glee club omitted black students. The fine arts faculty vehemently denied that they refused African American participation in the department, pointing to the presence of a black violinist in the orchestra. However, when asked why no black students currently were in the band, the harried director replied that "none were good enough to make it." He admitted that the band had been segregated in the past because of white fears of "close body contact" between the races. He held up as proof against segregation policies, however, the previous year's two black members.\textsuperscript{34}

Glee club director Irene Peabody, who also replied to the charges, claimed that "their [black students'] voices weren't good enough to make it and didn't fit in." No one thought to ask why Ettta Moten, a 1931 African American KU graduate and star of the Broadway play \textit{Porgy and Bess}, never sang with the club. Ironically, the fine arts department, eager to prove its open atmosphere and probably to forestall any more protests against black student exclusion, feted Miss Moten with a reception in her honor exactly one year later.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} "Women Political Parties Announce Platforms," \textit{University Daily Kansan}, April 8, 1943; photo and caption, ibid., April 23, 1943. No archival materials on the PWCL or WIGS are found in the University Archives, University of Kansas.

\textsuperscript{33} Paul W. Gilles to editor, \textit{University Daily Kansan}, April 8, 1943; "Councils Back Negro Rights to go to Prom," ibid., April 9, 1943.

\textsuperscript{34} "ASC Investigates Negro Omission from KU Musical Organizations," ibid., November 24, 1943; "Fine Arts Faculty Denies Bar- ring of Negroes From Participation in Campus Musical Organizations," ibid., November 26, 1943; VanderWerf interview.

\textsuperscript{35} "Ettta Moten to Be Guest of Honor at Reception," \textit{University Daily Kansan}, November 20, 1944; \textit{The Jayhawker} (1931), 186.