

AT LEISURE'S EDGE

A Radio Documentary by
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00:00 MUSIC: [M-1] ORGAN ROCK

00:05 HATTIE: Kentucky was a big place when I was a little girl. My grandpa told stories of wide rivers, rich farmlands, big cities, and black and white fences that zigzagged across the Bluegrass. He described places where tobacco and coal were kings, where bourbon was the drink of choice, and where horses fetched more money than what whole families could earn working their entire lives.

My grandpa did most everything a black man could do when he was younger. He worked the river in Owensboro, built roads in Louisville, and dug coal in the mountains. Today we would find that odd to work in so many different places --- to be so footloose. But back then, black folks were always on the move. He always said that it was harder to hit a moving target.

And for black folks that didn't move away to some great northern city --- for those us that decided to stay, we still moved. We moved ourselves on the inside, emotionally and spiritually, because if we didn't stir things up, nobody else would do it for us.

Fact was, the good 'ol days were not always so good --- life meant working, and work was hard --- but just like everywhere, when work was done, we always found time to play.

01:35 SOUND: HAUNTING CHILDREN PLAYING. FORESHADOWING.

01:44 HOST: All public parks established and maintained for the recreation, pleasure and welfare of the white population in cities of the second class shall be held, managed and controlled by a "Board of Park Commissioners (White)" of the city wherein the parks are located, and all public parks established and maintained for the recreation, pleasure and welfare of the colored population in cities of the second class shall be held, managed and controlled by a "Board of Park Commissioners (Colored)" of the city wherein the parks are located.

My Old Kentucky Home.

02:20 MUSIC: [M-2] ?UP AND UNDER THRU NEXT SEGMENT

02:54 HATTIE: That summer of '49 was the first time I left Ashland. I was a young lady then and I was so excited --- I was nervous too. In Ashland, black folks had their own churches, schools, & stores --

- we had our own community. I didn't know many white folks, so I didn't know what to expect when we hit that open road. I knew one thing though, we weren't driving since we didn't own a car and not many black folks had cars then anyway. Even if we did have car, daddy didn't know how to drive --- mama did though, and I guess she learned nannying for rich folks. Funny that daddy could work all day like a bull and not know how to drive. He would never admit that he couldn't, but I could tell he was ashamed.

So where were we going that summer? It seemed like black folks had cousins, uncles and family about everywhere, and we were visiting family in Paducah. We were going to the 8th of August, a black holiday, and we were staying at a black resort park. US Highway 60 from the mountains to the flatlands. I was so amazed I tingled. My mama said not to worry, since I was never leaving home.

04:20 MUSIC: [M-2] BACK UP AND FADE

04:33 SCOOP BROWN: [SCOOP 1] We used to walk from home..

05:30 MUSIC: [M-3] QUICK UP AND UNDER

06:08 MUSIC: [M-3] OUT QUICK

06:11 JAMES O. JONES: [JONES 1]

07:00 SCOOP BROWN: [SCOOP 2] I think Smoke...

07:06 JAMES O. JONES: [JONES 2] Smoke Richardson and golf and Trees

08:15 MUSIC: [M-4] SLOW FADE UP AND HOLD, FADE AND UNDER

08:38 HOST: Smoke Richard's Orchestra would really jazz up the Charles Young Community Center Christmas Dance. Dare I explain the importance of music to black heritage? A few words: Blues, Jazz, Soul, R&B, Rap...

Now who was this Charles Young? And why was Lexington's first black community center, built with WPA funds in the 1930's, named after this man? There is power in names after all. Douglass Park was named after Frederick Douglass and this community center was named after Colonel Charles Young, the highest ranking black officer in the US military prior to World War I. He wasn't a buffalo soldier --- he was the product of these early black soldiers' determination.

Douglass & Charles Young Parks were part of a larger, publicly funded black park system managed entirely by black folks. Lexington had one of the

most well-organized black park systems in the south.

Although Colonel Young was a strong man, we mustn't forget that white folks had more parks and they were bigger and better funded. Despite this disparity, our city parks are our oldest public recreation spaces in the state & we should celebrate them as such ---- Black folks did, as a local newspaper described:

Fred Douglass Park, the first public park for colored people ever opened in Lexington, was dedicated yesterday afternoon with elaborate exercises, preceded by a parade fully a mile in length and managed entirely by the committee of colored citizens appointed to arrange for the celebration. A crowd estimated at 5,000 filled the park and heard the program of addresses and music which had been arranged...

10:27 PEARL: [SUPER SUNDAY]

10:56 PEARL: Dunking Contest

11:24 PEARL: I am the voice of the Dirt Bowl...

12:05 MUSIC: PEARL RAP

12:15 REF: [PRE JODICIE]

12:58 MUSIC [M-5]: JODICIE

13:20 PEARL: [KEY INTERVIEW]

14:30 PEARL: [DITTO]

15:20 SOUND: NORTHSIDE!!!

15:30 HATTIE: Basketball, just like any sport, was a privilege you earned after a good day's work. And hard work we did --- some more than others, but we all found time to let off steam. Back when folks didn't have TV's and air conditioners like today, we created our own entertainment. If we didn't, we'd get tired of waiting for something to do...

When I was a little girl, recreation in our city parks was programmed by what was then called the Civic League, and they took recreation very seriously. Their idea was simple: when people, young and old alike, played a variety of challenging games, they became better people. And everybody was a winner. A community that played together stayed together.

So what kind of games did we play? Let me read from an old newspaper:

Last week's special feature, the pet show, was a tremendous success. Special awards went to Miss Lucy's talking toad Ester and Mr. John's merry skunk Stinkweed. A scavenger hunt and peanut scramble will be held this Monday for children 8 to 16 years old. Prizes will be awarded. A midget contest for junior boys and a Gypsy hike to Southend for all girls will be held Tuesday. Wednesday will be the shuffle-board and checker tournaments for adults. For juniors that night will be a make-up contest between the girls and the boys. The amateur contest will be held Thursday night as usual. All those who can perform stunts, sing, dance, or play an instrument are invited. Friday night will be this week's special event with a lantern carnival, community singing, and the first game of the seniors' boundball tournament.

17:20 SOUND: RIVER SIDE AND FROGS

17:33 SOUND: SHAWNEE PARKS BALLOON GLOW

18:11 EVONE COLEMAN: [SET UP SHAWNEE PARK]

18:45 MUSIC [M-6]: TANIETTA GAINS

19:45 MUSIC [M-7]: ORGAN BLAST FADE DOWN AND CONTINUE UNDER

20:30 HOST:

Shawnee Park, along with Iroquois and Cherokee Parks, are Kentucky's oldest and largest urban parks. But there was a time when a black individual got arrested for strolling through any of these parks.

In 1924, police arrested a black school teacher for taking her elementary school children to Iroquois Park. Although Louisville was exempt from the state law segregating urban parks, this 1924 incident prompted city officials to keep whites in the largest parks and blacks to a handful.

Louisville's park system was the last urban park system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted before he retired in 1895. It is hard to visit an American city and not find the touch of Olmsted --- ironically, he didn't intend for segregation to be in that touch. Olmsted believed that properly designed parks, with a variety of spaces, were scenic therapy for a growing number of laboring Americans, regardless of class, race, or gender.

Don't get me wrong, Olmsted wasn't pro-black, but he was socially progressive for his time. Before he was a park designer, he traveled the Southern

States in the 1850's as journalist. His widely read accounts of the South criticized slavery and fueled many abolitionist causes in the North.

Despite his influence, he couldn't stop the US Supreme Court from making Jim Crow law of the land in 1896. 25 years later, Louisville invited Olmsted's Son to design Chickasaw Park, the city's classiest colored park.

Now Chickasaw is where black folks went....

22:15 CHICKASAW: [RAPPING WITH THE OLD DUDES BY THE POND]

23:15 CHICKASAW: [BY THE TENNIS COURTS]

23:50 CHICKASAW: [KEEP THIS TENNIS SECTION]

25:58 HOST: When we admire the success of pro athletes today, we should also admire the decades of experience on which these athletes stand. Tennis tournaments in the 30's and 40's attracted competitors from far and near to play on Chickasaw's famous clay courts.

Sometimes history is forever changed with one explosive strike of genius.

Cassius Clay, born in 1942, grew up a few blocks from Chickasaw. Before rumble in the jungle, Ali

cruised the park on his bicycle sporting wingtips and a full serving of attitude. One wonders if he ever drifted back to Chickasaw's quiet, serene landscapes when he was exacting his thunderous signature on world championship boxing.

26:45 AL: [CHICKASAW PARK PLAY]

27:55 MRS: [LOVER'S LANE]

28:22 MR: [NECKING AT LOVER'S LANE]

29:45 MUSIC [M-8]: HAPPY ORGAN

30:45 MRS: [FOOD, WHICH NEEDS MIDDLE SECTION CUT OUT]

32:15 AL: [FOOD]

33:22 MRS: [BIRD'S ROOST TEA]

33:50 MUSIC [M-9]: HARD ORGAN

34:10 HOST: I wonder if any of these men ever got a little Bird Roost Tea? If they did, it was the least of their worries...Mama could be tough, but the larger society was tougher.

Most black Southerners worked in the most sweaty, mundane, and hazardous jobs, when jobs were available, and generally received a raw deal in life.

What constitutes a raw deal? Let me break it down for you.

In the decade that saw the creation of Douglass and Chickasaw Parks, America witnessed 2 of the most violent race riots in its history. East St. Louis saw upwards to 200 blacks murdered and in Tulsa 60 blacks were killed and an entire community and business district were leveled. Between 1911 and 1921, roughly 450 black Americans were lynched.

And in My Old Kentucky Home? In the spring of 1911, Will Porter was strung up in a McLean County Opera House and a frothing mob charged admission to not only watch the lynching, but premium payers could bring a gun to fire on the helpless victim.

Obviously the vast majority of Kentuckians were neither lynched nor part of a lynch mob. We must not forget though that our shared history includes violent racism. More importantly, despite the violence, segregation and hardship, black Kentuckians found not only the time to work, but also the perseverance to fill their parks with recreation, humor, and love.

35:45 MUSIC [M-9]: HARD ORGAN BACK UP. FADE OUT AND UNDER

36:00 OSCAR: [FIRST MEMORY OF PADUCAH]

37:25 R. COLEMAN: [SOLD YOU MOTHER AND BROTHER]

38:15 SOUND: [PARK SPACE]

38:30 R. COLEMAN: [AVENUES OF COOPING]

39:15 OSCAR: [PARK BOARD]

39:49 R. COLEMAN: [STUART NELSON]

34:10 HOST: What's in a name? A great deal. Stuart Nelson Park is the largest park in the state named after a black Kentuckian. But like most black spaces, there's always something hanging off...

Before Stuart Nelson was a park, it was a sanitarium for folks with the most contagious diseases. After the city tore down the sanitarium in the early '30s, it opened the space as a black park.

Noble Park, dedicated in 1921, was a white-only park prior to integration and is today Paducah's premier park. Although Stuart Nelson was beautifully landscaped and was the focus of black community life, the park fell into disfavor with the black community when a neighboring race track built horse stables adjacent to the park.

Before black folks visited Stuart Nelson, they recreated in Rolandtown and Hook's Parks, which no longer exist. Blackburn Park is today an active neighborhood park for Paducah's east end.

39:49 R. COLEMAN: [NOBLE'S SWIMMING POOL]

42:45 HOST: The oldest black holiday in the Kentucky has been held in Paducah for over a century. The 8th of August Emancipation Day Celebration.

The venue might change, but the reason is always the same: the celebration of freedom.

43:00 C. GAINS: [8TH OF AUGUST]

43:45 OSCAR: [BREAKFAST DANCE]

44:05 C. GAINS: [BIG BAND MUSIC]

44:45 MUSIC [M-10]: SMOOTH ORGAN

45:20 HATTIE: We use to celebrate Emancipation Day on January 1st, but in Western Kentucky they moved the celebration to the warm days of summer. I guess so they could cook bar-b-que all day. I did hear one curious story though. Black folks out here not only celebrated the freeing of American Slaves, but also celebrated the first successful slave

revolt in history which began in August of 1791 on the island of Haiti.

Whether it was for bar-b-que or Haiti, folks came to Paducah by the train load. Excursion trains from St. Louis, Chicago, and other northern cities would reunite black families for this holiday, and we'd eat and dance until our bodies said NO MORE!

Now it was time for some rest and relaxation at a great Kentucky lake. My map said, "Cherokee State Resort Park, the finest colored park in the South for Negroes..." Aurora, Kentucky. Our bluegrass roads sure had some mysteries then.

46:35 J. WHITE: [PEOPLE CAME FROM ALL OVER...OODLES!]

47:01 J. WHITE: [PERSONAL INTRO]

47:50 LIFEGUARD: [FOLKS WANTED TO BE WITH THEIR OWN KIND]

48:10 OSCAR: [EVERYBODY WENT TO CHEROKEE]

48:45 LIFEGUARD: [BBQ]

48:55 J. WHITE: [DR. GERALD HART]

49:25 LIFEGUARD: [LOT OF MEAT ON THEM BONES]

50:30 J. WHITE: [AIR CONDITIONED FOR WIFE]

51:05 LIFEGUARD: [BEACH AND SAND]

52:05 LIFEGUARD: [ALTHOUGH INTEGRATION CAME ALONG]

52:05 HOST: Cherokee Resort Park is no longer a park. In 1998, Murray State University leased the space to host their sculling teams. The former lodge is now a trophy house and the grounds are clean --- but barely a whisper of history blows through these trees today.

Back in the glory years from 1949 to the mid-'60s, Cherokee Park employed a full-time staff of lifeguards, managers, cooks, ground keepers, and clerks. The park offered a boat launch, bath house and about a dozen cottages --- and it was all black --- and it was the only black state park in Kentucky.

When the state parks finally integrated, they locked Cherokee's doors, stopped the children playing, and moved her cottages to neighboring Kenlake State Park. When integration occurred throughout the state, many black public accommodations locked their doors or fell to ruins because the money wasn't there...

But the memories will always remain. Segregation might not be cool to talk about today, but for

black folks who lived through it, segregation was a fact of life.

So, how do we preserve our public history? Cherokee's lodge now honors Richard H. Lewis. Would it matter if Mr. Lewis ever visited this place, or if he was from Kentucky, or if he was white or black? I'll let you decide.

50-miles east of Cherokee is Jefferson Davis Monument, which honors the birthplace of the Confederacy's president. When the monument was completed in 1924, it was the highest concrete obelisk in the world. Less than 100-miles northeast of this towering obelisk, is Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace, a National Historic Site. The site was established 2-weeks after the creation of Douglass Park in 1916.

If our state is big enough to honor the extremes of Southern history, then our state and urban parks can at least acknowledge and support our community history.

Now get your eyeballs of this TV and get yourself into a park.

55:15 MUSIC [M-11]: OUTRO ORGAN. FADE AND UNDER

55:30 PLAY: [BLACK GUM]

56:45 MUSIC [M-11]: OUTRO ORGAN. SOLID