



Black Spartans (1907-1948)

Curators

Carli V. Lowe, University Archivist
Kate Steffens, Special Collections Librarian

Artist

Yeab Kebede ('22, Digital Media Arts)

Graphic Designer

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Exhibit Curators Statement

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" represents ongoing research in SJSU Special Collections & Archives identifying documentation of Black experiences throughout SJSU history. This exhibit is the first of several installments.

Much of the information we have comes from the Spartan Daily student newspaper and the La Torre yearbooks. With too few exceptions, Black Spartans' stories are not told in their own words but from the perspectives of their majority white classmates. This is reflected in the language and focus of the articles. We invite you to read critically.

The Black Spartans featured in this exhibit pursued their educational goals while contending with institutionalized racism and other major crises of the 20th century: two World Wars, the influenza pandemic of 1918, and polio. Locally, "the deed to virtually every home in San Jose" included restrictions against Black and Asian residents known as "restrictive covenants" (Spartan Daily, February 16, 1948, page 2). On campus, blackface and minstrel shows were a regular part of student events.

"Black Spartans (1907-1948)" is an invitation to the community to join us in surfacing these stories, ensuring these histories are preserved and presented in a way that honors these students' lives. Contact us at special.collections@sjsu.edu to participate.

Carli V. Lowe - University Archivist
Kate Steffens - Special Collections Librarian

Artist Statement

The "Black Spartans (1907-1948)" exhibition is a homage to Black culture and history at San José State University and the Bay Area at large. Until recently, the significance of Black bodies in Bay Area history (as well as U.S. history) was overlooked. Unless it was associated with the struggles of civil rights leaders, athletes, or celebrity-personas, the story of a graduate from a state school wasn't valued because we weren't part of the mainstream culture. As a Black Spartan myself, I was deeply connected to these individuals that started out just like me. I saw a reflection of myself and my community throughout the process of making these mixed media portraits and came to realize how important it is to know your history because it becomes a catalyst for knowing who you are.

My work explores the intricacy of identity and the role culture, tradition, and history play. These portraits are embodiments of our Black Spartans, they are visual representations of the colorful and captivating lives they led. Through this work, I hope to influence other artists and individuals to take part in researching and finding out the infinite layers of what it means to be Black. Our history is beyond our struggle. We are the blueprint.

Yeab Kebede
'22 Digital Media Arts



Henrietta Harris attended San Jose State College briefly in 1933, and then from 1936-1940. She graduated in 1940 with a degree in Music. Harris grew up in San José on N. 7th Street, and moved to the East Bay after graduating. At SJSC, Harris was a leader of the Negro Youth Association of San Jose, and a member of Tau Mu Delta, the honor society for music majors. During World War II, she worked as a welder at Richmond's Kaiser shipyard, and after the war as a library clerk at U.C. Berkeley. Harris was an accomplished singer and performer whose stage career began at SJSC and continued on after her relocation to Berkeley, where she took the role of sorceress in "Dido and Aeneas" in a U.C. Berkeley production. Some of her favorite types of music to sing included Bach, German Lieder, and spirituals. She continued her acting and singing career while living in both New York City and San Francisco, and became a well-respected acting and voice teacher as well as the founder of the African American theater group, the Aldridge Players-West. Harris passed away on March 8, 2017 at the age of 100. Her oral history is available at U.C. Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

San Jose Mercury Herald

Between 1926-1933, before attending San Jose State College, Henrietta Harris is a member of the Junior Mercury Herald Club, at what would become the San José Mercury News. Her columns report on news from the Grant School, and sometimes include her creative writing.

Aunt Carol Talks to Grant School Pupils

By HENRIETTA HARRIS.

The Grant school assembly today was honored by the presence of Aunt Carol, the originator of the Junior Mercury Herald club. She came to tell the children about the club and asked them to take an active part in it. They agreed to her wishes with much enthusiasm.

The assembly program consisted of a harmonica solo by little Joseph Bracato, who is winner of a harmonica contest, and of a dance by George Fontaine. The chorus then sang three numbers, "Sailing Song," "When the Flag Goes By" and "Just Around the Corner." Miss Dalesandro led, and Mrs. Atkinson presided at the piano.

October 20, 1926

Grant Teachers Have Luncheon

By HENRIETTA HARRIS.

At noon last Tuesday I peeped into the Grant school dining room and saw the tables beautifully decorated with autumn flowers, foliage and Hallowe'en favors. The occasion was the regular luncheon of the Larks' Social club.

This club is composed of lady teachers of our school, but on special occasions the principal and other guests are invited. The club meets and enjoys a delightful luncheon twice a month. A committee with two assistants prepared the menu. Miss Smith and Mrs. Emig had charge last Tuesday. Mrs. Fowler gave an interesting talk on "High Lights of Europe," describing the scenes she considered most enjoyable during her recent tour abroad.

October 27, 1926

Sixth Graders At Grant Have Party

By HENRIETTA HARRIS.

Our principal, Mr. E. A. Holland, appreciated the hard work done by the low sixth grade in behalf of the Community Chest. Because this grade won the first prize in a recent paper drive, Mr. Holland gave the sixth graders a party last night.

The gymnasium was gaily decorated for the affair. Games of all sorts and a short program were enjoyed by those present. The program consisted of magic stunts by Joe Teresi and Phillip D'Angelo; recitation by Mary Decola and a selection by Beryl Seppa. Refreshments were then served and there was an abundance of ice cream, cake and candy. Bright bon-bon boxes filled with nuts and candy were placed at every plate. Then much fun was caused by the donkey game, won by Mary Decola, and by a cracker race, won by Edward Duggan.

At the close of the program the pupils present thanked Mr. Holland for giving them such a lovely time, and he was pleased that they showed courtesy in inviting him. We hope to have the same jolly gathering next year.

November 17, 1926

San Jose Mercury Herald

Grant Mothers Fix Lunch Room

By HENRIETTA HARRIS.

The Mothers' club of Grant is taking unusual interest in every project that is of advantage to the children it represents. The teachers also of Grant have been made happier by the mothers' thoughtfulness, for their school lunchroom has been comfortably furnished by the ladies' efforts.

The Grant school library has recently received a valuable addition. Through the kindness of the Mothers' club \$100 was given to the primary grades, and brightly illustrated books suitable for little children were purchased by the teachers.

At the club meeting yesterday, \$70 was voted to the fourth grades, and Miss Greene received notice to purchase story books appropriate for the pupils.

The next money donated by the club for the purpose of enlarging the school library will be given to the fifth and sixth grades.

January 12, 1927

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January 26, 1927

What High School Students Think About

Editor's Note: Affording interesting examples of the writings of which young high school students are capable, as well as an insight into what the youth of today observes and thinks about, are the following compositions of members of San Jose high school classes in creative writing. The compositions are not prepared for publication, but as part of the regular class work. These contributions will appear regularly in Monday issues of the Mercury Herald.

Trees, Buddy Come Under Observation

By HENRIETTA HARRIS.

My eucalyptus trees are three, long, lean old maids who constantly nod and whisper to each other. What they are saying I cannot tell, for they are very aloof and murmur their secrets only to the birds and the wind. Sometimes, though, I think that I am the subject of their discussion from the way they wave their heads at me when I pass along the streets. Cissy old ladies, these trees are.

B'DDY.

A year ago Buddy was just another boy running and shooting with his friends in the vacant lot on the corner. His clothes were torn and rolled. His grimy face and hands added to his unkempt appearance.

But last week when I saw him I noticed that his hair was sleek. He wore a fresh shirt and, miraculously, a tie. His face fairly gleamed. It was so clean. "What has happened to you, Buddy?" I exclaimed. He reddened and shifted his feet. "Oh, nothin'," he answered with an attempt to sound careless; "I'm just going down here to see my girl."

January 30, 1933

**Alien Tree Creates
Curious Sensation
In Young Observer**

By Henrietta Harris

I suddenly caught sight of it as I neared the end of the block. It was one of those sultry days with which a reluctantly departing summer sometimes defiantly surprises us. As I stood in the protecting shadow of the apartment house for a second before crossing the busy street, I looked up, and there, in front of a modest home, was a most peculiar looking tree. Aside from its great height and smoothly rounded outline, the most noticeable thing about it was its foliage, or rather the lack of it. At the very top of the tree, there was a mass of dull green. And covering the bottom branches, I could make out long, slender leaves, curving and twisting in confusion of green and brown. The remaining branches were completely bare except for their tips, from which drooped tufts of this snake-like foliage. It was as if some petulant wind had stripped away all of that which gives beauty and dignity to a tree, leaving just enough to make it appear slightly ridiculous. For ridiculous it seemed, the great bulk through whose unadorned ribs I could see the tops of many telephone wires, houses, and far beyond, the lifeless glaring blue sky. The tree seemed out of place, too. Below it, street cars and automobiles rolled endlessly, and busily by. Pedestrians passed, some hurrying to reach the shade of a clump of trees in the next block, others resignedly plodding their way home heavy laden, from town. There this stood, unable to give these passers by a moment's relief from the insistent rays of the sun, unable even to house the birds. There it stood, useless and incongruous, with long bare arms lifted in a helpless sort of appeal. A appeal for what, I wondered, as I moved on.

* * * * *

It was dark already when I started on my way back. It was still very warm but not uncomfortably so. In fact there were signs that it was to be a lovely night. A lazy breeze almost imperceptibly moved the dying flowers in the gardens I passed. An enormous moon was rising in the east. Nor was it the usual sickly yellow. No, tonight its color was deep and brilliant, almost an orange. I had forgotten the tree when, once again, I saw it directly ahead of me. How remote it seemed with its black outline flung up against the evening moon between its ribs. It caught the pulsing stars and held them captive there, too. Below it, the lighted street cars and automobiles seemed but annoying fire bugs swarming about its base. No longer was the tree incongruous, for it had fitted the very moon, heaven, and stars into a remarkable pattern of its own. The rest of the street faded into insignificance. The tree stood there haughty and distant with arms curved up in gesture of triumphant indifference.

San Jose State College Times

November 16, 1933

Henrietta Harris reflects on her surroundings.

Book Chat Circle To Meet For Discussion

With Robin Lampson's "Laughter Out of the Ground" to be used as the novel for discussion, the Book Chat Circle, under the direction of Bea Chandler, will meet today at the home of Caroline Leland, 297 South Ninth street, from four o'clock to five.

A recent guest of the San Jose Soroptomist Club, women's service society, Robin Lampson is a local contemporary author. "Laughter Out of the Ground" is a novel written in cadence, and will be read to the Book Chat Circle by Henrietta Harris.

Spartan Daily

February 6, 1936

Henrietta Harris reads "a novel written in cadence" aloud at a meeting of the Book Chat Circle.

NEGRO VERSE CHOIR, TRIO IN REHEARSALS

For the purpose of presenting school groups with entertainment, the newly organized Negro Trio and the Verse Speaking Choir are now rehearsing under the direction of Miss Elizabeth M. Jenks, of the Speech Arts department.

The negro group, which is working on short programs to supplement work of other groups, consists of Dolores Reverd, Dellree Washington, and Henrietta Harris.

The Verse Speaking Choir, organized at the beginning of the quarter, is attempting to give a new interpretation of Vachel Lindsay's "Congo", according to Miss Jenks, who also stated that the reading is one that has always been a favorite with choir and audience alike.

Tryouts for admittance to the groups are held at the beginning of each quarter.

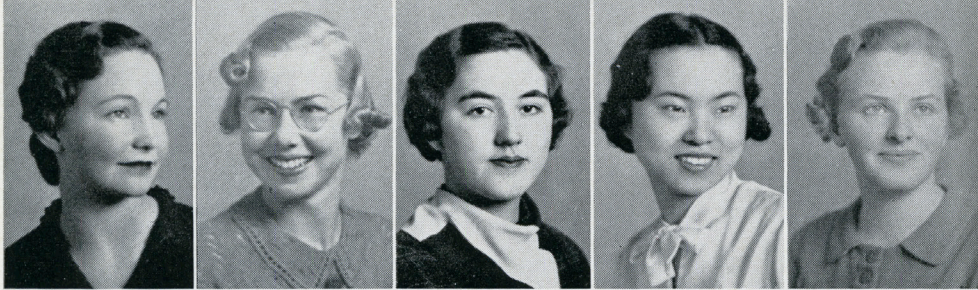
Spartan Daily

February 20, 1936

Henrietta Harris rehearses and performs with the San Jose State College Negro Verse Speaking Choir, with fellow Black Spartans Delores Rivera and Delree Washington.



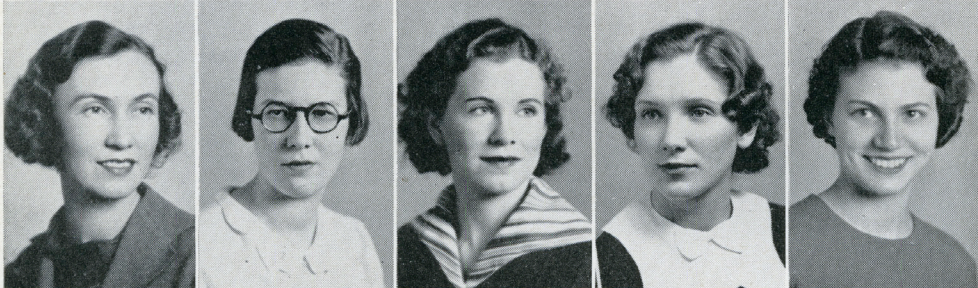
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DELTA



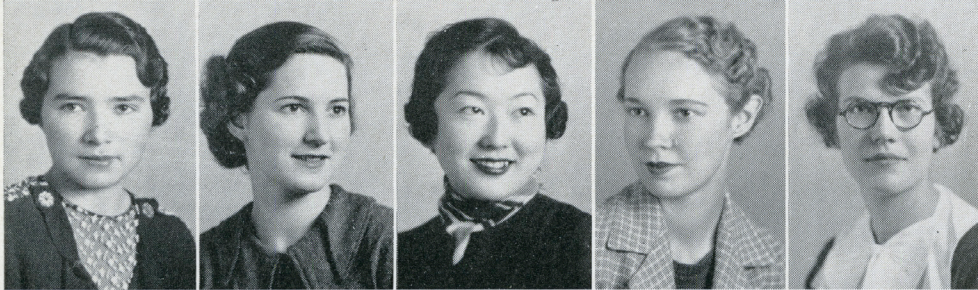
MARTHELLA DAVIS
ELIZABETH SIMPSON
MARGARET MELLIAR, President
MAUREEN CORNELL
VIOLET CAUTHEN



MILDRED CARMEN
VICTORIA PARSONS
VIOLET THOMAS
VIRGINIA KADOIKE
FRANCIS CRONEY



DORIS STANDISH
VIRGINIA ELVIDGE
HENRIETTA HARRIS
JANE DUNCAN
DOROTHY VEDA CURRELL



LUCY STACEY
GRACE KNOWLES
ELINOR M. DAVIS
ARLENE WOTEN
RUBY G. ANDERSON



VIVIAN LESHER
EDITH BOND
JUNE OKAMOTO
LOLO KINNE
ROBERTA SMITH

MRS. SIBYL HANCHETT
PHYLLIS HANNER
COUSIE COVERSTON

Tau Mu Delta is the honorary society for women music majors. Included among their activities each year is the annual Tau Mu Delta concert.

La Torre Yearbook

1936

Henrietta Harris is pictured as a member of Tau Mu Delta, the “honor society for women music majors.”

Music Entries Awarded Prizes In Morris Dailey Tuesday Morning

Presenting compositions both original and without any outside assistance, the winners of the third annual music composition contest, were awarded \$75 in cash prizes, in a general assembly held in the Morris Dailey auditorium Tuesday morning.

All the winning numbers were played in the assembly, and all entries were well-handled from the standpoint of music, and were demonstrated with exceptional ability, according to Mr. George Matthews of the Music department.

Three prizes, the first \$10 in cash, the second \$3, and the third \$2, were awarded to the winners.

Those who received prizes for their winning compositions were:

(1) piano solos: "Elegy", first prize, Margaret Davenport, "Idyll", second prize, Margaret Davenport. (2) Vocal solos: "The Poet", first prize, Jean Rogers, sung by Lucille Roberts, John Andrews accompanist. (3) "The Lake of Innisfree", second prize, Teresa MacKenna, sung by Ruby Anderson; "I Shall Not Live in Vain", third prize, Lola Kinne, sung by Henrietta Harris. (4) Piano solo, "The Green Camel", third prize, Clifford Cunha, played by John Andrews. (5) Violin solo, "Norwegian Lament" honorable mention, Margaret Davenport, played by William Ty-

(Continued on Page Three)

Music Awards Granted

(Continued from Page One)
ler. (6) String quartet; "Minuet", first prize, Margaret Davenport, played by William Tyler, first violin; Ruth Amsden, second violin; Darwin Lee, viola; Jane Duncan, O'cello. (7) Brass sextet, "Evening at Sea", second prize, Ben Mable, played by Ben Mable, first trumpet; Arthur Smiley, second trumpet; Norman Hoover, horn; Robert Beckett, trombone; Lauris Jones, Baritone; Dave Powell, tuba.

Other awards are:

Vocal ensemble, "A Dedication to Music", first prize, Margaret Mel-liar; "Grief", tied for second prize, Clifford Cunha; "I Look Into the Stars", tied for second prize, Norma Jones.

Instrumental ensemble:
Quartet for French Horns, third prize, Bernard Watson.

Spartan Daily

June 18, 1936

Henrietta Harris sings at an event honoring the winners of a composition contest.



Open Forum On Labor Relations Planned For Tomorrow

Dr. Victor Hunt and Mr. Ralph Eckert of the social science and speech departments, respectively, will conduct open forum in Room 2 of the Home Economics building Wednesday from 12:00 to 1:00.

National labor relations will be the main topic of discussion at this meeting. The college YMCA and YWCA are sponsoring these weekly meetings. Current topics are discussed by authorities, and arrangements are made by Miss Henrietta Harris.

Spartan Daily

October 12, 1937

Henrietta Harris makes the arrangements for an "open forum on labor relations" sponsored by the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A.

Edith Sloane To Tell Of U.S. Neutrality Position

"The United States' position in neutrality" will be the topic for discussion led by Miss Edith C. Sloane at the open forum tomorrow noon in Room 2 of the Home Economics building.

Miss Sloane is a member of the San Jose high school faculty, where she is head of the International Relations club. She spent the past summer in the Orient and will present very interesting views on the subject of neutrality, announced Miss Henrietta Harris, Y.W.C.A. chairman in charge.

Spartan Daily

October 25, 1937

Henrietta Harris, "Y.W.C.A. chairman in charge" of an open forum event, announces a discussion on the topic of "the United States' position in neutrality."

Negro Problems Topic Of Forum

Henrietta Harris and Clara Walldow, students here, will discuss the negro problem in the United States at the regular meeting of Open Forum in Room 2 of the Home Economics building Tuesday noon.

Miss Harris is a leader in the newly organized Negro Youth Association of San Jose. She and Miss Walldow, president of the YWCA, will discuss phases of such problems as the anti-lynching bill, the future of the educated negro, the negro political status, and political movements in the south.

Time for questions will be allowed at the end of the hour. Students may bring lunches to eat during the meeting.

Spartan Daily

February 28, 1938

As leader of the "newly organized Negro Youth Association of San Jose," Henrietta Harris discusses "Negro problems" with Clara Walldow, fellow student and president of the Y.W.C.A.

FRESHMAN LUNCHEON

The Freshman Luncheon club of the YWCA will meet today at 12:10 in Room 1 of the Home Economics building, at which time Henrietta Harris will read Negro poetry and important business will be discussed.

Spartan Daily

March 10, 1938

Henrietta Harris reads "Negro poetry" for the Freshman Luncheon of the Y.W.C.A.



Committee Names Stanford Man On Peace Rally Bill

With the Peace Council demonstration to be held on April 27 in the Morris Dailey auditorium, officially endorsed by the student council, plans for the protest against war were discussed by the campus peace demonstration committee last week.

Dr. Harlan Roberts, nationally known educator from Stanford University, is to be the main speaker. Other possibilities discussed for the program include the use of the school band and the Verse speaking choir.

A call has been sent out to campus organizations to send representatives to the net Peace Council, at which meeting plans for a Campus Peace Tag Day will get under way. Students against war will wear a tag for that purpose.

The date for this event will be the same time peace activities are scheduled at California and Stanford universities.

Henrietta Harris has been named to take charge of the day's events. There will be another meeting of the Council in Room 2 in the Home Economics building today at 12 o'clock.

Spartan Daily

April 18, 1938

Henrietta Harris is "named to take charge" of events at a Peace Council demonstration.

MUSIC ARTS

Henrietta Harris, contralto who sang several numbers at the Music Arts Musicales, will again be sponsored by the Music Arts committee when she acts as soloist at the First Presbyterian church Sunday evening at 7:30.

David Birchom, a representative at the Amsterdam Youth Conference this summer, will show moving pictures of the conference. Everyone is invited to attend the service, according to the Music Arts committee.

Spartan Daily

December 1, 1939

Henrietta Harris performs as a contralto soloist at the First Presbyterian Church.

