
From 'The Bottoms' to the Top: Jazz Musician Wilbur (Buck) Clayton and Segregated Life in Parsons, Kansas

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The following paper uses jazz musician Wilbur “Buck” Clayton’s early twentieth-century childhood in Parsons, Kansas, as a lens of comparison to situate racial segregation in Kansas within the larger context of the more familiar Jim Crow of the American South. The essay argues that, while pervasive and harmful racial segregation existed in Kansas, it manifested differently and with more flexibility than other entrenched Jim Crow structures. This greater malleability allowed Black residents of Parsons to navigate and push the boundaries of Kansas segregation, working within its gray areas to create opportunities for themselves and their children. Buck Clayton’s childhood experiences demonstrate the existence of regional variations of segregation and the adaptable character of systemic racism, while illustrating how Black communities challenged these systems. Additionally, this essay highlights the importance of illuminating the often-ignored stories of Black residents in smaller midwestern communities.

KEYWORDS: Wilbur “Buck” Clayton, segregation, Midwest, Parsons, Kansas, Jim Crow

ONE EVENING IN THE 1920S, Black teenager Wilbur “Buck” Clayton (b. 1911) was walking through his hometown of Parsons, Kansas, when he heard through a house’s open window, a radio playing jazz music. Buck, a future jazz great, stood enthralled on the sidewalk listening to several songs. A police car stopping nearby interrupted his listening as multiple officers jumped out and ran toward him. Recognizing one of the officers as “Peek-a-Boo,” a nickname prompted by his constant harassment of youngsters, Buck

instinctively took off running and soon was outdistancing Peek-a-Boo and the other officers.

As he escaped down Main Street, Buck ran into his minister father returning home from escorting his wife to a PTA meeting. Mr. Clayton was chastising his son for running down the street when Peek-a-Boo caught up, grabbed Buck by the collar, and took him to jail. While locked in a cell, Buck explained he was not a prowler and was simply listening to music from the sidewalk. Police officers eventually released Buck to his father because, in his words, “they found out that I was from a respectful family and was an Eagle Scout in the Boy Scout troop.”¹ In the racially segregated world of Parsons, Kansas in the 1920s, Buck Clayton’s Blackness and youth automatically made him a suspect, but a malleable version of segregation also provided space for the politics of respectability to sometimes ameliorate the harsher aspects of Jim Crow.

Kansas, like much of the north, was not immune to segregation, but the flexibility of segregation in Kansas also provided opportunities that did not exist in the Jim Crow South. Using Buck Clayton’s childhood in Parsons as a lens, this essay situates racial segregation in Kansas within the larger context of the more familiar Jim Crow of the American South. While Clayton is best known for his achievements in jazz, this essay focuses on how his formative years in Parsons reveal both the limitations and openings of racial segregation in a smaller midwestern community. The son of Texans who moved to Kansas in the nineteenth century, Clayton went on to international fame as a trumpet player, music arranger, and band leader. In addition to a distinguished career playing and recording with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holliday, and others, Clayton also appeared in Hollywood films and helped popularize jazz in Asia by leading a band in Shanghai, China before World War II. After leaving Parsons as a young man, Clayton returned often to visit family and friends, making his final visit in 1987, just a few years before his death.²

By shifting attention to Clayton’s youth, this study aims to illuminate how the experiences of Black Kansans challenge simplified regional narratives of segregation and expand our understanding of Black life outside the South.

¹ Buck Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 22-23.

² Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World*, 11-29; Parsons, *KS Sun*, December 12, 1991.

For example, Buck Clayton was an Eagle Scout, but his Boy Scout troop was segregated, organized through the Douglass School—the school for Black elementary-age students in Parsons during Buck’s childhood. However, while segregated, the Douglass troop was not totally excluded. Local newspapers covered the Douglass troop similarly to their coverage of white Boy Scout troops, and the Douglass troop participated in events alongside white troops from Parsons. One story from 1922 describes a Boy Scout parade in which forty Boy Scouts from Douglass participated. The parade was composed of “big boys and little, white boys and colored,” and after the parade, the scouts “swarmed into the grand stand” at Marvel Park to enjoy lunch together, then participated in songs and games until dark.³ Four years later, in a story headlined “Boy Scouts Had Big Time at Camp Diggs,” a newspaper reported that fourteen-year-old Clayton won a merit badge for swimming while part of an eight-day camping trip with an interracial group of Boy Scouts.⁴

That same year, Clayton was listed as a winner of a poster contest while representing the academically integrated West Junior High School. Black students from the Douglass School were also listed alongside students from the white elementary schools in the elementary school poster contest: Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Washington.⁵ In Parsons, during Buck Clayton’s school years, the district’s 6-4-4 model meant students in kindergarten through 6th grade attended segregated elementary schools. They then matriculated to one of the two junior high schools (grades 7-10), then to Parsons High (grades 11-12), which shared a building with Parsons Junior College. The junior highs and the high school were somewhat integrated, with Black students allowed to enroll and attend class but not participate in extracurricular activities, including sports and choir. In those activities, they participated through Douglass, competing against other Black schools in the area. After Buck Clayton left Parsons, in response to racism in the junior high schools and high school, Douglass’s principal requested that the Douglass School expand through 10th grade. Douglass School, in the words of one scholar, provided its students “a strong foundation of pride and self-worth” the principal and teachers knew would be assaulted when their students left the tight knit community of Douglass. Douglass School students developed the capacity to survive and thrive in a hostile world. Parsons,

³ The Parsons *Daily Republican*, May 18, 1922.

⁴ The Parsons *Daily Sun*, July 16, 1926.

⁵ The Parsons *Daily Sun*, November 19, 1926.

Kansas Black citizens were cautious, and understood the limitations racial segregation placed on their lives, but they never lived in fear of violence.”⁶ While the statement “never lived in fear of violence” overstates the case, it does reflect a sense of physical security Black citizens of Parsons had that perhaps differs from those living under Jim Crow in other places.

This essay utilizes contemporary newspapers, Clayton’s autobiography, accounts from Black Parsons citizens, and scholarship focusing on segregation in Kansas and the Midwest to explore segregation in Parsons during the first half of the twentieth century. Building on the work of historians Nell Irvin Painter, Rusty Monhollon and Kristen Tegtmeir Oertel, Randall Woods, Clarence Lang, Mary Dudziak, James Leiker, and others, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of segregation in both Kansas and the broader Midwest. This argument does not minimize the abhorrent nature of racial segregation nor seek to diminish the harm caused by white supremacy in Kansas. It does, however, seek to complicate the too-simplistic argument that flattens racial segregation across regions. Additionally, it rebuts the false binary of a Jim Crow South and a racially neutral North and Midwest.

Answering Orville Vernon Burton’s call for historians to show how regionality affects how race operates, Clarence Lang argues, “the characteristics of white racism have varied across temporal and spatial contexts and regional differences in black-white relations were stark and fundamental.”⁷ In challenging the artificial binary of a reactionary, racist south and a progressive north, historians argued for reducing the differences in regions to understand racism as a national phenomenon. This was an important step in historiography; however, this understanding also has its problems. While not discounting racism’s national impact or nationwide Black freedom efforts, Lang makes a persuasive case for the “continued necessity of regional specificity in Black Freedom Movement histories,” effectively threading the needle between southern racial exceptionalism and a nationwide Jim Crow system without distinction.⁸ Lang contends it is possible to “identify fundamental historical differences between ‘north’ and ‘south’ in a manner that does *not* buttress a

⁶ Jean Patterson, “Segregation and Desegregation in Parsons, Kansas: Memories of Douglass School 1908-1958—Narrative of Marietta Smith,” in Noblitt, Ed., *School Desegregation*, 51-55.

⁷ Clarence Lang, “Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest, and Border South in Black Freedom Studies,” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 373.

⁸ Lang, “Locating,” 373.

simplistic regional binary in civil rights history, locate anti-black racism only in the South,” or “downplay the existence of institutionalized racism north of the Mason-Dixon line.”⁹ Lang effectively uses St. Louis, Missouri as a case study to explore his argument. Kansas, with its “free state” past during its Bleeding Kansas era and centrality to civil rights history, also provides an important lens to understand racial segregation outside of the South and illustrate the regional differences of white supremacy.

In writing about the experiences of Black migrants who moved from the South to the “Promised Land” of Kansas in the years after Reconstruction, Nell Irvin Painter stated, “By 1900 Blacks in Kansas were generally, if not overwhelmingly, more prosperous than their counterparts in the South; politically they were enormously better off. Although they might not enjoy their civil rights to the extent that white Kansans did, they were far freer and less discriminated against than were their peers in the South. Kansas was no Canaan, but it was a far cry from Mississippi and Louisiana.”¹⁰ Successfully fleeing from political, social, and economic oppression and racist violence in the South, in Kansas, Black Americans found new levels of freedom but also faced discrimination in their daily lives.¹¹ Jim Crow was more deeply embedded and widespread in the South, and civil rights for Black Kansans were curtailed, but this does not tell the entire story. Explicating the distinctions between the Jim Crow segregation of the Deep South and the racial segregation of the Midwest and North provides us with an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the nuances of how racism operates throughout the United States.

The essential argument of this essay is that, while harmful and damaging racial segregation existed in Parsons, it manifested differently and with more flexibility than the entrenched Jim Crow structures of the South. This greater malleability allowed Black residents of Parsons to navigate and push the boundaries of Kansas segregation, working within its gray areas to create opportunities for themselves and their children. Buck Clayton’s childhood experiences demonstrate how regional variations shaped Black life in Parsons and highlight the persistent, adaptable character of systemic racism.

⁹ Lang, “Locating,” 373.

¹⁰ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 260.

¹¹ Aldon Morris, “A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 518.

In trying to understand the nuances of northern and midwestern segregation, especially in comparison to the Jim Crow of the South, there is a risk of downplaying the harmful effects of white supremacy outside of the South. Historian Tiya Miles provides an enlightening example of how to describe these nuances and distinguish systems of racism across regions without minimizing the harmful nature of white supremacy. In her National Book Award-winning book, *All That She Carried*, Miles speaks of her grandmother's leaving the South, writing that she married young and migrated, "out of the jaws of the Jim Crow South and into the teeth of the segregated North."¹² As evidenced by her imagery, Miles rightly does not diminish the effects of northern segregation but does delineate between it and Southern Jim Crow.

No common phrase adequately describes midwestern segregation, and using the term "Jim Crow" to describe segregation in Kansas can obscure the different ways segregation operated across regions. Because of Kansas's antebellum self-image as a "Free State," in opposition to the slaveholding South, a tension existed in Kansas between the full implementation of white supremacy and segregation and the promise of a more equitable society.¹³ Of course, Kansas did not achieve this equitable society; it was not a reality, but instead an illusion of white Kansans constructed for themselves.¹⁴ However, within this tension, segregation in Kansas had a flexibility that Black Kansans utilized to build community institutions and create opportunities, while still challenging inequality and working to eliminate racist barriers.

Kansas, proud of its abolitionist history, but also possessing a history of anti-Blackness, created a system encompassing aspects of both. Mary Dudziak, a legal scholar, argues that in "Kansas, civil rights and segregation were compatible concepts, and the state-maintained laws which permitted segregation in some aspects of public life, yet prohibited it in others," creating a "middle ground" of segregation in this most middle of states.¹⁵ Historians Randall Woods and James Leiker position segregation in Kansas

¹² Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, (Random House, 2022), 11.

¹³ Brent M.S. Campney, "This is Not Dixie: The Imagined South, the Kansas Free State Narrative, and Racist Violence," September 6, 2007, <https://southernspaces.org/2007/not-dixie-imagined-south-kansas-free-state-narrative-and-rhetoric-racist-violence/>.

¹⁴ James N. Leiker, "Imagining the Free State: A 150-Year History of a Contested Image," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*, 34 (Spring 2011): 44.

¹⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, "The Limits of Good Faith: Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1950-1956," *Law and History Review* 5 (Fall 1987): 352-353.

within a western context as well as a northern one, with Woods explicating the difference between the outright “exclusion” of Southern Jim Crow segregation, full integration, and the system adopted in Kansas. He writes, “Except in public schools in the larger cities and in the state militia for a period, legally mandated segregation and exclusion were nonexistent. While Kansans were willing, for the most part, to allow blacks access to facilities and institutions considered essential to the individual’s health and safety—on an integrated basis if necessary—they were not willing to condone ‘social equality,’ i.e. racial mixing in neighborhoods, places of amusement, churches, and fraternal societies” leading to a “parallel development” of institutions that took “separate but equal” more seriously than did the South.¹⁶ This “middle ground” segregation led to, in Leiker’s words, “some of the contradictions that would haunt Kansas for much of its history: tension between a commitment to blacks’ legal freedom and a hesitance to embrace the full realization of that freedom through the extension of political and social equality.”¹⁷

Former Parsons resident Andrew “Chip” Johnson, a generation younger than Buck Clayton, tried to explain what living in this “middle ground” segregation was like. He stated, repeating himself for emphasis, that Parsons, “had kind of a quasi-Jim Crow thing going here and it was accepted...It wasn’t as blatant as in the South. But it still existed. Growing up in Parsons in my early life, it was like quasi apartheid. It was a dual society, and it was accepted. A dual society. Apartheid. Yeah. It was apartheid. And we bought into it.”¹⁸ Johnson’s phrasing reinforces the harm caused by segregation in Parsons but also acknowledges the difference between segregation in Parsons and Southern Jim Crow.

Buck Clayton’s life in Parsons offers an opportunity to explore the delineation between north and south, as Tiya Miles describes and Chip Johnson experienced. Growing up in a politically active, middle-class Black family in a small, segregated Kansas town, Clayton was shaped by that environment. In addition to segregated schools, residential segregation was

¹⁶ Randall B. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The ‘Color Line’ in Kansas, 1878-1900,” *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 14, no. 2 (April 1983): 183; James N. Leiker, “Race Relations in the Sunflower State,” *Kansas History*, 25, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 225.

¹⁷ Leiker, “Race Relations,” 221.

¹⁸ Jean Patterson, “The Final Days of Douglass School: The Narrative of Andrew ‘Chip’ Johnson” in George Noblitt, Ed. *School Desegregation: Oral Histories Toward Understanding the Effects of White Domination*, (Sense Publishers, 2015), 81.

the norm in Parsons as well. Black residents also faced *de facto* segregation in many public accommodations, including public parks and movie theaters. Although Clayton came from a middle-class, “respectable” family, residential segregation placed his home near “The Bottoms,” the Black section of Parsons that contained gambling houses, brothels, music clubs, and other establishments.¹⁹

Buck Clayton does not dwell on segregation in his autobiography, describing a happy, carefree childhood; he also faced discrimination in Parsons. However, he also felt Parsons was a place of comparative safety compared to Southern states, even those near his hometown. A town of approximately 15,000 people in the 1920s, Parsons is in the southeast corner of Kansas, just a few miles from Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, all of which practiced Jim Crow segregation. Three experiences during his teenage years, two in Texas and one in Arkansas, showed Clayton firsthand the differences between Parsons and these other, more Southern Jim Crow places.

One year, Clayton and his high school classmate and bandmate, Schifford Garner, left home to play a dance gig in Bella Vista, Arkansas. Located just over the Missouri/Arkansas border in the Ozark hills southeast of Parsons, Bella Vista was geographically not far from Parsons but was a world away.²⁰ Excited by the promise of earning \$10 for an evening of playing music, the two Black teenagers did not consider the level of Jim Crow and threats of racist violence they would face in Arkansas. Hungry after the two-hour drive and wanting to eat before the gig, they walked into a restaurant in Bella Vista and sat down, unaware of the restaurant’s segregation. The proprietor immediately confronted the two, yelling, “Hey, you can’t sit in here. Get out of here and go in the back yard.” Outside, among stray dogs and mocking white patrons, restaurant workers put a wooden plank on top of two oil drums and told the teenagers to use that as their table. Angry and humiliated, and enduring the taunts of white people cawing like crows, the two refused to eat. In Clayton’s words, the Kansans were “pretty mad” but did not respond because “Arkansas was a pretty mean state in those days. There were no civil rights, and black people were still being lynched.”²¹

¹⁹ “Swat Undesirable Negroes, With Rest,” *The Parsons Daily Sun*, February 4, 1915; Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World*, 34.

²⁰ In his autobiography, Clayton states it was 1929, but the venue did not open until 1930. Nearly sixty years after the event, perhaps he was off by a year.

²¹ Buck Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 24.

To avoid further incident (and perhaps a lynching), the concert promoter picked up the two young musicians and drove them to the gig, held at Wonderland Cave, "The Largest Natural Place of Amusement in America."²² Underground, a space approximately 300 feet from the cave entrance was large enough to contain a dance floor, bar, and stone stage for musicians. However, a long winding staircase was the only way in and out, leaving no room for escape in an emergency. In Clayton's telling, the crowd of hundreds of "real Ozark hillbillies," drunk on moonshine, became increasingly rowdy and threatening as the night continued, and began breaking the venue's light bulbs and threatening the Black musicians. When Clayton refused to answer a drunk patron who repeatedly called him "boy," the man and his friends promised to find Clayton after the show and "beat hell out of" him. As the show ended, the mob stayed late into the night, congregating at the entrance, ready to attack Clayton and his bandmates. The promoter kept the band underground, waiting for hours until the last of the mob finally drifted away, and it was safe to go back upstairs. After saying goodbye to the local musicians, Clayton and Garner told themselves, "To hell with Bella Vista, Arkansas. You can have it." In Clayton's words, they "wasted no time in getting back to Parsons," carrying with them the reminder of the severity of a type of Jim Crow that existed just a short drive from their Kansas home.²³ Parsons was also racially segregated, but as Clayton implies, it provided safety from the kind of segregation and violence they faced in Arkansas.

Two, perhaps even more dangerous situations, occurred in Texas for Clayton not long after the Arkansas experience. Bored with Parsons and longing to go to California, Clayton and his friend Jack Medlock decided to hobo on trains to California to visit their friend in Los Angeles. After accidentally hopping on a southbound train in Colorado instead of a westbound one, they found themselves in the middle of the night in a rural Texas town. A carload of white men found the teenagers hiding in the outskirts of town, accused them of rape, and held them in the basement of the railroad station. There, the men forced Clayton and Medlock to do a "Buck dance" for hours while threatening to lynch them. Fortunately, after hours of threats, the men instead took Clayton and Medlock to the town limits, telling them to "get

²² *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, "Wonderland Cave," <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/wonderland-cave-332/>.

²³ Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, 24-25.

the Hell out of here.” Relieved, the teenagers made their escape back toward Colorado and on to California.²⁴

After a few months in Los Angeles, Clayton was returning to Parsons alone on a Greyhound bus. He writes, “when I got on the bus everything was peaches and pie. Everybody was so friendly. I got a nice seat near the front and I quickly became friends with two little white boys about my age...but I found out later that my ticket to Kansas was through a southern route that took me down into Texas, then up to Oklahoma and then on into Kansas.” Talking about his two new “friends,” Clayton says, “They became less and less friendly and when I had to go take a seat in the back of the bus when we got to the state of Texas, they became almost hostile.” At their bus stop in Texas, where Clayton was going to catch his train to Kansas, the boys threatened to kill him, and he responded angrily, exiting the bus by the back door and breaking the windows when he slammed the door. Threatened with arrest by “another redneck station policeman,” Clayton tried to make his way into the bus station but accidentally walked into the “Whites Only” waiting room, prompting another threat of arrest. At this point, Clayton writes, “I thought, ‘for God’s sake, please hurry and get me back to Kansas.’ Finally, after waiting a little while, the train for Kansas came and I got on it and I was almost as glad to get on it as I was to get out of that small town in Texas.”²⁵

Parsons, which in many ways embodies the tension between freedom and segregation, was founded in 1871 as a site for offices and repair shops for the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas (MKT—“Katy”) railroad, and the railroad provided job opportunities for newly-arrived Black residents.²⁶ Within eight years of Parsons’s founding, there was already a significant Black population, a result of the “Exoduster” movement from Mississippi and Louisiana and the “Texodusters” arriving from Texas.²⁷ Buck Clayton’s family is illustrative of this movement—his father, Simeon Oliver (S.O.) Clayton was from Rockwall, Texas, and his mother, Aritha Anne Dorsey, was born in Stonewall County,

²⁴ Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World*, 33.

²⁵ Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World*, 32-33.

²⁶ V.V. Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier*, (The University of Missouri Press, 1988), 95-96.

²⁷ Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas 1879-1880*, (The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), 188-193; Bryan M. Jack, *The Saint Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*, (The University of Missouri Press, 2007), 6-8.

Texas in 1876 and moved to Parsons as a young child.²⁸ Although there had been Black residents of Labette County before the Exodusters' arrival, the new Parsons residents, particularly the arrivals from Texas, formed the foundation for a thriving Black community in Parsons that continues today.²⁹ The year before Buck Clayton was born, the 1910 census shows 999 Black residents out of the community's total population of 12,463. Proportionally, Parsons had over twice as many Black residents (8%) as Kansas overall (3%).³⁰

By the time Buck Clayton was born, the Black community in Parsons was already well-established, with multiple churches and Black-owned businesses, including restaurants and barber shops. Black workers held numerous positions with the Katy railroad, as well as skilled trades like plumbers, carpenters, and brick masons. Parsons's (partially segregated) schools educated Black students, and there was a thriving assortment of Black fraternal organizations. Although it was defunct before his birth, previously Parsons had a Black newspaper, the *Parsons Blade*, with Buck's father, S.O., working as the paper's first editor from 1892 to 1894. After leaving that position, S.O. became an officer with the Parsons Police Department, serving from 1894 to 1896, meaning Parsons had a Black police officer more than twenty years before nearby Tulsa, Oklahoma.³¹

The system of segregation in Parsons was not as all-encompassing as segregation in places further south; Black residents of Parsons could vote, hold office, and had more employment opportunities than places with more comprehensive Jim Crow systems. The newspapers in Parsons included coverage of events in Parsons's Black community from a mostly neutral basis, including using honorifics for Black men and women, although also regularly denoting their race. A 1914 story in the *Parsons Sun*, headlined "Held Baby Contest," stated that toddler Buck Clayton was the second-tallest 2- to 3-year-old in the A.M.E. Church event, winning talcum powder and soap. The paper also reported "owing to the difficulty of making a decision,"

²⁸ Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, 11-12.

²⁹ Arnold Cooper, "'Protection to All, Discrimination to None': The *Parsons Weekly Blade*, 1892-1900," *Kansas History* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 59-61; Bryan M. Jack "The Bitter with the Sweet: African Americans in Parsons, Kansas," *Middle West Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 15-28.

³⁰ *Thirteenth Census of the United States (1910)*, Statistics for Kansas.

³¹ Cooper, "'Protection to All," 59, 61-62; Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, (Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 14.

the judges did not choose the prettiest baby.³² Eight years later, a different paper reported that “Wilbur Clayton son of Mr. and Mrs. S.O. Clayton” was “improving nicely” after falling out of a tree.³³

However, this veneer of somewhat equal treatment does not mean that the system of white supremacy in Parsons was not damaging to its Black residents. Marietta Smith, born in 1940, described feeling supported and loved within the Black community of Parsons, and says of her childhood, “at least at our age, we didn’t really care that much about participating with the white folks doing anything. Therefore, we were happy, comfortable in our situation.” Yet, she also discusses the daily indignities in Parsons as well. “Most of our fathers were Pullman porters and they would run from Parsons to Texas and all that. And my mother used to cook at the Katy Station and she could cook but she couldn’t feed her husband. She could not give him food. The Black porters could not go into the kitchen to get a meal. This was one of those things.” Another of “those things” was the segregated movie theatres. Smith says, “if we wanted to go to the movies, we knew we had to sit upstairs, or at the municipal building, we had to sit upstairs. When I was coming up—we went to get a drink, we couldn’t get it in a glass. We had to have the plastic cup. And these were the things that were—the rules were there—and it didn’t bother us at all. Because we knew that we were not going to be restricted forever.”³⁴

Buck Clayton was only two generations removed from slavery, as both sets of his grandparents were enslaved. His parents were active in the social and political life of Parsons’s Black community, instilling in Clayton an awareness of racial identity and pride. Clayton’s mother, a schoolteacher and member of the NAACP, “was a freedom fighter from the day she was born,” who protested a segregated Parsons movie theater by sitting in the white section and refusing to move even after the police were called. His father “wrote many poems condemning prejudice,” and both parents “were equally involved in freedom for black people.”³⁵

Their civil rights activity and segregation in Parsons’s hotels meant many

³² The Parsons *Daily Sun*, August 24, 1914.

³³ The Parsons *Daily Republican*, October 12, 1922, 5.

³⁴ Patterson, “Segregation and Desegregation in Parsons, Kansas: Memories of Douglass School 1908-1958—Narrative of Marietta Smith,” 55-56.

³⁵ Clayton, *Buck Clayton’s Jazz World*, 13-14.

dignitaries stayed with the Claytons when traveling through Parsons. During Buck's childhood, his family hosted WEB DuBois as an overnight guest, and Roy Wilkins's father moved to Parsons and became close friends with S.O. Clayton. Parsons's location within driving distance to Topeka and Kansas City and halfway between those cities and Tulsa meant that, in addition to traveling musical acts bringing jazz to Parsons for one-night shows, Parsons residents could also participate in civil rights activity in the larger cities. As a youngster, Clayton was able to attend the Federation of American Negro Women's Convention in Topeka, where he sang with a quartet. At the convention, he served as Mary McLeod Bethune's fan attendant, a task that "really impressed" him "quite a bit."³⁶

In the more prosaic aspects of life, Buck's childhood was full of fun and opportunities for growth but was also limited by racial segregation. The Parsons newspapers frequently and positively mention Buck during his childhood, from his winning running races at field days to his musical performances in church and school, his participation in Boy Scouts, and his talent for drawing and painting. Additionally, the papers were supportive of his musical career after he left Parsons, featuring stories on his band's successes and his movie appearances, and his Army service during World War II. On the surface, it is a typical, small-town in early twentieth-century childhood. But looking below the surface tells a more complicated story. Buck Clayton attended a segregated school, was a member of a segregated Boy Scout Troop and Army unit, and some of his musical performances in Parsons were in support of minstrel acts. Growing up in this environment, with its duality of segregation and support, not only shaped Buck Clayton, someone with the talent and drive to achieve worldwide acclaim, but also shaped everyone in Parsons's vibrant, resilient Black community.

³⁶ Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, 14.

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