STORIES FROM

The congregation of Wichita's St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1960s.
African American Experiences in Wichita, Kansas

by Judith R. Johnson and Craig L. Torbenson

On January 16, 1965, a United States Air Force KC 135 tanker crashed in the heart of the African American community in the northeast sector of Wichita, Kansas. The seven crew members and twenty-two people on the ground died instantly. The tanker, loaded with thirty-one thousand gallons of jet fuel, had just taken off from McConnell Air Force Base at the southern end of the city when the two engines on the right side failed. The pilot apparently tried to return to base but, without sufficient altitude or speed, the plane rolled over and hit the ground nose first, leaving a crater fifteen feet deep near the intersection of Piatt and Twentieth Streets. The huge engines were buried six feet in the ground.

The crash of that U.S. Air Force tanker remains a vivid memory for many African Americans who lived in Wichita at that time. While participating in an oral history project conducted in 1995 and 1996 in Wichita, Kansas, they recounted the horror of that moment. For example, Ron Thomas, an intense

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forty-four-year-old graduate student at Wichita State University, recalled how rumors spread throughout the community. Some people at his church claimed the pilot had aimed for the black neighborhood where the crash would do the least damage. Others speculated the pilot had crashed there on purpose to avoid hurting whites or white businesses in other parts of the city.

It seems to me the city did not show much remorse, or enough remorse, outside of the black community. After the crash, and maybe because of the responses of whites, a lot of people in the black community really closed up. It became a black/white thing. People asked, "Why did all those people die here?" and the city never even put up a memorial or anything to acknowledge the loss of life.

Another participant in the project, Brenda Gray, an articulate and soft-spoken woman, recalled that tragic morning with a sad tone in her voice:

I remember it was a Saturday morning. We felt it—we could feel the explosion and the windows shook. I ran outside and could see the black smoke. The phone calls started right away, people telling others where it had hit and who was killed. It was so traumatic. Then it seemed to me that no one outside the black neighborhood was really interested. The reaction among whites that I talked to was nothing like the recent [April 1995] Oklahoma City bombing. It was like, "Well, thank God it didn't go over another few miles or it would really have wiped out something." I think that because of where it was, it was definitely not so important to the rest of Wichita.

The responses to the crash highlight a major theme that emerged among African Americans who participated in this oral history project. Based on those interviews, the African American community has a definite sense of isolation from the rest of the city. In addition to Ron Thomas and Brenda Gray, others who contributed their stories frequently voiced how historical events and issues confirmed their exclusion from the larger community. From their perspectives, the separation of races in Wichita has been a major determining factor in their daily lives. The interviews also reveal that busing schoolchildren and economic issues were central in their minds when African Americans recalled their experiences of growing up and living in Wichita.

4. The African Americans who participated in this study all live in the northeast sector of Wichita. To date, twenty-five individuals have agreed to participate. The ages range from those who were born in the 1920s to the youngest who was born in 1967. The participants include pro-
Oral histories frequently are used to gather information about past events and to document the more subjective aspects of the historical experience. Although oral histories are products of the time when they are recorded, they do give a unique sense to history that comes from living through events. Oral histories also fill gaps in knowledge by relying on relatively untapped resources. Those accounts and personal perceptions provide information that generally is unavailable elsewhere. Finally, oral histories rely on people whose recollections of what they saw and did in a given time help form pieces of the historical tapestry. In this oral history project, the participants expressed the immediate and sustaining impact of particular issues and events. As such they provide us with a window into the lives of members of the black community in Wichita.

Whether in 1940, 1960, or even 1998, the majority of African Americans, including those interviewed, live in a defined area of Wichita. Various agencies and residents within the city use different boundaries to designate the specific sector. Some Wichitans refer to it as a ghetto or as Bernice Hutcherson related: “Call it the northeast area, or the near northeast, or the northeast sector; it doesn’t matter because this is known as the place where black people in Wichita live.” For this study, Census Tracts 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 18, 75, 77, and 78 constitute the northeast area of Wichita (Fig. 1). The parameters of those tracts have remained fairly constant since the 1940s, but numbers 5 and 12 were combined to form Tract 42. Although the population has increased in the last fifty years, a color line separating blacks and whites has remained in the minds of many African Americans.

A review of population growth, characteristics, and expansion in Wichita from 1940 to 1980 points to the continuous movement of African Americans to the north and east of downtown. The area is bounded by Oliver Street to the east, Broadway Boulevard to the west, Central Avenue to the south, and Twenty-ninth Street to the north (Fig. 2). A more general description would place the location to the north and east of downtown Wichita. Interstate 135 (I–135) dissect the area, parallel to or elevated above a flood control canal. One set of railroad tracks runs north

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and south, and another runs east and west. These divisions of the already existing community were no accident. While most of the area is residential, it has pockets of light industry and commercial activity. Wichita State University also is located within the boundaries of the northeast sector.

Racial discrimination has long been identified as a crucial factor in determining the economic and social limits and restrictions for African Americans. In many cities and towns across the United States, African Americans have been forced to live in specific areas. As in Wichita, *de facto* residential segregation of blacks in the entire country has been sustained at a high level for the past fifty years, despite the shifts in population during World War II and the social upheavals of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.8

World War II had a tremendous impact on Wichita. Between 1940 and 1945 the federal government awarded more than half of all defense contracts to states west of the Mississippi River. Wichita, with an established aircraft industry, had the facilities to build planes for the military. As such, workers flocked to the city. Among those attracted to the relatively high wages at the Boeing and Beech Aircraft plants were African Americans, particularly from Oklahoma and Arkansas. In 1940 Wichita had a population of 114,966; only 4.9 percent of that total was African American. The city, however, remained segregated in terms of residence.10

One who migrated to Wichita during the war years was Julia Scott Nelson. Now retired, she came to the city in 1943 specifically to work in the aircraft industry. Nelson, who was born and grew up in Oklahoma, followed her sister who already had found a job. After a seven-week training period, Nelson began work as a riveter at Boeing on the second or evening shift. She still has a vivid memory of beginning that job in August because it was so hot and the plant had no air-conditioning. Sometimes she worked with her sister.

I liked riveting, especially when I had a good partner. There was a pregnant white girl who sometimes worked with us. But she complained that my sister and I worked too fast and that we made her look bad. I’m not sure, but I think she didn’t want to work with us because we were black. Whatever the reason, my sister and I met her attitude with intelligence and poise.


Boeing began to lay off workers right before the war ended, and Nelson had to find another job. She regrets to this day that she did not learn to read blueprints as her lead man at Boeing had suggested. Nevertheless, Nelson remained in Wichita, did day work where “I cleaned houses for some white women in the city,” and married Bennie Nelson in 1953. He also had migrated to Wichita from Arkansas in 1943 to work in the aircraft plants.11

After World War II Wichita experienced more growth both in numbers of people and in industry. By 1950 the city had more than 165,000 residents. Of that total, 8,082 or just under 5 percent were black.12 An expanding economy, particularly because of the advent of the Cold War and the greater need for the military aircraft Boeing produced, created physical changes for the city. Between 1945 and 1955 Wichita doubled in size to forty-four square miles. South of Wichita the small town of Derby grew at a phenomenal rate. There the population increased from 438 to 6,458 between 1950 and 1960.13

The interviews illustrate how economic opportunities attracted black migrants to the city and why the black community grew. For example, Ron Thomas came with his family to Wichita from Louisiana in 1951 when he was six months old. “They chose Wichita,” he recalled, “because they heard there was work here. It was purely a word of mouth thing. To hear my parents and their friends talk, they speak of going to places where black communities were already established.”14 His family settled in Census Tract 13, or in what was the original and traditional black residential area of Wichita.15

Robert Mitchell, who is now an attorney, moved with his family to Wichita during the early Cold War years. He was four years old when his parents brought his family to Wichita in 1952 from what he calls a black settlement in Oklahoma. They lived in the northern end of Wichita, close to one of the refineries and near the railroad tracks. “It was just like Oklahoma,” Mitchell said. “All the black folk lived in one area. We all had outdoor toilets. There were hog pens and people still had livestock in their backyards or fields at that time.”16

When the Mitchells arrived in Wichita, the African American population of the city was clearly expanding to the northeast. As more families moved into the city, and as increased commercial activity overtook the old ghetto in the downtown region,

14. Thomas, interview.
blacks moved to a district that bordered on the stockyards and refineries. In addition to fewer city services, the odors that emanated from those industries, especially when the wind blew from the south, filled the air with noxious fumes.17

Yet the community remained a close-knit group. Brenda Gray, who was born in Wichita in 1953, recalled a clear separation of the races and that blacks were encouraged to remain in a confined area.

I can remember our neighborhood. There was a lot of interaction between neighbors. There was always somebody who lived across the street or there were good friends around the corner. My relatives lived nearby, and if you got in trouble at school, you were going to get in trouble at home because the teachers all knew the parents and the grandparents. Wichita was a tight neighborhood for African Americans because we all lived really close together. If black people ventured out of the neighborhood, it wasn’t very far. Twenty-First Street was the cutoff point for “no-man’s land.” There were very defined boundaries.18

In addition to residential separation, African Americans often faced daily humiliation. As Ron Thomas related:

I used to like to go downtown a lot when I was younger, especially to the library. Then if you were black and you were walking outside the black neighborhood, or even downtown at the library, you were going to receive at least one racial slur somewhere along the way. Or someone was going to go out of his way to say something to you, or not serve you. That was just standard policy or procedure.19

Bernice Hutcherson has lived in her home in the northeast sector since 1954. Her story presents another example of the physical as well as psychological separation of the races in Wichita. She remembers that she and her husband were the only blacks on her street. Because of the questions Hutcherson was asked, it was obvious to her that the white children there had little contact with African Americans before they met her family. For example, several inquired if the black skin could rub off on their hands. Others wondered if African Americans had tails. Those questions, Hutcherson emphasized, were usual for the time. She also recalled how she used to go downtown to shop and stop at the Woolworth’s store for lunch. There she had to stand up at the end of the counter in a special section set aside for African Americans. As she related:

I would look across the counter and I could see white persons who were filthy, who had no manners according to my way of viewing it, who were sitting down, slopping over their food. Here I was, clean, probably smelling good, very well-groomed, with excellent table manners and I had to stand up. I used to wonder what those people thought. But I ate my sandwich if I was starving and went on my merry way. I also thought about working with the groups who wanted to change things.20

One group that challenged that situation was the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It first targeted the segregated lunch counters in downtown Wichita. In the summer of 1958, two years before the well-publicized Greensboro, North Carolina, sit-in, the Youth Council organized a sit-in at Dockum Drugstore on Wichita’s main commercial street. The members began their protest on a Saturday morning in July, taking seats at the counter when whites finished eating and left. That first confrontation lasted only a few hours until the manager closed the counter. Undeterred, the group continued its protest the next Saturday. After four weeks the manager declared the lunch counter integrated and served the protesters. Following that success, the group members moved to stage a protest against the segregated drugstore near the high school that many of them attended. Shortly

18. Gray, interview.
19. Thomas, interview.
20. Hutcherson, interview.
Afterwards, other drugstores in the city began to serve African Americans and a visible, concrete reminder of discrimination in Wichita disappeared.21

As Wichita grew during the post-WWII surge, both black and white populations increased. The 1950s witnessed a huge rise in the birth rate across the United States, and the situation in Wichita reflected that trend.22 Consequently, the need for more schools became a pressing issue. The Wichita School Board decided that small, neighborhood schools were the best approach for the younger children. That plan allowed children to be close to home, and it limited the number of pupils. In practice the system worked, albeit on a segregated basis.23 Historically, children of both races in Wichita attended school together. The state had passed legislation in 1867 that made school districts responsible for the education of both blacks and whites. Then in 1879 additional legislation allowed cities of the first class to develop and maintain separate schools for the two races. Wichita, with a population of fewer than ten thousand, did not qualify as a first class city and therefore continued to send black and white children to school together. In 1911, apparently in response to the rapid increase in population, the growing number of African American children in the schools, and the demands of some white residents, the voters in Wichita approved the sale of bonds for the construction of new schools for black children. By 1914 Wichita had built four new schools in the black community to accommodate a segregated system. That arrangement remained in effect until 1952 when the board abandoned de jure segregation for schools but continued to practice de facto separation based on residential patterns. A consequence of increased population and the movement of blacks farther into the northeast section of the city, however, led to the conversion of mostly white schools to all black schools.24 The experiences of several of those interviewed described how the system worked.


Robert Mitchell began his education at L’Ouverture where all students were black. After finishing the third grade he went to Skinner School, which by 1960 had a 60 percent African American enrollment. Brenda Gray also attended L’Ouverture but was at Dunbar School for the third and fourth grades. As she recalled:

Both of those schools were segregated. We usually had black teachers. I think there were some white principals, but I never saw them. I remember my black teachers as very dedicated. The white teachers were the real “liberal” types, you know, the ones who wanted to go in and help the inner city kids, or they were there for discipline, like being there in a black school was a form of punishment.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against separate but equal schools in the Brown v Board of Education of Topeka decision in 1954, schools in Wichita remained segregated. Later in 1963, when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) investigated the racial distribution of students in Wichita, the findings revealed uneven and unequal representation of the races in city schools. Consequently, HEW ordered Wichita to integrate. At the same time, community activists such as Chester Lewis, an attorney who emerged as a leading opponent of segregation, began a campaign to integrate the schools. Lewis pointed out that Wichita continued to practice segregation based on residential patterns. In reality, the situation in the city mirrored the rest of the nation where in 1967, 65 percent of black children attended school with 90 to 100 percent of members of their own race. The debate in Wichita in the latter part of the 1960s raged over closing certain schools, busing children, and changing boundaries for specific schools. Then in the 1967–1968 academic year the school board developed busing plans to end segregation in the school district. Despite opposition from some members of the white community, Wichita was able to integrate the elementary schools by the fall of 1970. As part of a plan to comply with HEW, the board closed Fairmount in 1971, and Little, Isely, and Dunbar schools in 1975 (Fig. 2). All were located in the expanding African American neighborhood and had a student body that was 100 percent black. Those children were then bused to schools in white neighborhoods.

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25. Goldman, School and Society in One City, 21; Mitchell, interview.
The interviews clearly reveal the strain and trauma of the initial moves for integration. One example is provided by Shakura Sentwali, who was born in Wichita in 1955 and has lived in the city all her life; she refers to herself as a socialist and prefers the designation of African to African American. Sentwali described attending a white school:

When we had to go to the white schools after integration, those teachers didn’t know us from Adam and, of course, because of their own ideas and prejudices, didn’t expect us Africans to do much in the way of learning. It was like “Black children must be slow because they can’t speak the English of North Americans.” The expectations for us were so low. All that stuff got in the way. A child knows if you care about him or not. And it was clear to me those teachers didn’t care. We knew right away that we weren’t accepted or welcomed.30

Brenda Gray also recalled how the struggle for integration affected her:

When I was in the eighth grade at Mathewson, we were given a choice to stay there or go to Coleman. It was really a big issue and pretty heavy stuff for someone only twelve or thirteen. We had conversations at the lunch table, like “Debbie’s going over to Coleman.” Debbie was light-skinned and had long hair and we thought she was stuck-up. I stayed because I felt a real connection to my blackness then. I felt if you left, you were betraying Mathewson. I know a lot of kids stayed because of that too. It was like, “They don’t want us, so we don’t want them. Our school is good and we’re going to stay.”30

According to those interviewed, busing as practiced in Wichita always has been one-sided and unfair. As in other areas of the country, busing children to school has been the subject of continued scrutiny among African Americans in Wichita. The issue frequently has surfaced in local school board discussions or in confrontations with parents and other members of the community, both black and white. The question now, according to those interviewed, is not only how to get black and white children in school together but also how to provide equal schools or educational opportunities for all. As they see it, the burden of integration has always been placed on black children and causes them to feel separated from the rest of the city. To attend school black children have to leave the northeast community for the day, but few white children come into their community, thus perpetuating the separation of blacks and whites.

Churches in the city exhibit a similar pattern of separation. The location of black or white congregations clearly demonstrates how far apart the races are. Some white churches have moved farther east in the city and sold their properties to black congregations. The experiences of three churches highlight this pattern. In 1954 the St. Paul African Methodist

31. Gray, interview. In the early 1960s Mathewson was a predominate black school; Coleman was white. See Goldman, School and Society in One City, 22.

30. Shakura Sentwali, interview by authors, June 22, 1995.
Episcopal congregation, which had been established in 1875 and always had worshiped in the same building in the black community of downtown Wichita, purchased land to the northeast to construct new facilities. Two years later the white University Methodist congregation moved from the area and sold its building to the African American Tabernacle Baptist Church. In 1961 Christ Lutheran physically moved its church building four miles north. Members had concluded that the church’s original location limited potential for growth since so many other churches were in the area. More accurate perhaps was the invisible barrier between the city’s black and white residents that diminished the likelihood that either race would cross that line to join a church.

Urban renewal projects during the 1960s also separated the races in Wichita. The construction of state and local government buildings forced black owners to sell their properties and move elsewhere. Private homes in the area also were demolished. Brenda Gray recalled that her grandmother lived in a house on Main Street that was torn down during a phase of urban renewal. According to Ron Thomas, the first house his family lived in when they arrived in Wichita was downtown. “That house is no longer there. It was replaced with the police station, with parking garages, or just parking.”

Other physical changes occurred in the black community. Plans for a north and south limited access highway through the city had been discussed since the latter part of the 1940s, but disputes over the exact route delayed construction. Then in 1963 state engineers confirmed the route of the expressway to follow the course of the flood-control canal built soon after the end of World War II. According to state highway engineer Walter Johnson, the decision for the route was based on three arguments. First, the city owned much of the right-of-way, which meant placement there would be cheaper. Second, the population of the city was moving to the east, so the canal route would accommodate that trend. Finally, the canal route allowed easy access to and from downtown Wichita. What went unsaid was that the proposed route was located through the heart of Wichita’s black sector. Despite protests from African Americans over the location of the highway and of the access ramps, they lost the battle. In the end, the interstate physically divided the black community and tended to block interaction among the residents on both sides (Fig. 2). As in Detroit, Michigan; Elizabeth, New Jersey; and other major metropolitan areas of the country, the construction of an interstate through the heart of a city became a barrier to already established neighborhoods and in effect acted as a passageway for white commuters to skirt the ghetto.

The construction of I-135 had an immediate effect on African American residents in Wichita. As Brenda Gray recalled:

My grandfather had a bait shop; it was called Bog’s Bait. He found out he was going to have to move because of the construction of I-135. They made him move. There was a hamburger stand next to his store and I remember them having discussions about having to move and they didn’t like it. They thought they were going to lose their businesses because people would not be able to come to a new place. He said they didn’t have the right to come in there and take away his business and tell him he had to move. I remember though, that the whole construction thing coming up was an issue.

33. Goldman, School and Society in One City, 20.
38. Gray, interview.
Others directly affected by the new highway were Major and Dorothea Harding who had moved to Wichita in 1953 from Coffeyville in southeast Kansas. Within a short period of time they purchased a home on North Hydraulic. The Hardings liked the neighborhood, particularly because all the residents shared in the profits of an oil well located behind their street, which paid them each about three dollars per year in royalties. According to Mrs. Harding, their friends and relatives thought “we were in the money” because of the royalties of that pump.

But in 1965 the Hardings had to move from their home on Hydraulic to make room for the construction of I-135. Although the state paid them for their property, neither believed that they received the full value for their home. Nevertheless, they had to move, so they looked for a house farther north and east. Eventually, they settled in Census Tract 78. Initially, both black and white families lived on their block. Soon, however, whites began to move. Some of the families were in the military and changes in assignments forced them to relocate. The Hardings suspected, however, that the whites fled because they objected to blacks living in the same neighborhood.39

Vashti Lewis, who returned to Wichita in the early part of the 1960s after working outside of Kansas for several years, also encountered opposition when trying to move into a white neighborhood. She became active in the NAACP and worked to secure open and fair housing in the city. In the early 1960s she and her husband, Chester Lewis, tried to buy a home in an area near Wichita State University where no other blacks lived. “It was like an iron curtain had come down to keep blacks out of the neighborhood.” Finally, they joined a white couple who arranged to look at houses for sale with real estate agents. Mrs. Lewis posed as the couple’s maid and while they looked inside, she inspected the yard. When they went outside, she went inside. The Lewis’ finally purchased a home, but the residents on the block did not know their new neighbors were black until moving day arrived. Within a short period of time, someone burned a cross in the front yard and threw rocks through the front window. Eventually the violence ended, but it was not long before some of the white residents put their houses up for sale.40 That neighborhood, located in Census Tract 77, was less than 2 percent African American in 1960, but within a decade, the black population had increased to 33 percent.

Not all whites in Wichita accepted the separation of the races. For example, an integrated group of residents formed a grassroots organization against residential segregation. Calling themselves the Fair Housing Committee, they claimed that tradition and real estate practices restricted where African Americans in the city could live. That organization joined members of the NAACP, religious leaders, and more than three thousand others who marched in downtown Wichita on Sunday, October 27, 1963, to convince the city commission to adopt a fair housing ordinance. Vashti Lewis was among the marchers. In

39. Major Harding, interview by authors, June 24, 1995; Dorothea Harding, interview by authors, June 24, 1995.
response, however, the Wichita Real Estate Board formed a special committee to oppose any changes in the regulations regarding the sale of properties. That committee charged that such an ordinance violated rights of owners and that “they (Negroes) destroy an area, damage houses and even whole sections as has happened repeatedly in Wichita.” Finally in 1970 the state of Kansas added discrimination in housing to the original 1961 Kansas Act Against Discrimination, therefore making it illegal to exclude any race from purchasing or residing in a house in the state.

Other African Americans in the community challenged existing conditions, some in an unique way. Robert Mitchell related how tense race relations were in Wichita during the late 1960s. The police, he recalls, constantly harassed him and other young black males. In response, Mitchell and some of his friends organized a group they called the Northeast Patrol. Their plan was to act as a moderating force inside their own community, or in his words, “to deal with our own people a little better than the white folks had been doing.” Mitchell, who was president of the patrol, said the purpose was to create more stability in northeast Wichita. Initially, twenty-eight young black males joined together as a self-policing group and then expanded their interests to commercial enterprises. In September 1967 the group formed a business corporation, sold stock, and then purchased a hamburger stand in the heart of the African American neighborhood at the intersection of Thirteenth and Hydraulic in Census Tract 6. After cleaning up and remodeling the structure, the patrol opened the stand for business. In December of the same year Mitchell oversaw the grand opening of a service station also owned by the patrol. It was after the experiences with the patrol that he determined to return to school and study to become a lawyer. As Mitchell and the others left the group to pursue other activi-

43 Mitchell, interview; Wichita Beacon, December 12, 1967; Wichita Eagle, September 13, 1976.
was not readily available to African Americans. According to Brenda Gray:

In thinking back to when I was a kid in the late 1950s, I don’t think working there was a big option because the males that I had contact with, my friends’ dads, and everybody, they didn’t work there. They worked at the packing houses and there were a lot of railroad workers. But there were no manufacturing jobs. Even when they did start to open up, I can remember they didn’t have the good jobs there. I call them “the Plantations.” Blacks did the menial labor there. They did the clean up, but they didn’t do the welding.44

Ron Thomas had a somewhat different experience when he worked in the plants in the 1980s.

At Cessna, my first job was to stamp out metal pieces that had jagged edges. I did that all week. But it was aircraft and they paid well. I tried to move into tooling which is the best job you can do in aircraft. I applied to go to their tooling school there, but my supervisor said I wouldn’t be good at it. So I quit and went to Boeing. There weren’t many black people in tooling because it was such an upper end job. Being bright and black in Wichita is one of the hardest things to do. Racism follows you everywhere.45

Allen Teague, who was a student at Wichita State University at the time of his interview, had found employment in the aircraft industry during the early 1990s. He too related that he went there because the pay was so good, but he also had to endure overt racism. One day he found a rope noose placed on his work station. Other examples of racism, such as the jungle noises whites in his section made when he walked by, and people in a truck following him home after work, convinced Teague to give up his job in the aircraft industry and pursue a degree in education.

Although Thomas and Teague worked at the aircraft plants at different times, they both encountered constant reminders that the races in Wichita are still separate. As they mentioned in their interviews, lack of opportunities for advancement, a desire to enter a profession rather than continue in manufacturing, and a sense that the white workers did not want them there, motivated both of them to leave the aircraft industry and return to college.46

Beyond the news stories and headlines, the oral histories of the participants in this study give a sense of what people feel about specific issues and the ongoing nature of race relations in Wichita. They also reveal that Wichita was and remains a divided city. While some of the more blatant examples of discrimination may have disappeared, constant reminders confront these African Americans who feel separated from the larger community. All participants said they are comfortable living in the northeast sector but at the same time see a wide gulf between their neighborhood and other areas of the city. These interviews also demonstrate a strong African American presence in Wichita that has deep roots and close ties. The participants recognize their history as valid and valuable to themselves and the city as a whole.

African Americans have been a part of Wichita since the city was founded in 1870. To this day these residents have contributed to the characteristics that define the city. The individuals who shared their stories provide an insight into the identity, the history, and the internal and external forces that bind them together. Rather than relying alone on powerful and influential leaders to recall a history, these narratives help place past events and issues into the larger historical context and perhaps prepare the community to meet challenges of the future.

44. Gray, interview.
45. Thomas, interview.