

Santa Fe Place:  
**Moving to the Top of the Hill**



By Jami Parkison · Introduction by Delma Johnson



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Top of the Hill**

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*Introduction by Delma Johnson*

*The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation and Affiliated Trusts*



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This book really belongs to Delma Johnson, who dreamed it for years, campaigned quietly but effectively to secure the grant that made it possible, then worked tirelessly researching, chasing down documents and photographs, talking to the many people whose recollections form the basis of the text. Her intense desire to help document the journey "to the top of the hill" kept this project in focus for the whole team. Delma's family were pioneers in the move to Santa Fe, and she has continued that tradition, blazing a trail with this book.

All of us who worked on this book struggled with terms to call the "characters" in the drama that is the story of the Santa Fe neighborhood. We would have preferred not to delineate "white" or "black." But this is a story about racial issues and people of different races working through a long, sometimes painful, sometimes triumphant, still continuing process. Terms designating race needed to be used in the text, but no real consistency appears possible at this time. While *African-American* is the choice of many today, Dr. Miller and the other people who moved into Santa Fe in the late 1940s and the 1950s did not use that term. At that time, *Negro* was widely accepted. A decade later *black* began to be broadly used and some residents are more comfortable with it than with *African-American*. Consequently, all these words appear along with "white," which is not really an accurate term either. This confusion of language is clearly a reflection of transitions in our lives individually and together. We have respectfully left this variety of terms in the text to recognize the importance of this process to our community and to each of us.

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## DEDICATION

*This book was created to honor those  
who passed this way with purpose,  
their determination strong, yet tempered with love.*

*The path they made is wide enough for all of us  
to move to the top of the hill side by side.*



ALAN WHEAT  
5TH DISTRICT, MISSOURI

MEMBER  
COMMITTEE ON  
RULES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON  
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AND FAMILIES

SELECT COMMITTEE  
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August, 1993

Dear Friends:


The Santa Fe neighborhood has a distinctive history that spans more than one hundred years. Santa Fe was settled in 1835 as a part of a 520 acre farm, developed in the late 19th century and officially plotted in 1897. Santa Fe was named for the Santa Fe Trail which once crossed the property. The Santa Fe Neighborhood has experienced significant transitions but has always maintained its identity and character as a neighborhood.

People of local and national acclaim have lived and worked in the Santa Fe Neighborhood and are a part of its history. I am proud to have lived in the Santa Fe neighborhood and to have represented the area during my tenure in the Missouri House of Representatives and the United States Congress.

There are many fine neighborhoods throughout the Kansas City metropolitan area, but this one alone is recognized on the National Register of Historic Places.

I am very pleased to join in the celebration of the Santa Fe Neighborhood.

With best wishes,

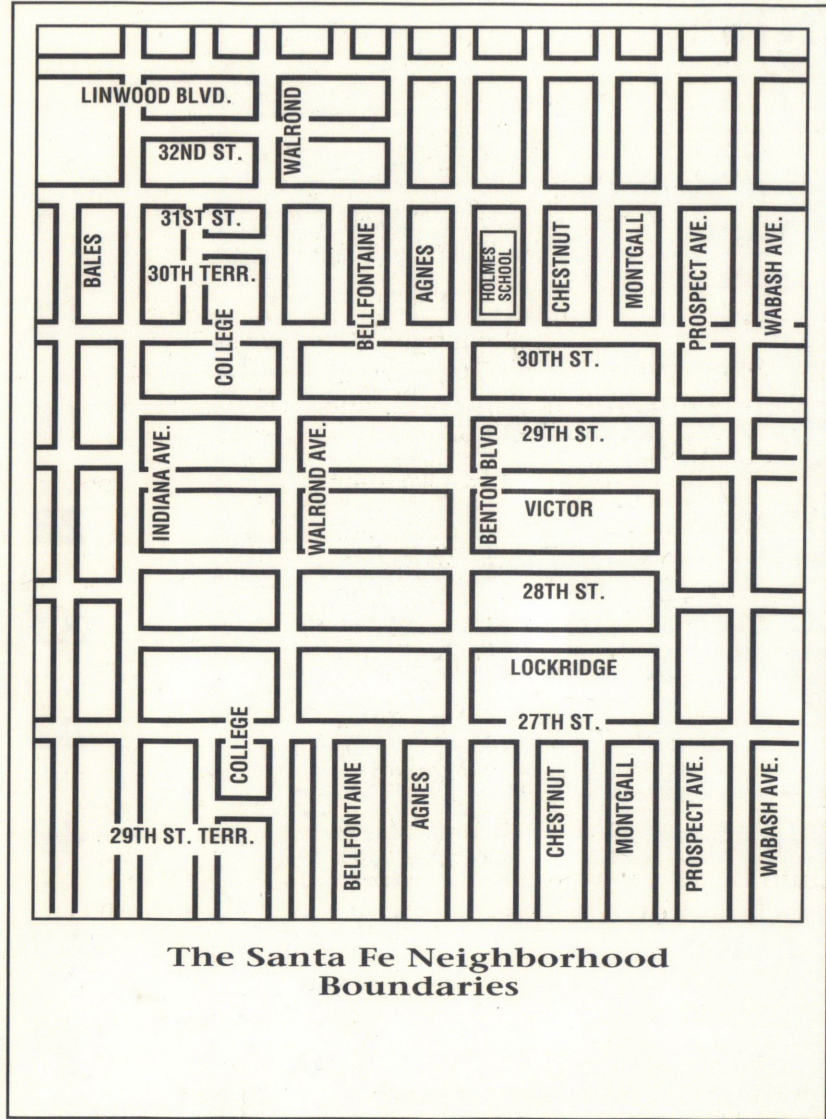
  
Alan Wheat  
Member of Congress

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*On the cover: Zachariah Hinton creates a splash in front of his home in Santa Fe Place.*





Santa Fe Place  
Kansas City, Missouri

1948 - 1994

Forty-Five Years of Achievement

- 1948 First black family moved to Santa Fe community
- 1949 The Santa Fe restrictive housing covenant, which barred black families from moving into the Santa Fe area, was declared unconstitutional by the Missouri Supreme Court
- 1951 First block club (Victor) organized
- 1953 Benton School name changed to D.A. Holmes School
- 1970 Santa Fe Area Council organized
- 1980 Historic neighborhood markers set in place
- 1986 Santa Fe area place in the National Register of Historic Places
- 1988 Fortieth Anniversary (1948-1988) of Santa Fe Neighborhood celebrated
- 1992 Santa Fe Area Council strategic plan developed
- 1994 The Santa Fe story published, a book celebrating the neighborhood

INTRODUCTION

Forty years ago, my family moved into a house that was someone else's home. Our coming created a force of energy that caused another family to be displaced, as we had been, for they had to go in pursuit of another house that in time would become their home. The need to move from one's home is very painful — especially when the action has been imposed and does not come from a desire to do so. The challenge is that one begins to look for a house, not a home. The process of home ownership is generally a personal matter, and generally this process is an uneventful one, accompanied by laws that assist the buyer. But this was not the case when we moved into a nameless area that became our Santa Fe. For us, it was a social process.

A number of important changes have taken place since that time — at the outset of our pursuit, Civil Rights laws had not been established — and there operated throughout the system many practices. These were customs in the absence of law, and these practices were most intimidating to the persons who were caught up in the movement from old, well-established neighborhoods to a new, unfamiliar, and generally unwelcoming peace.

One disadvantage of living one's life in a limited community is that one knows very little about the full systems that impact upon one — or the decisions. In the case of the development of the plans to run the new federal highway system through the well-knit Negro community, the decision would not cripple the families. However, perhaps for the first time, the families would come face to face with a new protocol — called the System, or City Hall. Decision-making for the good of the family was a given and this was not new. What was new would be the movement from a segregated community to the full community without the benefits or the full protection of law.

All that families had needed had been at arm's reach within the immediate community: money could be saved at the local savings and loan association on 18th and Vine; groceries could be purchased at the locally-owned stores; enjoyment could be obtained at the local theatres: Castle, Lincoln and the Gem. Church doors were always open and both pastor and priest served as shepherds. The often beloved, on-foot patrol officers were known to all.



We were not asking for handouts; we simply needed to know, how do we use the full, larger systems, when we had only used the smaller resources? How would the two interface and, better, how would we be treated? Would we have to contend with the sure "ugliness" from the process?

There was a bit or a great deal of trepidation for a number of families. Within an ethnic community, one does not spend energy thinking about insults, exclusions, acceptance, because one's money, attendance, and memberships are accepted in that community. Few persons had been crippled by segregation. Moving out of the community would be for the most part for many of us a condition that would compel us to confront the larger community for the right-of-passage, for home ownership.

We had to request loans from the banks.

We had to request attendance rights for our children and youth to enroll in the new neighborhood's schools.

We had to request the right to sit at the neighborhood drug store counters.

We had to request the right to attend neighborhood theatres.

And we were denied passage.

In the early fifties there were no public accommodation laws, thus opportunities for our families were very bleak.

Moving from one neighborhood to another had to do with a lot more than distance. Throughout the small, very closely knit neighborhood, the word was beginning to spread that we were going to have

to move — first it was rumored that the City Inspectors were going to condemn our homes; later it was said that a freeway was going to come through. In the days of old, few of us were sophisticated enough to utilize the system for information gathering. So neighbors used the oldest manner and the fastest system known to them — talking about the dilemma. This method was very adequate and most appropriate for people throughout the community — belonging to social clubs, church clubs, sororities, fraternities. Aside from these agents of information, *The Kansas City Call*, a Negro weekly newspaper, served as a source of information for the community.

The question became when do we have to move and more importantly, where?

Through "lip and flip" we obtained the name of a realtor, contacted him and we were told the area of the city into which the ethnic community would be permitted to move with limited difficulty. This provoked thought and concern, for many of us had long been aware of the invisible east/west boundary that was 27th Street.

Although the move from one location to another may have been viewed by some as a very short distance, the real move had nothing to do with distance at all. Our move had more to do with change.

We could negotiate from a standpoint of strength: we had savings accounts, home ownership, good citizenship, voters. We were articulate, quiet and clean as we faced the realtors.

We could let them know what type of housing we needed for our families. We loved and would be leaving our homes, and we would be moving into a house that would — we hoped — soon become a new home.

We were as good as we were going to be. That is why we were successful. I remember arriving and directing the movement of things into our new house. I remember two small children playing on their lawn; they waved and smiled at our daughter and before the day ended the children were in conversation.

Our move onto the block was very quiet and less painful than I had imagined. The sun was bright; the trees were glorious, and I took notice of the giant cottonwood tree that grew directly across the street. The trees extended a mighty welcome.

The day of the move was uneventful. It was in April and the beauty of springtime was very inviting, but, over time, the process of reestablishing our homes was not uneventful, or especially peaceful.

Once families moved they began to create a new neighborhood with new neighbors: greetings, children playing, morning waves from the fathers and mothers as they moved toward work, greetings to the children as they passed on their way to school.

A certain order, uniformity and pride prevailed among homeowners. We believed that we had made a better choice and we would all benefit from our new surroundings.

Our neighborhood club was organized as

a means to bind and protect our common interests in property, investment and safety. But our friendships were nourished one by one.

My next door neighbor was Mrs. Margaret Williams. From April 1954 to 1968, our neighborly feelings were bound together through talks over the back fence about the beauty of the flowers and the vines: surprise lily, the mock orange bush, the trumpet vine, the peonies, crocus, lily-of-the-valley, wisteria bush, crabapple bush, honeysuckle vine, the peach tree — all grew in our respective backyards. We watched the humming bird take nectar from the trumpet vine.



Front porches, forerunners of the family room, provided an arena for conversation among family, neighbors, friends, and playmates.



This very kind and charming lady had shared with me how she planned to make her present home her last one. She had no plans of moving. She told me once, "Mrs. Johnson, prior to your family moving next door, there appeared in the neighborhood one evening a real estate man who came to my door and said, 'The niggers are coming, and I can give you a good deal if you let me handle your home.' My response to him was, I don't care who is coming, I am not going anywhere. I am not leaving my home."

The night that the businesses were deliberately torched on 31st and Indiana, Mrs. Williams and I stood in her backyard holding hands. She said, "Mrs. Johnson, do you think we should leave?" and I said, "Not now," and I squeezed her hand very gently but firmly. We stood together and watched the dark, sheep-like figures, prancing through the easeways behind the buildings on 31st Street, holding gasoline cans. Together we vowed that we would not leave our homes — if the fires leaped over the back fences and burned our homes, we would stand and watch.

My first new bedroom suite had been delivered to our home the day prior to the burnings on 31st and Indiana. I was not home for this delivery; the door had been left unlocked while I was in class teaching. I left school that afternoon full of joy and anticipation of seeing this beautiful new furniture in place in our home.

I moved about during the next three or four hours, arranging and re-arranging, placing items in

dresser and nightstand drawers. I took no notice of anything but the happenings within that bedroom, but I do recall that the salesman called to check to see if the furniture had been delivered. He said that he had heard that there had been a disturbance somewhere in the neighborhood. I said, not to my knowledge. The students at Central High School had been together and had gone to City Hall, but I said that I thought that this had been done in a peaceful manner.

Just as I stood back to admire my work, I thought I heard a very faint crackle. I glanced toward the bedroom windows where the shades had been drawn and there appeared to be a redness. I raised one of the shades and saw what seemed to me a sea of fire.

I panicked and momentarily stood stiff and still. I gauged the distance of the raging fire, picked up the telephone and tried to place a long distance call to my husband, who was in the Army hospital in Fort Benning, Georgia, where he had been recently airlifted, having been wounded in Vietnam. The operator said that no long distance telephone calls could be placed because of the disorder.

I said, "I am Mrs. Joseph W. Johnson — 3224 E. 32nd Street — this neighborhood is on fire — my husband is in the Army hospital in Georgia. He was wounded in Vietnam and I wish to speak to him. I am not interested in what you have been told that you could not do. I am telling you that this call will be placed and if not, you will be held responsible." The call was placed at last.

Upon hearing my husband's voice, I began

screaming about the fire and the menacing sound of a tank from the street and the arrival of soldiers. In a very calm and reassuring manner, he said "Del, you do not have anything to worry about. The soldiers will not harm you. You are in America. Ask for help from any authority if you need it."

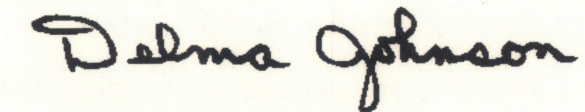
I hung up the telephone and walked onto the front porch. Cars were starting up; dogs were barking; parents were trying to assure their children that they would be all right. My telephone was ringing, friends calling to say we will come after you, we are concerned for your safety. Back outside, a neighbor yelled from across the street, "Mrs. J., will you need help getting anything out of your house?" This lovely home had become once again just a house because of this hellishness.

My elderly neighbor had left her home and together we walked to the backyard to face the roaring mass of flames. The tire company was

burning, the apartment building adjoining my property line was blazing, and to the east I saw the flames bellow up from the corner drug store. I was filled with sadness and rage.

As a classroom teacher I had witnessed the small fights on the playground — and the parade of individuals who had to be a part of the process in order to solve the problem: student, teacher, nurse, principal, parent, administration. The same process and procedure had to be in place and kicked into order for us to examine reason behind this disorder. It was a much bigger fight on a vast playground, however, and the efforts to understand that terrible night and to rebuild after it took years and years. In some ways, the process is still going on today.

We couldn't do anything else but go forward. There was no going back. Santa Fe was more than just a neighborhood — it was our future.



Kansas City, Missouri  
1994