



CHAPTER 4

The Rainbow Sign — Shelley v. Kreamer

"If we do not dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, the fire next time'."

— James Baldwin

Once the impasse of restrictive housing was overcome, the tempo of African-American migration within Kansas City, as in other cities nationwide, increased to a brisk pace. Restrictive housing covenants and zoning codes had confined blacks to an area roughly bounded by 10th and 27th Streets, and by Troost and Brooklyn. After the Supreme Court decision of 1948, Kansas City's black migration advanced south, especially along the Paseo corridor. In some areas, with the movement came physical violence and property damage.

Santa Fe Place was the bright exception. The battle for Santa Fe, by and large, took place not in the streets but in the courts. In the end, Missouri's Supreme Court nullified the numerous lawsuits against Dr. Miller's family by refusing to hear them, setting a precedent that protected other black families who wanted to own property in Santa Fe.

After Dr. Miller successfully defended his legal right to live in Santa Fe Place, well-to-do black families began to buy homes in the once exclusive, all-white neighborhood. Although problems arose

as black families bought and occupied more and more of the Santa Fe community, few incidences of violence occurred.

Still, the first wave of African-American families in Santa Fe Place faced other problems. Whites were in the majority. And many took advantage of this by voicing their resentment and fear at what they viewed as a violation of their right to choose their neighbors. One white resident expressed the prejudicial fear of many, "The Negroes came down Victor Street like a black cloud."

Kathryn W. Smith recalls confronting racial prejudice. "We purchased our home at 2944 Lockridge in May of 1949. The only racial incidents came before we moved in July. We had a number of calls asking us not to move in and to sell our home to whites. These weren't threats, just that we wouldn't be welcomed because of our ethnic background. At that time, there were no blacks living in the 2900 block of Lockridge."

William R. Pettiford, who moved to Santa Fe Place on March 1, 1950, remembers a racial incident near his home. "Our neighbor on Agnes had some trouble, that involved a white family at 3005 Agnes. The mother and father were no problem, but the daughter was. She would get drunk and speak her sober thoughts. She'd walk out to the front yard and say every curse word she could think of about blacks moving in. So my friend and I — and a few other neighbors — decided we had to do something before somebody got hurt. We circulated a complaint and got signatures from

neighbors against the daughter. She was arrested and there was a trial. We won our case. She had to move out of the neighborhood — Judge's order."

Most often, prejudice came in more subtle ways. The most frustrating had to do with money. Middle-class blacks had difficulty finding financial backing. Lorraine Henry, who moved to Santa Fe Place in the early years, remembers, "We are proud of our homes and against all odds we tried to keep



Even when African-Americans won the legal right to buy property in Santa Fe, other barriers remained.

lished itself as a vital part of the city. The stability and prosperity of the neighborhood created confidence in the business community. During the 1950s, Santa Fe was ringed with thriving commercial and retail stores, making the neighborhood a bustling and self-contained community.

Dozens of businesses were within walking distance of Santa Fe Place. Groceries included A & P, Safeway, and Kroger. Two of Kansas City's main chain stores, Katz Drug Store and Gaines' Hardware, operated branches in the area. St. Joseph Hospital was there, as was a U.S. Post Office. Also nearby were small clothing stores, restaurants, a bakery and a movie theater. "We had it all," remembers one resident.

Indeed, Santa Fe Place had everything . . . almost.

The pride which these new residents felt extended much further than the physical evidence of their success at rebuilding the splendor of old Santa Fe Place — that is, the refurbishment of houses and the establishment of nearby businesses. Perhaps better than anyone else in Kansas City, these new Santa Fe Place residents understood the significance of the role their community had played in the history of this country and in the history of the African-Americans' struggle.

The Santa Fe Trail had been witness to this nation's greatest migration, the settlement of the West. One hundred years later, Santa Fe Place had been witness to another migration, equally daring and historic — the development of fair housing opportunities.

This second wave of pioneers was well aware of these facts. After all, most blacks living in Santa Fe Place in the 1950s were college-educated professionals. They were the leaders of the greater black community. In fact, Freeman's 1956 dissertation credits the relative peace following the neighborhood's integration with the cultural and educational background of the blacks. Her research revealed that Santa Fe's new residents were predominantly educators, physicians, pharmacists, ministers and lawyers. More Santa Fe Place blacks held university degrees than did the whites of the neighborhood.

Not surprisingly, black parents in Santa Fe were keenly concerned about their children's education. During the early 1950s, the black school nearest to Santa Fe Place was Booker T. Washington at 24th and Prospect. Not only was Booker T. Washington more than three quarters of a mile from Santa Fe Place, it was also overcrowded — more than double its capacity! This was especially galling to concerned black parents because two white schools were located within a half-mile radius of Santa Fe Place. One was even within the boundaries of the neighborhood: Benton School.

When the Briscoes moved into Santa Fe in 1951, they called the school board to find out about school enrollment. Soon after they received a letter from the school district with an assignment to Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School, many blocks distant, with the advisory that Benton School was not "available."

Certainly, residents of Santa Fe Place were not strangers to civil rights battles. They were not the kind of people to sit back and passively accept unfair rules. The issue of safe, high-quality schools was no exception.

Black parents held Parent-Teacher Association meetings. Delegations of PTA members marched to the Board of Education. When talking didn't work, black parents picketed the Board of Education. They demanded a resolution to the overcrowding at Washington.

Finally, the names of two schools were placed before the Board for possible use by black students: Yeager School, 19th and Indiana; and Benton School, 30th and Benton Boulevard.

White parents led a counter demonstration to protest either school being transferred to use by black children. Because Benton was within Santa Fe Place boundaries, black parents urged the Board to choose Benton.

On March 19, 1953, the six members of the Board of Education made their decision. After studying the pros and cons involved in each school's conversion, the Board voted four to two to transfer Benton School from white to black. The choice was logical, said the majority of members, because Benton represented the least inconvenience to the children.

Five hundred white residents met twice at Central High School in an effort to prevent or delay the transfer. In the event their efforts failed, the whites demanded that the name of Benton School

be changed: if Benton were transferred, white alumni intended to avoid the name of their alma mater being associated with black students.

And then on September 16, 1953, nine days after black children began classes in their new building, violence erupted. Sometime during the early morning hours, someone set fire to Benton School.

Peace in Santa Fe Place suddenly ended.

"I was on my way to work when I saw it," remembers Mr. Pettiford. "I turned around to go back home to call the fire department, but they



Mrs. Lenora Hicks and Mrs. M. A. Hardy were among the parents who protested the conditions at the old Booker T. Washington School in the early 1950s.

were on the way. I told my wife and children that the school is burning. I was mad — we all were. All of Santa Fe. Very angry.”

Later the Fire Department would report that “an unknown person or persons” set several fires in the school. The first and most destructive fire began after books and papers were piled high in one of the upstairs classrooms and then ignited. The arsonists were never caught.

School closed for five days. Damage affected the entire front half of the school, destroying 16 classrooms. Parents worked closely with faculty

Delma Johnson



D. A. Holmes school was rebuilt for black students after arsonists set fire to the building in 1953.

and staff to reopen the school. For the next year, while \$170,000 worth of repairs were being made, the school children were put on a half-day, split-shift schedule. Half the school’s population, approximately 500 students, attended each shift. Only certain classrooms were designated undamaged enough to use. Not until September, 1954 was the entire school restored for full-time operation.

Tension in the neighborhood was high. An article in *The Kansas City Star* at the time reported, “The whites did not want colored children to attend school in this historic building so filled with old family traditions . . . [They felt] the building was too nice for Negro children.”

The after-effects of the fire were like a rainbow sign: residents felt united in their struggles to secure decent education for their children. The troubles only served to draw them together and make them more determined.

Certainly Santa Fe’s African-American residents felt anger about this travesty, but they never retaliated violently. Instead, in a single, eloquent stroke, the black community made a resolute statement about their feelings. Benton School was renamed D. A. Holmes School. Dr. Daniel Arthur Holmes was pastor of the Paseo Baptist Church and a respected black theologian, long recognized as a leader of his people. On January 23, 1955, when the school was officially dedicated in his name, Dr. Holmes donated a piano to the school. The piano can still be seen in a kindergarten room in the school.

Parents felt they had earned this school for their children. They were closely involved in school activities. Lenora Hicks, who had walked many miles in picket lines for better schools, became the first president of D.A. Holmes’ P.T.A.

In the mid-1950s, Mr. George Perry, Holmes’ principal from 1953 to 1972, established a unique tradition at Holmes School: the May Day Festival.

Alberta Bean Perry



Mr. George Perry was principal at D. A. Holmes school from 1953 to 1972.



Alberta Bean Perry

In the mid-1950s, the May Day Festival was established at Holmes School. Here, students participate in one of many group dances.

This gala Spring ritual has lasted for almost 40 years. Current and former students fondly remember the event as the closing highlight of the school year. For the last several years, Mrs. Effie Frye has organized the Festival. A kindergarten teacher, she began teaching at Holmes in 1957.

“Nothing brings out as many people as May Day,” says Mrs. Frye. “Parents and teachers have as much fun as the students. Everybody associated with Holmes — I mean everybody, from the principal to the custodian — participates in the activities. We have 500 to 600 people come to May Day every year.”

In 1992, the Kansas City School Board proposed closing and tearing down D. A. Holmes School.

Santa Fe Place's response to the proposal was swift. Holmes represented a key landmark in the history of Santa Fe Place and in the history of the larger African-American community. Residents and neighborhood leaders, including two school board members who lived in the neighborhood, exerted tremendous pressure against the plans to raze the old school. The pressure succeeded. Holmes was saved.

Benton School — later D.A. Holmes — was transferred to blacks because that was the only option in a city that operated a strictly racially segregated school system. Kansas City had two sys-



Every D.A. Holmes student participated in May Day activities. Many of the activities included fancy costumes.

tems, really, one for whites and one for blacks. In 1953, when the transfer was made, the Missouri Constitution still required school segregation.

In the year that Holmes School finally recovered from the fire damage — 1954 — the issue of school integration came before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court took a stand against discrimination in a case originating from the Midwest that would set the precedent and change the nature of schools in America forever.

Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka [347 U.S. 483, 1954] declared that segregated education



The D. A. Holmes faculty in 1953, the year Benton School, later D. A. Holmes, was transferred to blacks.

could not be defended with the argument of "separate but equal," because separate education was inherently unequal, thus violating the Fourteenth Amendment.

At the time of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, blacks made up about 18 percent of the Kansas City School District's enrollment. After this landmark case, Missouri's Attorney General sent out letters to the state's public school district. Kansas City's Board of Education was advised to dismantle its racially divided school system.

In the fall of 1955, Kansas City implemented its desegregation plan. Students were assigned to their neighborhood schools. Faculty and all extra-curricular activities were integrated city-wide. Within two years, the district closed four elementary schools, three black and one white, as a result of the reorganization. Black enrollment in the district rose to 20 percent after the plan went into effect. Like the neighborhood around it, D.A. Holmes became integrated.



A classroom at D.A. Holmes after Kansas City implemented its first desegregation plan in 1955 reflected the fact that most young families in the neighborhood were African-American.