

We Shall Overcome

In the years following World War I, the inner section of 18th Street and Vine in Kansas City became one of the most famous street corners in the world. The area around 18th and Vine had long been a center for the black community, but in the 1920's and 1930's the district flourished. The town was wide-open; night clubs stayed open until morning. One of the draws was jazz. A new style of jazz, which took the hot rhythms of New Orleans and added innovation, solos, experimentation. The new Kansas City sound poured out of night clubs up and down the street. The country's most dynamic musicians were here, innovators of this most American form of music. Exploring, learning, collaborating, they were inventing Kansas City jazz. It was a wild exciting time in the history of our country and it happened right here, in Kansas City, at 18th and Vine.

In the 1920's large numbers of African-Americans began moving to Kansas City. Segregation laws of the time kept them from living or shopping in the downtown area, so they moved here, around the corner of 18th and Vine.

Music.

It was the place where black men and women could live, eat and shop. There were doctors, newspapers and a baseball team—the Kansas City Monarchs.

Socially, the district flourished as well. Dances and nightclubs drew talented musicians from around the country. It was this concentration of creative energy that led to a totally new musical style—Kansas City jazz.

Today, the 18th and Vine district is home to museums and cultural centers that celebrate the contributions of black culture to American life. Let's take a look!

The key to understanding Kansas City jazz is the sound, and the American Jazz Museum has lots of ways to listen. Studio 18th and Vine allows you to mix your own music. You can bring up the rhythm section or the reeds. There's the Jazz Discovery Room that allows younger kids a chance to play around with the creative elements that make music so fun. And there are exhibits featuring four jazz greats: Louie Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Charlie Parker. Also within this complex is the Negro League's Baseball Museum which celebrates the outstanding achievements of black athletes for over forty years, particularly 18th and Vine's home team—the Kansas City Monarchs. Together the museums at 18th and Vine present a vivid of African-American artists and athletes. It's fitting that here, in a district created by the segregation of the past, we're able to celebrate the remarkable achievements of the individuals who lived through those times.

This is the Blue Room. By day, it's a part of the American Jazz Museum. By night, it's a swinging jazz club featuring today's hottest jazz musicians. It's decorated as it would have been in the 1930's when joints like this lined 18th Street. In the late 1930's, the 18th and Vine district was at its peak, but the segregation of the black population into this small area, was still in effect. African-American's couldn't live in downtown buildings, couldn't shop in downtown stores; it was the same story throughout the state. Though the Civil War had abolished slavery, black Americans still faced enormous injustice. Across the state, in Missouri's bootheel region, some individuals were beginning to band together to protest this injustice.

On a cold Tuesday morning, January 10th of 1939, hundreds of sharecroppers began setting up camps along the highways near Sikeston, Missouri. For generations, these tenant farmers had worked fields owned by white land owners. But changes in agriculture, including new government farm policies, and increased mechanization, had led to the eviction of these tenant farmers. Without homes or work, many soon faced starvation. Conditions in the boot heel were becoming intolerable. Enter the Reverend Owen Whitfield.

Whitfield was a sharecropper from near Charlestown, Missouri. He'd been involved with the labor movement for several years and he had the experience and the motivation to organize a demonstration. Weeks of meetings with sharecroppers throughout the boot heel region led to a common strategy. Move to the highways on January 10th to bring the conditions of the sharecroppers into the public eye. Whitfield had done his job well. Hundreds of people moved to the highways to protest their plight. The local populous was shocked. They didn't believe the local sharecroppers were capable of staging the demonstration. They blamed outside agitators and demanded the sharecroppers removal. But the demonstrators had gotten their message out. Extensive newspaper coverage of the sharecroppers plight led to public outcry. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed a man named Aubry Williams to investigate. Williams report back to the President summed up the challenges presented by the demonstration.

This situation, serious as it is for the individual families and the communities in which they are located, is even more serious as a symptom of the widespread situation existing throughout the South. It has been conservatively estimated that at least a quarter of a million families are being forced off farms in the South this year.

William's report echoed the Missouri response to the sharecroppers' demonstration. State officials forced the demonstrators off the highways and the participants drifted out of the public view. Some moved into vacant buildings offered by land owners to prevent any federal assistance, and ensure a ready supply of day labor. Others continued to live in primitive conditions, often behind a levy, out of sight, out of mind. But the legacy of these courageous men and women continued. Organization, resistance, camaraderie, devotion to a cause, elements that became common themes in the civil rights struggles to come had their foundation in the sharecropper camps of the Missouri boot heel.

Following the second World War, the character of the 18th and Vine district began to change. Though the jazz scene remained vibrant, new opportunities led many individuals to other parts of the city. Returning veterans would no longer tolerate the segregation of the past. In both Kansas City and St. Louis, black Missourians began to stand up and demand their rights.

I have a dream. That one day, this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.

Martin Luther King's dream meant a lot to Ivory Perry. A veteran of the Korean War, he had long been involved with the civil rights movement as a leader and an organizer. In 1963, this St. Louis Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, as it was called, demanded that Jefferson Bank in St. Louis hire black tellers. They threatened a boycott and public protest though the bank obtained a restraining order prohibiting protests outside the building, Ivory Perry and the other members of CORE, kept up the pressure with fund raising, marches and demonstrations. Arrested several times, Perry refused to be silenced. On one occasion, he stopped downtown traffic by lying under the wheels of a city bus. The campaign against discrimination at Jefferson Bank was a success. In March of 1964 the bank hired its first black tellers. Other banks followed suit. In the months that followed, more than 80 blacks were hired by the banking industry in St. Louis.

What happens when a dream dies? Following Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, the frustration and anger felt by many black Missourians was taken to the streets with direct confrontation and violent protest. In Kansas City, the protest began when black students demonstrated against the cities failing to close the schools in honor of Dr. King. They were dispersed with tear gas. Nightfall brought reports of people throwing fire bombs at police. The governor called out the National Guard and the entire 900 man force of the Kansas City Police were put on duty. The rioting escalated. Seven people were killed and scores were injured as police and National Guardsmen exchanged fire with snipers. Did the violence of 1968 mean King's dream had come to an end, or was it only just the beginning?

This is the Gem Theater, built in 1912 as a movie house for African Americans, it stands today as a totally renovated center for cultural activities and the performing arts. Called by many the “Jewel” of the 18th and Vine district, it’s a fitting symbol of a city rediscovering its history. In the 1990’s, the city of Kansas City, Missouri, committed substantial resources into the redevelopment of the 18th and Vine district. Throughout the state, communities are banding together to preserve their heritage. Case in point, the Lincoln School in Vandalia, Missouri.

Most of these people are alumnus of Lincoln School. And, they have a reunion every two years. It’s an effort to save Lincoln School and we’re trying to secure funds and raise funds to purchase it and put it—it’s already on the Historical Register—but then to restore it.

In 1927, the Lincoln School was built in Vandalia. Built with bricks donated by the local brick company, on land donated by local black residents, the Lincoln school was the heart of Vandalia’s black community. Segregation laws of the era demanded that blacks and whites be educated in different facilities, and the black community took great effort to create a school they could be proud of. A school where everyone would receive a good education. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in schools was illegal. In less than a year, the Lincoln School was closed. Its students were transferred to previously all white schools. Today, the Lincoln School building sits in the center of a junkyard. Old car parts litter the classrooms. The playground no longer rings with the sound of children laughing, but the story doesn’t end here. The former students of Lincoln School are banding together to buy the old building and create a community center. Lincoln School, created from the legacy of segregation, is still an important part of Missouri Heritage.

I think from a historical perspective, it’s good for people to know what’s happened in our lives, and when it comes to Lincoln School, lots of us have had some real benefit from that. I got a great education there, I got a great education that helped me go onto high school and into college, and it’s all because of Lincoln School.

Kansas City jazz and the 18th and Vine district. It’s a part of your Missouri heritage.