Photo from 1936 depicting people going through the Quindaro ruins. Courtesy of Wyandotte County Museum.
The following article contains a series of excerpts from oral history interviews. It was inspired by LaDawndra Robbs’s presentation at the “Strength through Numbers” symposium about Quindaro and its history held in April 2018 at Memorial Hall in Kansas City, Kansas. Additional interviews about Robbs’s recollections of the community were combined with oral history interviews collected by the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library. All of these interviews provide insight into the way people remember Quindaro and experienced living there over the past half century. The themes covered in these interviews include reminiscences of childhood, community life, work, and hopes for the future. Quindaro is often portrayed as a crossroads of many different peoples, and these interviews reflect that portrayal. Sylvia Fulbright grew up in Quindaro with only one sister, which she remembers as unusual because her neighbors tended to have large families. Robert Laskey’s parents planned to move from Chicago to California. On the way, they stayed with relatives in Kansas City and instead made Quindaro their new home, where Robert was born. Frank Hursh was a lifelong Kansan who grew up in Kansas City, Kansas, and remembered playing at the Quindaro ruins as a child. Curtis Smith’s work with the railroad brought him to Quindaro. LaDawndra Robbs also came to Quindaro for work as a teacher at M. E. Pearson Elementary School. Nedra Bonds moved to Quindaro with her family when her father became a Kansas City, Kansas, police officer. These excerpts do not constitute a definitive history, of course, but they give voice to people’s lives in this particular community and what it meant for them to be a part of it.
Childhood

"[In] Quindaro, maybe it was like that everywhere, but you didn’t have rules, I mean, you weren’t restricted. You could play until the streetlights came on; you [didn’t have] to go home until the whistle blew; they had a big whistle in Kansas City that blew like eight or nine o’clock. And your parents didn’t have to call you. You heard the whistle. You didn’t have to be in the house, but you had to be on the property [laughs]."—Sylvia Fulbright

"But at nine o’clock, there was a whistle that blew from the Power and Light plant down at 12th Street . . . And that was the curfew for us, I mean if you were out—[I] lived off Lee’s Scat Road . . . —you got off the street."—Robert Laskey

"I was a Boy Scout at the church at 17th and Yecker. As Boy Scouts, we always went hiking all of the time; we always had canteens with us. We would hike out 17th Street clear to the tracks by the waterworks; then we would turn and go west to the Quindaro ruins. [South] of the tracks was Quindaro ruins, where we would play in the old basements. North of the tracks, we would go down to the river, and it was right at where the river curved, and we’d get naked and go swimming in the Missouri River. But we had a lot of fun in the ruins."—Frank Hursh

"Almost every basement was still there up the hill, and we would go in the different basements, and some black people lived in the area, and they had gardens all through the area. We knew they grew corn, so we would take our canteens and we would get ears of corn, and we found an old bucket; we would cook the corn in one of the basements . . . and eat it. The corn ears were only about five inches long. And one old black man came down and saw us and said, ‘I see you’re eating my corn, boys, have fun.’ He was nice about it. But we just played in the ruin."—Frank Hursh

"We used to go out there and find, uh, arrowheads, things like that, and it was a great viewpoint too out over the river. You know, you got there, and I remember we used to go out there and all the way north of the river there was an area, a big, flat bank, and when we got over it we’d take a bunch of bottles and cans and go up from the river and throw them right back down there, and then we’d shoot ‘em with a rifle. It was dangerous. Yeah . . . when we found an arrowhead, you thought, ‘Man, that was really something.’"—Robert Laskey

Community and Culture

"Well, after I got out of high school, I . . . wanted to go to college, and I started into college, and . . . my father . . . mentioned that they had a program that . . . they would pay for your college education if you were working for the Union Pacific . . . I mostly worked at the Quindaro yard office . . . which is . . . right down at the bottom of the hill from Quindaro . . . so I worked with several of the first African American males that worked for the railroad. But . . . three of the gentlemen I worked with . . . they told me about each other, and they told me about the area . . . It seemed rather foreign to me considering the fact I was from Grandview, which . . . was an all-white community . . . we had one black family there the whole time I went through my education system. So my contact with African Americans . . . changed a lot when I worked at the Union Pacific Railroad just osmotically.

"I didn’t know where to go . . . didn’t know what to do around there. I wasn’t familiar with the neighborhood, so I started [to] go to local restaurants, and . . . try things out, and . . . the food [was] not to my liking at all. They were just fried chicken places basically, a Church’s and a Kentucky Fried Chicken. . . . I like fried chicken okay . . . but . . . you know there was no more variety than that . . . Then I think a Chinese restaurant popped up eventually . . . It was nice . . . to go to their homes, where you could sit down and . . . relax and . . . have . . . more of a home-cooking, you know, type [meal] . . . There were more greens and things that maybe they had grown . . . in their yard and . . . beans and legumes . . . things like that . . . We were just basically eating a quick sandwich, so nothing that [took] a lot of time . . . These were just stop-ins for an hour, you know, basically lunch . . . I did get to . . . go out with them, oh, you know, for a drink and things like that after hours and socialize with them somewhat."—Curtis Smith

"There was this one lady and she had about five, six kids. And my mother worked, and my dad worked, and my mother wasn’t doing anything like making homemade rolls or nothing like that. So this woman . . . and her daughter would tell me when her mother was going

3. Frank Hursh, interview by Anne Lacey, oral history interviews, Kansas City, Kansas Public Library, February 4, 2017.
4. Hursh.
5. Laskey.
to make homemade rolls. So I would take butter from my house [because a] family with six kids, they didn’t have butter. And I would take the butter over there, and I would just have a ball. And they thought that I was something because I had butter. And it never occurred to me . . . what we had. There wasn’t nothing but two kids [in our house].

“Everyone was very, very nice . . . my grandfather bought me a bike, and I left my bike at the store, I think it was Safeway or something, and I walked home. [I] forgot I rode my bike. So that evening I told my grandpa that somebody stole my bike. So he called the police, and so the next day, they brought me my bike. It was in front of the store; it had been there for those forty-eight hours; the people at the store saw it, [and] they knew that little girl left it. Nobody bothered the bike.

“There was this lady, her name was Mrs. Branch. I’ve been trying to think of her name all day. And she was a mixed lady, white and black, and she looked very white. And she lived on 27th about two blocks north of Farrow . . . . She lived next door to the Hopes . . . Mrs. Branch had an old-model car, and she was a beautiful lady. She would take in girls, women really, like if a girl had a baby out of wedlock, Mrs. Branch would take them in. And keep them 'til the baby was like two or three years old or something. And that was her, that was just her love. That was just her thing she would do. And . . . she was just kindly, you know. I always thought about that . . . She was from Texas originally, and . . . she married a black man, and . . . they had come to Quindaro in like, uh, 1929 or something. My mother was born in 1919 . . . She was saying how they decided where they wanted to live . . . Quindaro had their own hospital. [And] she wanted to be a nurse, and I think you could be a nurse in about six months, so she went . . . to Western University, [and] she became a nurse. But she said that she watched all of the people move in and come from different places, [and] she raised [other] people’s kids.”—Sylvia Fulbright

7. Fulbright.
“[Farming] was another part of African Kansas City, Kansas, history that has been omitted. There were black farmers owning land in the Sardoo area. There is an area in Kansas City, Kansas, [as] matter of fact, we used to go visit just to buy fruits and vegetables there. These farmers were still [prominent] three or four generations later. . . . And they had their little fruit stands and vegetable stands. But the stories link to them. And when they first came to Quindaro, they were farmers. This was a prominent group of people . . . who . . . became very financially stable because of their agricultural background as slaves, and then they were able to use those crafts and those skills in their life as freemen. . . . [I] believe it was in 2008, he would’ve been in his nineties. This man, his name was Mr. Johnson, and I’m telling you, this man acted as if he were fifty or sixty years old. Baffling. But he would tell the stories of these black farming entrepreneurs. And he was able to . . . tell the stories of how they were able to feed their families and the community and how they were able to establish their livelihood. . . . But they’re kind of forgotten. . . . One day . . . he was . . . selling fruit and vegetables, and we were wondering if we could get more, and he said, ‘Well, why don’t you just come over to my land?’ And I said, ‘Excuse me?’ and he began to tell us about how he’s been farming for years, and we went over to see his property, and we were like ‘Oh, my goodness’—he had hogs and chickens and . . . vegetables and fruits. . . . I mean, he was almost ninety when he was doing all this on his own. That time in history of farmers and what they contribute is kind of leaving us as a culture, so he . . . gave us the key to his fence [and] told us to come take whatever we want, we could just pay monthly, and we were good to go. I’d never seen anything like that before, but . . . we took advantage of it.

“[Students] didn’t have a lot of African American teachers, so for me to come into the community to work with them and teach them, not only about their heritage but give them encouragement to do something about their future, I believe that was . . . a success. In the community center, they were consistently working and following up with some of those kids we also worked with. They called it the twenty-first-century community workers. We went through a program, it was through the Kauffman Center, I believe . . . who funded it, and we, as teachers and African American community leaders, we came together to do some [problem solving]. And so through that, they were going into the schools . . . to bridge the gap [for] these students who were falling into the cracks, you know, not being successful in school. But the main focus was to connect them to community leaders to help them and feed them portraits of . . . successful [African American leaders]. . . . I’m just going to be very truthful. They looked at African American—black male—students as being unsuccessful. They labeled them as uneducated . . . they were either going to be selling drugs or dead or in jail, and so for that reason, I took this flame to destroy that thinking. . . . [Some] African American males were extremely successful, and . . . many of them became historical people, but there’s so few in the eyes of a teenager. They don’t understand, and that’s why it’s such a passion for me because they can at least know their past and know what their people did. Because when I walk down Kansas City, Kansas, streets, and I looked at these neighborhoods and these people, I’m going, ‘Oh, my God, you mean to tell me there were doctors, there were lawyers in this area.’ And now of course it’s a crime-ridden area, and the way that it looks . . . you wouldn’t think so. . . . If you [can] look at what someone did beyond their odds [and] overcame, it fuels you and encourages you. It empowers you to want to do it; make a change in your life . . . speaking from an African American point of view.”—LaDawndra Robbs

“Jesse Hope [had] just passed away . . . He would sit in a rocking chair and talk about . . . his ancestors [who] had been there. A story had been . . . handed down to him [about] the first settlers, uh, African American settlers in the area after the Civil War . . . He had a . . . relation that was a slave . . . [and] he was very fast. He . . . was the fastest runner, which made the slave owners very nervous . . . but he was a very good worker, and he was very dedicated. He didn’t cause any trouble. He was a very . . . hardworking, ‘perfect’ slave, if you will. But he was very fast, and that made them nervous. And so he was so ‘loyal,’ if you will in quotes, to his master. The definition of ‘perfect slave’ is of course an oxymoron, but the point I’m trying to make . . . and that Jesse was trying to make was that he would always do what his master told him to do. He didn’t cause any trouble . . . One day [his master] asked him [to] . . . show what would happen to anybody who tried to escape. And he had to be the model slave for this. So [the master] put him in the middle of a field and basically told him, ‘Now, you’re gonna have to run from my dogs, and you—there’s a tree, and I want you to climb—get in that tree so the dogs can’t get you. But this is going to be timed perfectly so the dogs are just gonna miss your heels, and you’re gonna run up in the tree to

keep from . . . being torn up by my dogs and . . . getting chewed up by them.’ [This involved] running towards the river, where you would cross . . . [to] go over to . . . the Kansas side. [The master] didn’t want them escaping to the Kansas side. . . . He didn’t make it. So the dogs pretty much chewed one of his legs off. And . . . the master felt so bad about it that he trained him to become a cobbler. So after the Civil War, he became the most famous shoe-maker in Quindaro and made a living selling shoes and as a cobbler. . . . That was the career and tradition that was handed down to his family.”—Curtis Smith

“I had a vision. The vision was . . . really quick. A real glimpse. [There] was a young man [who] had gotten out of a boat, and he was running. He had no shoes on his feet. There were some people behind him that . . . we call now ‘slave catchers.’ And they eventually did catch him, but the vision was gone before I could get any more detail. And I was facing the riverfront when I saw this vision, and it just, I was like in shock. . . . Even though at the time of the vision I didn’t have a lot of background knowledge about Quindaro, as time went on [I learned the history]. . . . So you can understand now why I’m fueled and the fires never quit burning . . . [as] a teacher . . . to connect the dots [between] American history, world history, and black history.”—LaDawndra Robbs

“So when the landfill was proposed, [as] a family, we really felt it as an injury. In fact, my parents were a part of the original lawsuit . . . trying to stop the landfill. Of
course, it didn’t work; the lawsuit didn’t work. But I had just returned to Kansas City from living on [the] East Coast, and I took a personal affront to the landfill . . . situation, and I just decided that [it] was going to be a project for me. Originally, what I knew I could . . . do was make a quilt, and so I did . . . I made the Quindaro quilt . . . because there were no images of anything [that] happened in Quindaro history . . . especially in the old history with the Indians and the Underground Railroad. And [the] people who proposed the landfill refused to acknowledge that the Underground Railroad actually existed. It was part of our family history; it was part of the history of the community. Even when I attended Quindaro school, there were people who came from here, from downtown. Mrs. Crosskey is one I remember distinctly because she came each year, and she talked about her family . . . who had . . . a business in Quindaro and talked about the Underground Railroad and talked about the school and about how people were really proud of the whole idea of the Native Americans and Africans and white people all working together for a common goal. So that’s always been an important part of my life, and . . . when I made the quilt, I included images that reflected all of that and took the quilt around the state to testify at the various hearings. And interestingly enough, it started me quilting again. My family [has] lifelong quilters on both sides, but I didn’t like to do it. But this made me do it again, especially with the reaction that I got from the quilt. In fact, when the law went into effect, Joan Finney was governor then, she came to Kansas City to sign the law . . . that prevented landfills on navigable streams in Kansas, and she came and she signed that law in front of my quilt. So you know, that really, really gave me a realization that this family art form was an important kind of thing, and I’ve been doing it ever since . . . It took eight years to get the law in effect. There were two lawsuits, and both
of them failed. There was constant demonstration against the landfill. My family was always part of that. My dad, he would just sort of stand off to the side and make sure nothing bad happened to us. . . . That was a job for our family every day . . . we would testify or picket somebody. That’s in my blood now.”—Nedra Bonds

“We went out to the ruins last year, and a Mexican family lives in the last house before the ruins, and they were having a wedding at the ruins. . . . And at first we didn’t like it. ‘They’re having a party,’ you know. . . . It wasn’t racism, but it was like ‘Don’t they know what this place is?’ And we got over it real quick ’cause we’re silly. . . . But we thought it was more sacred to us, and they didn’t know where they were. . . . I [can] still feel how I felt when I saw them there . . . celebrating. . . . I had no reason to feel that way other than I must have felt like that was a sacred spot or something.”—Sylvia Fulbright

“African American students . . . made up a small percentage, maybe 7 percent or 8 percent, it was very low, and I began to share with them [the history of the area], and of course a lot of them [and] their parents didn’t know [any of it]. . . . It was very surprising. And that’s when I started really talking to community people. . . . As an educator, I feel obligated to make sure that that story is told. It was very disheartening to see so many of our African American students who were disconnected from their past. Some of them I met [had] ancestors [connected to the] Quindaro ruins, but they knew little about it. It was, you know, like ‘My grandmother talked about it all the time, but it’s boring. . . .’ That’s kinda their thoughts.”—LaDawndra Robbs

Quindaro’s Future

“I was working with community programs to help our students connect [to] their history. And I do believe Marvin [Robinson] is still doing some things like that in the community. . . . It’s not a big deal to [students] . . . but putting on the plays and beginning to expose them to who they are . . . [this] lost time of history is what intrigues me the most. It has to be done . . . with my students today in high school, when they grumble or when they are complaining, I find a way to turn them to the reality today [and] why history is so important.”—LaDawndra Robbs

“I would like to see something built down the middle, like . . . even if it’s asphalt. A way to get down and back easy. And maybe . . . put a sign up, if they can figure out what was in each of [the ruins]. . . . The railroad tracks screwed it up. Because it went through the edge of the town. I mean, there was town north of these railroad tracks, all the way to the river. And now that’s just woods. So you don’t know what was there. I think you could probably get a map of what the town looked like.”—Frank Hursh

“Thank you for taking the time . . . to do this project. I think it’s important for . . . people to . . . remember their history, and I think down the road someday, people will appreciate it more. I’m really quite thrilled that I have . . . this opportunity to be involved with it, even though I’m a Truman . . . Grandview Missourian.”—Curtis Smith

“I’d like to see them keep the buildings that are still there. . . . You know, do what they can to make it attractive enough for people, feel safe enough for people to come in and visit the ruins. . . . Right now . . . people [can’t get] down there. It’s sad to say . . . Make it attractive. Most people will follow history if you just point it out to them. I love history.”—Robert Laskey

“I would really like for there to be more than just a landmark, you know, I would like for there to be a facility where people could come and have meetings and study and talk . . . especially about racial issues. There were racial issues all of the time because it was an all-black, well, it was an all-Indian town, then it was an all-black school, and the statue of John Brown being there, and there are reasons, and people need to talk about why all of that happened. People need to know that slaves crossed the river right there at Quindaro from Parkville. There’s still a marker of the slave market in Parkville right across the river, and we need to have these discussions because we lose sight of why things are the way they are today. So you know, we really need to have a place where it’s safe [and] people can sit and talk about this.”—Nedra Bonds

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