

15004 Linden Ave N.
Seattle, Wash. 98133
July 5, 1970

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Dear Mrs. Paladin --

Here's the revision of the Taylor Gordon piece. Your assistant did a nice job of rewriting, but as you'll see, I've had either to drop or modify some chunks of the rewrite or, in a few cases, revert to my original wording. In each instance, I've made changes only because I can't subscribe to a sentiment expressed in a line or paragraph, because the letters or other sources I've worked with indicate a circumstance was different than the one expressed, or because I have doubts that Mr. Gordon's version of something is strictly accurate.

As you'll see, I've jotted comments on the rewrite and also typed some explanations of changes I've made.

A few stray items. First, I'm very sorry, but quotes from Mr. Gordon will have to be used exactly as they appeared in my original draft (and as I've restored them in my revision) or you'll have to bracket his additions and indicate in the final footnote that he made the additions upon reading over the article. The slight changes may make him happier, I know, but one of the few inflexible rules I have is never to alter quotes from tapes or notes at all. Naturally you're free to make any deletions or ellipses in the quotes . . .

The above is more than quirk, incidentally. One of the slight changes in a quote by Mr. Gordon completely alters what he told me in the interview, a couple of others are entirely different from his manner of speaking.

The second paragraph on p. 4, beginning "it makes little sense . . ."; I would like to have a statement of this sort in the piece, either as it stands, parenthetically, or in a footnote. The racial situation in this country is such that I feel it is a matter of professional integrity for me to say something along the lines of that paragraph somewhere early in the article.

For similar reasons and as a matter of historical context, I'd appreciate it if footnote 3 can be included substantially as it is.

I think that's all. I hope the article is right for you now; I'll be looking forward to the final draft from you.

Best wishes

Ivan Doig

*My comments on
Mont staffer's rewrite*

p. 1 -- I can't find in issues of New Republic, 1925-30, any reference which ranks TG with Robeson and Hayes, although there is an article about Robeson which mentions the other two. I've put in a precise reference and citation from that article.

p. 2 -- as my comments indicate, I cut some lines here because I thought they smacked a bit of hero worship.

p. 3 -- The paragraph about jazz is good; it's perfectly all right with me to use it as long as we're all sure it doesn't derive too directly from the language of the source. In short, I have to be certain we're not swiping somebody else's language without quote marks.

pp. 4-5 -- Portions of this page evidently derive from Born to Be and perhaps from Taylor himself; I've changed or deleted some because what I know of the situation simply doesn't square with what Taylor now believes. For instance, "That Taylor Gordon is black merely puts a slightly different accent on his own success story" is entirely wrong; I have three hours of tape recording, his letters to Van Vechten, and my own background in White Sulphur, all of which tell me the case really is the opposite: that TG is black makes his story very different. Likewise the point about poverty rather than pigmentation separating him from his peers; White Sulphur always has had children as poor as TG was. And "the only Negro family in town" I think is just an inaccuracy Taylor now believes. In most of his adult life the Gordons were the only Negro family in town, but when he was a child (according to my taped interview with Taylor's older sister, Rose) probably there were a number of other Negroes in town, in a period when various people in town had servants. Ditto on TG's version of why he left school; this has to be attributed directly to Taylor if it's used, because I certainly don't know that it is accurate.

pp. 10-11 -- the quote beginning "It never happened to us . . .": I see this an addition by Taylor. It definitely cannot go into the article, unless bracketed and footnoted as TG's additional comment after reading the article. In the taped interview with him, it's pretty plain that the only reason Taylor made the original comment was that it had happened to him; now, understandably, he'd like to tone that down.

p. 12 -- "the extreme range of his voice, from bass through falsetto": I don't know enough about music to know if such a range really is possible; let's just drop the final phrase, unless there is some sound proof to back it up. TG was -- and is -- an amazing singer, but I want to be careful in claims made for him.

p. 17 -- I put back in the reference to the NY Review of Books crowd because I think it's a necessary point of comparison. There's nothing denigrating or inaccurate in such a reference, so far as I can see; it's a very pertinent social comparison I think should be made.

p. 18 -- Again, I restored a bit of my original language in the second paragraph because it said what I want to say, while the rewritten version hadn't. I can't see any valid objection to making the point that Negroes have had a hard time in our society, and I don't feel my language overstates at all here.

p. 18 -- Again, no changes in quotes unless bracketed and labeled as after the fact additions.

p. 19 -- Ditto the above, and even more strongly: Taylor's additions here don't sound remotely like he talks, and to any perceptive reader stand out glaringly, I'm afraid.

p. 20 -- Let's be careful with the Westminster Gazette reference; looking over Taylor's citation of it, I'm not absolutely sure which newspaper it's really from. I'll try track down the reference in the university library here.

p. 22 -- Taylor by now believes his book was a best-seller until the stock market crash. But his letters to Van Vechten at the time indicate it wasn't much of a financial go from the start; a check of book review of the period shows the book received some attention, but certainly was no sensation; and the stock market crash did not automatically mean people stopped buying books. The Depression did not fall on this country in one afternoon. In short, steer clear of any references to how magnificently Born to Be was doing before the market crashed -- unless you want to quote Taylor's version and then set up my above comment as counterpoint.

p. 23 -- in paragraph 2, line about him making best of the change etc. must be taken out; his letters of the time show he was little short of desperate.

pp. 23-4 --- I restored my original ending, not because I think it's so great but because it's closer to the summation I want to make than is the amended version.

If you'd like more information about Taylor's family in the article, ~~my~~ may I suggest you consider running an excerpt from Born to Be; Taylor tells his family story better there than anyone else can.

I hope you don't find my revision of the rewrite too extensive. The story line is the same, as is the bulk of the material. My changes simply are adjustments I feel I must have in an article appearing under my byline. And the revised version represents, I think, a nice balance between Taylor's own words and facts I've been able to check out.

Ivan Divig
July 5, '70

Ivan Doig
15004 Linden Ave N.
Seattle, Washington 98133

My rewrite

TAYLOR GORDON

by Ivan Doig

"Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him," his friend, Carl Van Vechten, wrote of Taylor Gordon. That voice is often falsetto when Gordon sits back to tell stories of New York's intellectual and artistic society in the 1920's, taking all the parts in a party scene that might feature Sinclair Lewis, Rebecca West, Muriel Draper, Heywood Brown, Van Vechten, and a supporting cast of dozens of other personalities with whom he hobnobbed. But mostly the voice is tenor -- black tenor, fashioned for the Negro spirituals he sang so well.

Although Taylor Gordon's voice still has life, much of his artistic reputation is forty years and two thousand miles from his home in White Sulphur Springs, Montana. In the 1920's, he was one of the leading Negro singers in New York City, applauded by a New Republic critic as Paul Robeson's "latest rival" in

to win fresh young hearts in order to ruin their souls, this plea of seduction might avail. But he is not; he is a man in whose veins the hot blood of youth has long been cooled by the snows of age and cannot be the villainous seducer the gentlemen for the defense would have you believe him to be . . ." (San Francisco Chronicle, April 6, 1883.)

In less than three hours, the jury found Fannie Baldwin not guilty. Lucky Baldwin's biographer assessed the results this way: "The prompt acquittal of the young woman when Baldwin declined to testify against her, and her immediate removal to what was then Washington Territory, might have been interpreted as indicating a settlement out of court."

(C.B. Glasscock, Lucky Baldwin, Indianapolis, 1933, 224.)

When Miss Baldwin reached Washington, C.H. Hanford and Tacoma law officers escorted her to the asylum at Steilacoom.

(Undated newspaper clipping, McGilvra scrapbook.) In 1886, she again broke into the news in California when she threatened to sue Lucky Baldwin for support of a child she insisted he had fathered. She was then committed to the state asylum at Napa on grounds of violent insanity.

McGilvra was away from Seattle from November, 1882, to April, 1883, spending at least part of that period in San Francisco for the Baldwin trial. Sidney B. Vrooman took over McGilvra's practice in Seattle in his absence. (JJM to George B. Loring, April 25, 1883, letterbook 4, MP.) Although

performing spirituals. After much drifting and bouncing, Gordon was somebody, just as he had been determined to be.

In the little town where Taylor Gordon was born on April 29, 1893, he recently sang for my wife and me when we asked him.

He closes his eyes. The even teeth are the only white in the dark face. Then the voice, strong and clear. The songs roll out of the house, just as they must have six or seven decades ago when his mother sang spirituals as she worked over her washtub.

"You ever been before a big audience?" Taylor Gordon asks now. "No? Well, I tell you, you gotta know what you're doin' and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you come out, the first thing they challenge you right away, mentally, say: 'Well, what can you do?' And if you don't dominate 'em, they'll sure dominate you."

His years on the way up to the concert stage, the hopping from job to job to make room for music lessons -- an old concert program testifies that the payoff for his determination finally did come. Inscribed to Carl Van Vechten and dated November 15, 1925, it marks the night "dominating 'em" on a big scale became part of Taylor Gordon's life. It reads: "J. Rosamond Johnson, Arranger of The Book of American Negro Spirituals, and Taylor Gordon in a Program of Negro Spirituals."

On the border of the program is pencilled: "Dear Carl, This was our starting point, due to your efforts in persuading Mr. Langer to give us the start. Yours, Rosamond."

Seattle received yet another setback, however. In January, 1884, Villard's financial empire collapsed and the Northern Pacific again went into hands working for the Tacoma terminus instead of Seattle.

From then on, McGilvra spoke and wrote against the Northern Pacific land grant, the eventual plans of the railroad for a station in Seattle, its holdings on the Seattle waterfront, and the service, or lack of it, eventually provided to Seattle. His 1887 open letter to Robert Harris, president of the Northern Pacific, provided an example of his ire:

The generosity of the people, has been rewarded by ingratitude, fraud and robbery. You are not alone in the perpetration of the great outrages of modern times upon the mass of people of these United States.

To the greed, fraud, robbery and oppression on the part of aggregated capital mostly in the hands of giant corporations like yours, is to be attributed most of the sufferings of the laboring class, and the consequent labor troubles that are now seriously agitating the land from center to circumference.

The sovereign people have created these great artificial persons, called Corporations; as they supposed for the public good. Is the creature greater than the Creator, and are these creature corporations to bind, starve and enslave, their Creator, the sovereign American people? You will find that these creators can control and if necessary destroy, but this control or destruction will not be by an unlawful and unorganized mob, but it will be by the intelligent and patriotic sovereigns of these United States, through their lawfully constituted agents, and woe betide the agent who refuses to obey their high behests.¹⁴⁹

Albeit for reasons rooted in his own personality, McGilvra typified some of the growing opposition to the

Mannie Gordon from Montana, who earned his first money running errands for the brothels in White Sulphur Springs, had found his role in the 1920s of legend: concert dates reviewed in The New York Times, performances on network radio, one long swirl of parties and nightclubbing, Harlem in glory time.

Jazz set the exuberant tempo of the 1920's. Its minor keys and syncopated rhythms grew from the spirituals of slave days, speeded up and improvised into a new form during its stopover in New Orleans. When jazz became the music of the land, it kindled an interest in the older spiritual music. Gordon's versatile tenor voice and his sincerity with spirituals were the keys to the international success he enjoyed during the roaring years.

Today Taylor Gordon is a tall, erect man of 77 years, who seems more impressive than his surroundings, whatever they happen to be. He has a slangy courtliness; his talk is as much Harlem as Montana, bright and slippery with unfinished words, shortcuts right through some sentences, and the hard-edged irony a black man learns in a white society.

He is a good-looking man; in the 1920's, he was a very good-looking man. His face makes the right moves, lining into full joy when he laughs, turning intently serious as he tries to pry a name from memory, changing moods like stage lighting to accompany the story he is telling.

Gordon is of the same cut as many men of my father's generation in Montana: the weathered types born and raised there

him spared to a mourning world, and hope that his next beloved cousin may have the good luck to put an end to him." (The Porcupine, Feb. 3, 1883.) Fannie Verona Baldwin told a San Francisco Call reporter she had been a teacher at Baldwin's ranch when he assaulted her, charged her with improper conduct, and then fired her. The daughter of A.J. Baldwin of Thurston County, Washington Territory (Mrs. George E. Blankenship, ed., Early History of Thurston County, Washington, Olympia, 1914, 290) she had been a compositor for the Washington Standard in Olympia before leaving in April, 1877, to teach at Grays Harbor. (Washington Standard, March 24, 1877.) Fannie Baldwin was a sister-in-law of Cornelius H. Hanford, a rising Washington Territory lawyer who became territorial chief justice in 1889 and then a federal judge. It may have been through Hanford that McGilvra became a defense attorney for Miss Baldwin.

The trial opened in San Francisco on April 2, 1883, with police holding back a crowd trying to get into the already-filled courtroom. (The Oregonian, April 6, 1883) The defense attorneys were McGilvra and Giles H. Gray, a San Francisco attorney who was a friend of McGilvra's. Gray's opening statement outlined the plan of defense: ". . . We expect to prove that after April, 1879, and before January, 1882, the defendant became subject to certain

around the turn of the century who now are the old cowboys, the storytellers, the elders of the tribe. The difference is that Taylor Gordon is black -- and that is a difference which has put his story into a perspective little noticed in American history until recent years.^{3.}

It makes little sense for a white historian to try to describe the emotional side of a black person's life, in boyhood or in any other phase. The slurs and barbs surely have to be felt personally to be understood. But a black person's own memories and words and actions can be examined, and that is what this article tries to do.

White Sulphur Springs, where Taylor Gordon grew up, is about fifty air miles east from Helena. He fought his snowball fights, did his chores, and trudged across town to the grade school on the hill as hundreds of other White Sulphur boys have done.

The sulphur spring burbling down on the flat probably divided him and his companions -- as it has other generations of boys -- into those who swore the hot, coarse water was the healthiest elixir a soul could imbibe and those who likened it to rotten eggs and wouldn't touch the stuff.

That Emmanuel Taylor Gordon -- Mannie to his friends -- was from a Negro family made little difference in his early childhood, he says now. His mother did not make a point of race; years later, when Gordon made his first trip to Florida, he would be astonished at how many black people there were.

scrapbooks are occasional clippings on home cures, Christian Science (Oliver became a member of the First Church of Christ Scientist), palmistry, and the importance of positive thinking, plus a note giving the address of E.M. Sibbald, "The Prophet."

One of McGilvra's abiding problems was, as he put it in a letter to Caroline Burke, "to know what to do with Mother." (JJM to Caroline Burke, Nov. 17, 1886, MP.) He took several trips with her and she later traveled a good deal with Caroline, but it appears that only rarely could a place be found where she was comfortable for a while.

Nor was his wife's chronic frailty McGilvra's only concern at home. On March 25, 1880, his wife's father was committed to a doctor's care, by court order, on grounds of insanity. (JJM to Dr. Rufus Willard, March 25, 1880, letter-book 3, MP.) Hewitt O. Hills was 82; McGilvra said "Last October insanity began to show when he would get up in the middle of night and run to neighbors crying a conspiracy to kill him." (Ibid.) McGilvra told the doctor Hills "has had a mania for doctoring and dosing" for the nearly 30 years McGilvra had known him and apparently before that. McGilvra's letters do not indicate how long Hills had been living with his family; the letters do have an affectionate tone toward the ailing father-in-law.

Gordon's father, a railroad cook temporarily working in Canada, had been killed in a railroad accident before the boy could remember. Mrs. Gordon did laundry and occasionally cooked for large dinner parties. Extra cash was always welcome in the family of six, and after school the boys did their chores at home and then went out to find paying jobs to do.

Gordon recounts that because he was large for his age and had lost some time in school through illness, he felt awkward in the classroom, behind those his own age. The only point to school, as he saw it, was to get it finished, and he finally quit before completing high school.

The color line hampering a black person provided young Taylor Gordon with experience which quickly made him a man of the world. He filled those jobs a community half-expected a black boy to hold: errand boy for the brothels and saloons, later a uniformed "page" for the fanciest of the fancy houses.

And then he went to work for John Ringling. The great circus started by the Ringling family was flourishing, and John Ringling was a wealthy man. He had a reputation among the Ringling brothers for investing -- sometimes on hunch alone --

anywhere in the country, buying up a streetcar line in one place, adding a steam laundry to his concerns in another.

Moreover, Ringling was a railroad buff of the most venture-some sort: he liked to own short-line railroads. In Texas he bought the Eastland, Wichita Falls, and Gulf Line, which didn't

Negro steamboat crewmen and river front roustabouts. . . ."

Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, The Negro Cowboys, New York, 1965, 3, 140.

4. Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, The Circus Kings, New York, 1965, 3, 140

happen to run to Wichita Falls, and in Missouri he owned the St. Louis and Hannibal, which didn't go very near St. Louis. In Montana, he decided to build the White Sulphur Springs and Yellowstone Park line -- which still operates today, about one hundred miles north of Yellowstone Park.⁵

Drawn to the area by his railroad visions, Ringling made various investments in and around White Sulphur Springs in the first decade of this century. Eventually his holdings included, besides the railroad, a large house, an enormous dairy barn, and about 70,000 acres in various parts of Meagher County.⁶

Gordon went to John Ringling and got a job -- rather, jobs. At various times, he was Ringling's chauffeur and, later, handyman on the private railroad car Sarasota.

In 1910, at age seventeen, Gordon went to New York on a railroad pass supplied by Ringling, ready to work and see what fortune would bring. Gordon later remembered that as he rode across the continent, taking in the new scenery, he tried to look disdainful -- a very thin veneer of sophistication, he admits, over his excitement.

Through Ringling, he came to know Minneapolis and New York, and had his first experience with the American South. Running errands from Ringling's winter home in Sarasota, Gordon soon learned that he would be called, by many, a "niggah." He decided this was somehow different from a word used in Northern cities, "nigger." He also realized that freedom of movement for a "niggah"

was keyed to his employer's wealth.

"They used to call me 'Ringling' all the time," he laughs now. "And so, if anything happened wrong, anybody wanted to do somethin' to me, they'd say, 'Oh, don't do it, watch out for him, that's Ringling's boy!'"

Drafted in 1918 a few days before Armistice Day, Gordon was released within a week, surely one of the shortest military careers. Soon he decided to try singing as a career: "I didn't start to sing until I thought I could make some money with it," he recalls.

He began looking for teachers in New York. They were, he says, "some too expensive, some too bad." He was turned away by some schools because he was black. After false starts with different singing teachers, he found J. Rosamond Johnson.

Rosamond Johnson, a product of the New England Conservatory of Music, played music, arranged it, taught it at his school in Harlem. His brother was the writer, James Weldon Johnson, author of God's Trombones, and together they produced the acclaimed Book of American Negro Spirituals. Rosamond did the musical arrangements for the book and James Weldon wrote a lengthy preface.

Gordon quit Ringling once again, setting himself for a schedule of discipline and hard work. He took a railroad job, and explains: "When I was railroadin', I would sing, learn how to sing better. I could get better time off to meet Mr. Johnson. . . . I could make my arrangements to meet him much easier by railroadin' than could any other job because he had limited time,

y'know. . . ."

Johnson required work, and Gordon made himself work still harder. "I used to do my calisthenics at midnight," he says, "running out of the Jersey Central station to the yard, about half a mile, so I could keep my Western breath up."

He tried a touch of professional larceny, too. While with John Ringling, Gordon had seen Enrico Caruso perform, and he bought Caruso records to study the great singer's techniques. "I'd take his records and turn 'em way down low and steal from that. So I learned how to sing that way. . . . If you take a soprano or a tenor and turn 'em slow so they sound like a baritone . . . you can learn all their technique of what they're doin', see. But singin' fast, you'd never get it, see. Turn it slow and then you learn a tremendous lot about singin'."

Gordon's tenor voice was so promising that in 1919 he was brought into a vaudeville act Rosamond Johnson was forming, "The Inimitable Five." For the next five years, Gordon recalls, this singing group followed the circuit, that round of stale theaters and night trains which was wither a performer's apprenticeship for the big time or only a lot of hard work.

Scornfully comparing vaudeville acts to modern television performers, Gordon says: "They don't have to work on the stage where the guys up in the balcony could throw shoes at you and pennies and cans at you if you weren't good."

Gordon got his break from the circuit by way of the Johnson

Johnson repeated work, and Gordon made himself well
harder. "I need to do my calculations at night," he says.
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WHAT'S PAST IS MONOLOGUE

The illusion that he still is in Washington would require a
little soft smudging of the memory patterns, some erasure of the
old sensation of power pulsing out through the ganglia of his
telephones and pushbuttons. But the illusive possibilities are
there if he wants to work with them gently some time-warped
moment, perhaps as the early dark eases around the dome of the
Texas state capitol, when past and present flit into each other
for him.

From his office high in the Federal Office Building, he
can see in neighborhoods of Austin, as in Washington, clusters
of those heavy, near-white, throu

perhaps and come as you'll you never find."
Gordon got his breath from the attack by way of the Johnson

brothers and their anthology of spirituals. They knew Carl Van Vechten, novelist, critic, and informal promoter of the Harlem "Black Renaissance," and wanted his opinion of their collection. Gordon and Rosamond Johnson rehearsed a few songs and sang them at the Van Vechtens' home.

The music held the attention of Van Vechten and his wife.

But the head sticking out of the pantry door reassured them most; when they saw that the Negro maid was listening closely, Gordon, says, they knew they had scored.

"He was a big Dutchman," Gordon describes Carl Van Vechten, "he had very buck teeth, rabbit teeth like, and weighed about two hundred pounds, let's say, and was six feet tall. But he wasn't what they called a potbellied six. . . . He dressed very immaculate . . . he liked two colors, two tones. He liked pants one color and his shirt another, tie another. . . . He wore rings, y'know, exotic rings, something that would stand out, or a bracelet, somethin' like that. He was quite a character. . . . Bein' a millionaire he could do those things."

Gordon once wrote that the first time he met him, Van Vechten was wearing "a phantom red New Mexican cowboy shirt." Born in Iowa, Van Vechten was then in his forties, using Vanity Fair and other magazines to promote and encourage Negro artists. With his enthusiasm, staying power, and money, he reveled in his role of Park Avenue ambassador to Harlem.

"Go inspectin' like Van Vechten!" ran a line in the song

change

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He tried a touch of professional larceny, too. While with John Ringling, Gordon had seen Enrico Caruso perform, and he bought Caruso records to study the great singer's techniques. "I'd take his records and turn 'em way down low and steal from that. So I learned how to sing that way. . . . If you take a tenor and turn 'em slow so they sound like a baritone

Go Harlem. Other quarters showed less enthusiasm for his talent hunt. Time magazine said in 1925: "Sullen-mouthed, silky-haired Author Van Vechten has been playing with Negroes lately, writing prefaces for their poems, having them around the house, going to Harlem." Indeed, he was later to write the preface for Taylor Gordon's autobiography.⁸

This was the man who went to work finding a concert hall for the two unknowns and their program of spirituals. It turned out to be the Garrick Theater. From their first appearance in late 1925, Johnson and Gordon were on their way.

By April of the following year, The New York Times remarked that they had sung in New York "on no fewer than 15 occasions this season." Johnson, accompanying Gordon at the piano, sang a baritone obligato on many songs. In his solos, Gordon demonstrated the extreme range of his voice. The Times commented that "Messrs. Johnson and Gordon both possess voices which serve them faithfully and well; they sing with a fervor which carries conviction to the hearer . . ."

For the rest of the 1920's, Gordon's reputation as a singer was his passport into two remarkable American cultures. The two overlapped in a few places, and at those points Gordon moved between them. As he reminisces today, it is plain that he saw Harlem and New York's white high society as two separate worlds.

As he tells it, the greatest revelation to him, arriving in New York a young man from a Montana cowtown, was not the urban

the Federal Office Building the library staff had been wrestling the paperwork for months. "You just try to organize all this," Newland summed it up, with a slight shake of his head.

Organize, indeed. A presidential library is a study in cross-purposes. Such libraries are run by the National Archives and Records Service, the federal agency which preserves governmental records of lasting value -- historical raw material, so to speak. But because of the tradition that presidential papers belong to the President instead of to the nation, and because these museum-archives customarily are bankrolled, directly or indirectly, by the President's friends, such libraries also are a President's

glitter of the hugest American metropolis, but rather the fervent life of the black city-within-a-city. Harlem was the black capital of America. The most gifted of the Negro artists there in the 1920's were powerful talents by any measure: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson in literature, Duke Ellington and Paul Robeson in music.

The "Black Renaissance" took much of its strength from the breadth of talent in Harlem. The secondary writers and musicians who do solid work of their own and challenge the best of their colleagues into greatness perhaps are the marks of a genuine cultural movement.¹⁰

Harlem had such a group, whose reputation grew in both the black world and the white, despite occasional cynicism from each. Carl Van Vechten raged against white editors who regarded Negro artists as novelties, "like white elephants or black roses." Negro novelist Wallace Thurman dubbed the black artists subsisting on the admiration of influential whites "the Niggerati."

Three hundred thousand people were crowded into Harlem, and Gordon was aware of the tension in the air. He recounts: "They (Van Vechten and other white friends) would call me up, two or three clock in the morning, and say, 'We want to come to Harlem. What are you doing? Are you in bed? Get up, we want to see so and so and so.' And I'd get up and take 'em around . . . They always wanted to have at least one colored person with 'em for protection, see, if any argument comes up."

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"You ever been before a big audience?" Taylor Gordon asks now. "No? Well, I tell you, you gotta know what you're doin' and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you come out, the first thing they challenge you right away, mentally, say: 'Well, what can you do?' And if you don't dominate 'em, they'll sure dominate you."

His years on the way up to the concert stage, the hopping from job to job to make room for music lessons on his own time -- that the payoff for his determination did come, a concert program in the Carl Van Vechten papers at Yale testifies. Dated November 15, 1925, it marks the night "dominating 'em" on a big scale became part of Taylor Gordon's life. It reads: "J. Rosamond Johnson, Arranger of The Book of American Negro Spirituals, and Taylor Gordon in a Program of Negro Spirituals."

On the border of the program is pencilled: "Dear Carl, This was our starting point, due to your efforts in persuading Mr. Langer to give us the start. Yours, Rosamond."

Gordon knew, too, that color prejudices operated within Harlem itself. For example, the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway were playing some of the best music of any era, was known for its preference for "high yellow" complexions. And Gordon remembers 139th Street as "Scriver's Row," the exclusive abode of black lawyers and doctors.

White salons across town were celebrating the 1920's with fond legend. Carl Van Vechten claimed to have been drunk throughout the winter of 1925-26, still managing to write another novel; Heywood Brown supposedly would excuse himself briefly from the card table and return with the most literate column in America for the next day's New York World; Mabel Dodge was credited with collecting artists as if they were performing puppies.

The Harlem versions, no less intriguing, ran more to the personalities of Father Divine and Madame Walker, each of whom provided his own type of social revelation to Taylor Gordon.

A man of definite views, Gordon keenly feels that the "haves" of American society provide the "have nots" with little chance to make a go of it. Father Divine, the small man who gathered a large religious following, left striking memories with Gordon. He believes that Father Divine was a vital social agency in Harlem at the right time:

"... When everybody was broke, a lot of people would go to Father Divine and get the best meal in the world for thirty-five cents, see. And you'd be surprised -- white, black, blue,

Gordon knew, too, that there

green, and the other, they'd eat in Father Divine's, because . . . you could get a meal you couldn't pay two dollars for downtown for thirty-five cents, including ice cream dessert. . . . And he had 'em lined up, you'd thought a baseball game was goin' on."

A different kind of social insight came from Gordon's acquaintance with Madame Walker, the ultimate in Harlem high society. Her mother, Madame C.J. Walker, was a St. Louis laundress who invented a method for straightening the crinkle out of hair. Enough blacks regarded kinky hair as a stigma to make her a millionaire. She built mansions in Harlem and at Irvington-on-the-Hudson, and gave Harlem a rich streak of high society. When she died in 1919, her daughter, A'Leilia Walker Robinson, inherited both the fortune and the informal title "Madame Walker." It was to the salon of this second Madame Walker that Taylor Gordon went.

One history of Harlem describes the second Madame Walker's salon as a place where "the Negro Intelligentsia met influential white people, particularly publishers, critics, and potential 'sponsors.'"¹² It worked that way for Gordon, through Madame Walker's connection with what might be called the Floating Salon.

Neither a geographical setting nor a firm grouping, the Floating Salon was a mode of behavior. Its wit was the Dorothy Parker-Alexander Woollocott brand which flashed across the dinner table and pinked the target low on the ego. The entertainment was late and liquid. The literary output generally showed more stylization than style; perhaps it was more than coincidence that Ernest Hemingway

better man than I am, and will step outside the courthouse, I will give you a chance to prove it." Clark, said Prosch, apologized at once.

After his first few years of practice McGilvra was joined by his first law partner in Seattle, James M. McNaught. McNaught arrived in 1868 and his partnership with McGilvra, probably in 1869 or 1870, was brief. McNaught stayed on in Seattle and became one of Washington Territory's foremost lawyers in his partnerships with John Leary, John H. Mitchell, Elisha P. Ferry and his younger brother, Joseph McNaught. Although McNaught and McGilvra seem to have remained cordial to each other in public, the paths each chose meant they were legal and business foes. McNaught became an attorney for the Northern Pacific Railway, a company McGilvra bitterly opposed after its 1873 decision to make Tacoma its Pacific terminus.

By mid-March, 1872, McGilvra had formed a partnership with William S. Baxter. (The firm name appears in the King County inverted index of deeds in an entry dated March 16, 1872.) This partnership broke up in March, 1873, as bitterly as McGilvra's Chicago partnership with L.C. Wilkinson ended in the late 1850's. Baxter, who took pains to seem a bachelor although he had left a wife and son in Carleton, New Brunswick, apparently took some of the firm's money with him when he left Seattle. In August, 1873, McGilvra reported

and William Faulkner, both working their way to pre-eminence in American fiction, were not members of this New York crowd.

Yet, the Floating Salon had a significance to its time, perhaps roughly the sort of significance a future historian may find in the New York Review of Books group of our own day. Some of the intellectual currents of the time showed up in the Salon's marathon conversations. Also, the Floating Salon had some importance because of the people it knew and what it could do for them.

It introduced foreign artists to Americans, and mixed writers with composers, actors with painters. And as Taylor Gordon discovered, when you had a book in mind, it was capable of providing a publisher, sponsor, editorial advice, and an illustrator.

Gordon and Carl Van Vechten became well acquainted through the link between the Floating Salon and the Harlem intelligentsia. By the spring of 1926 they were good friends, each acting as the other's guide in his own world. They enjoyed much the same entertainment, and the same pranks.

"I remember one night," Gordon says, "we went to a party.

Carl and I was dressed as in Harlem, dressed in kind of satire . . .

Some man gave both of us sam hill. He said, '. . . You got somethin' to offer the world. You don't have to do anything out of the ordinary, just be yourselves.' Carl laughed and said,

'Well, can't we have a little fun?'"

On his part of the exchange, Gordon found himself clinking glasses at white intellectuals' parties jammed with bylines and

The case was complicated by Smith's escape. After the territorial Supreme Court ruled on ~~XXXXXX~~ April 28, 1870, McGilvra tried for several years to have the case heard by the Supreme Court of the United States. His records contain a series of letters, some asking the U.S. attorney general to help in bringing the case before the Supreme Court and some requesting compensation from the federal government for serving as Smith's lawyer in the case. (A request for \$1200 was turned down by Attorney General Williams. Williams to JJM, May 23, 1873, MP.) Finally, in October, 1876, the case was advanced on the Supreme Court docket. Chief Justice Morrison R. Waite delivered the opinion: the court would not hear argument on the case unless the plaintiff, John R. Smith, "submit himself to the jurisdiction of the court below on or before the first day of our next term." (U.S. Reports, Supreme Court, Boston, 1877, IV, 97-8.)

John Hartman's estimation of McGilvra's courtroom vigor notwithstanding, McGilvra retained in his private practice the combative spirit which occasionally had made him lose his temper while serving as U.S. district attorney. Charles Prosch recalled an encounter between McGilvra and a lawyer named Frank Clark. (Seattle Times, June 5, 1895.) In the courtroom the much larger Clark "threatened him with chastisement." McGilvra responded: "If you think you are a

and stage names. His rule for such affairs: "If I wasn't talking about some trip or somethin' to the West, I kept my mouth shut. Those people had college educations and experience of the world. Best way to be was just listen and drink."

Although Gordon is a wary man who has had his share of the mean experiences so many blacks have undergone in this predominantly white nation, he speaks of that swirl of white society in the 1920's with unreserved praise. For him, the entry token was talent, not color or money. While he makes no claim to having been an intimate of all the writers and artists he partied with, it is evident that he watched the scene intently and with a sense of the era.

One of those he observed was novelist Sinclair Lewis:

"We'd get down in Greenwich Village and Sinclair Lewis, in his apartment -- say, that Sinclair Lewis, he was somebody! You know, he could sing more spirituals than I could! Oh, we used to get down there three, four clock in the mornin' in his apartment. . . . Boy, he could really sing songs. He knew more songs. I knew about two hundred; I think he knew more than I did. . . . He knew more secular spirituals . . . like Methodist and Presbyterian songs. He knew 'em all. My mother -- I thought my mother knew a lot of 'em, but he . . ."

Of writer Muriel Draper, author of Music at Midnight and a leading character in the Floating Salon, he says:

"She was exotic. A little eccentric in her dress at times,

as an office advisor he stood well (and) had a splendid list of clients with whom he advised." (Interview with John P. Hartman by unknown interviewer, Oct. 29, 1940, LSPP.)

McGilvra handled at least one out-of-the-ordinary case during the early part of his Seattle career. The case was John R. Smith versus the United States, and as McGilvra explained to U.S. Attorney General George H. Williams in 1872:

I was appointed by the court below to defend Smith and feel no special interest in the case beyond what is involved in the legal question raised & I may add that all the Judges of the Supreme Court of the Territory are as desirous as myself that the Supreme Court of the United States should pass upon the case. (JJM to Attorney General George H. Williams, Jan. 30, 1872, MP.)

John R. Smith killed Edward James Butler on the bark Marinus when the ship was loading lumber at Port Blakely on April 28, 1868. Smith was tried in a U.S. district court, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to death. His case was appealed to the territorial Supreme Court on the grounds that the federal government had asserted jurisdiction in what was properly a case for one of the Territory's own courts. McGilvra pointed out in his letter to Williams the main legal point involved: ". . . whether crime committed upon the Bays inlets &c. of Puget Sound is to be tried and punished under the Acts of Congress, or the laws of the Territory." (Ibid.) The territorial Supreme Court affirmed the judgment and sentence of the lower court. (Reports of Cases Determined in the Supreme Court of the Territory of Washington from 1854 to 1879), I, 262-75.)

see. . . . She had long hair. Her hair went clear down to her waist, and she'd always do it up tight, like you'd think she's wearin' a wig. One night we's at a party and some woman insinuated, thought that she had on a wig. So Muriel didn't say a thing, just took all the pins out of her hair and let it all clear down there. . . . She was an English-type woman, sharp features. . . . She's a very fine elocutionist, you know, and she always talked with her lips kinda out, like so and so and so, every word had to be cut out just like that."

On Rebecca West and other visiting English writers:

"Most all of them English people had a funny thing about comin' to a party. There would be forty-fifty people in a room, and if the party was supposed to be at eleven o'clock, they'd come in about twelve, twelve-thirty, and Muriel Draper'd be sittin' in this big chair. She had a great big queen chair, she'd be sitting back and she could observe everybody that hit the door, see. . . . Muriel says, 'Ooooh, so and so, and so and so!' Then they'd say, 'Aaaah!' Then the grand entry . . . whoever the celebrity was, they always got the grand salaam. . . . I remember one time when Rebecca West came in, and I saw Rebecca standin' there. 'What's she waitin' for, what's she waitin' for?'

Finally Muriel said, 'Ooooh, Rebecca!'

And then: 'Ooooh, Muriel!'

Everybody: 'Who was that?'

LAW PRACTICE

"A great town for litigation," the secretary of the King County Bar Association wrote in 1900 about Seattle's early decades. (John Arthur, "The Seattle Bar," The Argus, Dec. 22, 1900.) But in a town of a few hundred in the 1860's really profitable cases for a lawyer were likely to be somewhat rare. McGilvra's chief legal competition in the first years, Ike M. Hall, announced in his newspaper advertisements "Particular attention given to collections" (Puget Sound Semi-Weekly, April 9, 1866) and McGilvra's records show a dependence on bill collections, small estate cases, and other minor legal work. Also, McGilvra earned small fees by serving as a notary public for some years. (JJM to N.A. Owings, July 17, 1883, letterbook 4, MP.) Decades later, when McGilvra had practiced law longer in Seattle than anyone else and was customarily accorded the honorary title of "Judge," his firm still handled minor collection cases along with more impressive work.

His first years in Seattle, McGilvra still was actively pursuing political office. He was elected to the territorial House of Representatives in 1866 and lost when he ran again in 1869. Always a prodigious writer of letters to the editor and a man willing to express his opinions on countless subjects, McGilvra likely had more interest in politics and public affairs than in his law practice. Seattle lawyer John P. Hartman later remembered McGilvra as "not vigorous in court nor did he like the wor

'That's REBECCA WEST!'"

On Columnist Heywood Broun:

"Heywood Broun was a big fellow, weighed about two hundred and ten or twenty pounds, you know, about six feet two, and very fine sense of humor. . . . I met him downtown at lots of these parties, and he introduced me to more foreign people. He'd get people from South Africa and From England and Australia and Japan and all over, all sorts of people in his home . . . Heywood was quite a friendly fellow. I always figured he's afraid he'd break the chair down, that's why he laid on the floor. Lay on the floor and get his glass and talk there."

In 1927, Rosamond Johnson and Taylor Gordon took their concerts to England, and Gordon made friends among what he calls the "English cast" of the Floating Salon.

The pair performed at private parties, one of which was reported this way in a clipping Gordon still has:

"The room was packed to hear Johnson and Gordon singing Negro spirituals, and cushions covered almost the entire floor and overflowed on the stairs. And even (John) Galsworthy took one of those lowly seats . . . obviously enchanted with the spirituals."¹³

As Taylor Gordon traveled and discovered Europe, he wrote his impressions in letters to Carl Van Vechten, who in turn read them to the Floating Salons:

From England, one letter to "Carlo" proclaims: "Man. Last night we were out to a party where we met ten Lords."¹⁴

adjusted their land claims to offer Henry Yesler precisely the site he wanted for a sawmill. When McGilvra first visited Seattle in the fall of 1861, ten years after the original settlers arrived, the few hundred inhabitants still looked to Yesler's sawmill and wharf as Seattle's major source of income and employment. The scene in 1861, as the city's growth has turned out, offered a sort of map of what was to happen, of endeavors which would help shape Seattle into the city it has become. The hills rising behind the cluster of buildings near the shore would be judged an impediment to growth and traffic, and some of them were sluiced away. Sawdust from Yesler's mill was filling a small inlet of Elliott Bay; in time, great areas of the bay would be filled for industrial building sites. During that 1861 visit, teamster Hillory Butler took McGilvra to Lake Washington (to the area then called Fleaburg and now known as Leschi Park) and to Lake Union. Already there were dreams of a canal connecting the lakes with Puget Sound. At least since Gov. Isaac I. Stevens's visit to Seattle in January, 1854, the harbor where Yesler's lumber went onto ships offered a twofold dream--of a transcontinental railroad from the east terminating in Seattle, of maritime trade from the railhead to the markets of Asia.

By 1903, when McGilvra died, Seattle had grown to a population of more than 80,000. Thus, McGilvra's career in his last 40 years was set amid the story of a village growing into a major city.

negotiated admitted some of the glowing obnoxious to the

virtue for lessons looked in his own belongings.

Of Paris, he wrote: "I must tell you this place is the
 concentrated essence of the world so far." ¹⁵ More precise the sense and
 place of the world so far." Gordon's perceptions and turns of phrase impressed Van Vechten.
 Gordon remembers: "I wrote me back and he said, 'Your letters
 are such a tremendous success at the parties,' he says, 'you've
 gotta write a book when you come back.' Is the clearest
 I said, 'Carl, I can't write a book, I can't even spell.'

"Don't worry about the spelling," he says, "you write the
 book." of the sufferings of the terrible class, and the
 of the sufferings of the terrible class, and the
 "When I came back they kept after me . . . I'd say, 'Well,
 if you insist.'

"I was singing concert at the time," he recalls, "and so . . .
 it didn't take me more than five or six months to write it. . . .
 I would write it between midnight and six o'clock in the morning,
 because that's the time Harlem is the quietest and then nobody

would bother me. When you write you gotta be holed up someplace.
 You can't write if anybody's gonna break into your continuity. . . .

I wrote it in longhand, see, and when it come to typin' it out,
 I got Edna (Thomas). Edna had a Boston education, she was a
 very cultured woman. . . ."

In the manuscript he told the story of his 36 years of life,
 the childhood pranks in White Sulphur Springs having as much weight

as the experiences in Europe. Muriel Draper provided editing help.
 Van Vechten paused during a vacation in Spain to write a preface.
 Miguel Covarrubias did the illustrations.

Seattle received yet another setback, however. In January, 1884, Villard's financial empire collapsed and the Northern Pacific again went into hands working for the Tacoma terminus instead of Seattle.

From then on, McGilvra spoke and wrote against the Northern Pacific land grant, the eventual plans of the railroad for a station in Seattle, its holdings on the Seattle waterfront, and the service, or lack of it, eventually provided to Seattle. His 1887 open letter to Robert Harris, president of the Northern Pacific, provided an example of his ire:

The generosity of the people, has been rewarded by ingratitude, fraud and robbery. You are not alone in the perpetration of the great outrages of modern times upon the mass of people of these United States.

To the greed, fraud, robbery and oppression on the part of aggregated capital mostly in the hands of giant corporations like yours, is to be attributed most of the sufferings of the laboring class, and the consequent labor troubles that are now seriously agitating the land from center to circumference.

The sovereign people have created these great artificial persons, called Corporations; as they supposed for the public good. Is the creature greater than the Creator, and are these creature corporations to bind, starve and enslave, their Creator, the sovereign American people? You will find that these creators can control and if necessary destroy, but this control or destruction will not be by an unlawful and unorganized mob, but it will be by the intelligent and patriotic sovereigns of these United States, through their lawfully constituted agents, and woe betide the agent who refuses to obey their high behests.¹⁴⁹

Albeit for reasons rooted in his own personality, McGilvra typified some of the growing opposition to the

Born to Be was published in the autumn of 1929. One of the favorable reviews appeared in the New York Herald Tribune Books, two pages after a review of young William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury.¹⁶

Van Vechten and Muriel Draper had had the wisdom not to alter Gordon's unorthodox spellings, contractions, and syntax, even though his typist had warned that when publishers saw the manuscript, "It'll be throwed in the wastepaper basket." Born to Be gave Gordon the satisfaction of having put his life into print and brought such comments as "delectable" and "amusing and even exciting" from reviewers. But the author soon wrote to Van Vechten that the work was a large financial disappointment.

It was not the only disappointment of the sort for Taylor Gordon in 1929 and the years after. Even though spirituals would seem to be the most appropriate songs for the Depression decade, Gordon (now parted with Rosamond Johnson) could get few bookings.

Now that his autobiography was a financial failure and singing engagements far apart, Gordon entered the lean years along with most of the country. Not that the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing financial trauma ruined any personal fortune for him, he hastens to add: "That's the consolation of never hoardin' any money." Van Vechten helped him financially, but that was not enough. And the crowd of eager sponsors and admirers dwindled.

"I wish the rent / was Heaven sent," black poet Langston

Of Paris, he wrote: "I must tell you this place is the place of the world so far."

Impressed with Gordon's perceptions and turns of phrase, Van Vechten cajoled until Gordon agreed to attempt a book when he returned to the United States.

Hughes wrote in a line that was the anthem of the 1930's. The rent party became a standard form of entertainment in Harlem. But when Taylor Gordon, with his love of showing his friends a good time, gave a rent party, a Harlem newspaper reported it was "the season's most successful party for everybody except the rent man." And for the host, who lost ten dollars on the affair. ¹⁷

Gordon continued working on other manuscripts and taking singing jobs when they turned up. He remembers being in the cast of a Heywood Brown-sponsored "cooperative" musical. He also landed a role in the Fred Astaire stage musical, ~~the~~ Gay Divorce.

By late 1935, however, he returned home to Montana. After the first winter back in the mountains, he wrote to Van Vechten:

"I wish you could take a picture of my whiskers! If they were straight they'd be a FOOT LONG! I can pull them out, and let them snap back, and knock myself out at will. It's a new idea." ¹⁸

He gave concerts around the state, singing now in school auditoriums and civic centers. After some years, he was travelling again, but has lived permanently in White Sulphur Springs since 1959.

One cannot really say that Taylor Gordon is retired, however. In 1967, he wrote a small book of local history, about the Meagher County rancher and mining man, Byron R. Sherman, The Man Who Built the Stone Castle. He also hopes to write a sequel to Born to Be, to cover the years since 1929.

that the city instead secure both Swan Lake and Cedar Lake "and construct the water works to these points at your convenience; as your supply from Lake Washington is sufficient for years to come."¹⁶⁹ One-fourth of the receipts of the city water system could be set aside over the years, he continued, and used to buy the land needed at Swan Lake and Cedar Lake and for building the extensions of the water system. He said of the Thomson-Cotterill plan:

. . . It is just such reckless speculations as the ordinance in question proposes that has involved this city in the very great and almost insupportable burden of its present indebtedness.

As a voter and taxpayer I protest against the scheme of this ordinance.¹⁷⁰

Thomson thought McGilvra's argument strong enough to merit concern, and the day after McGilvra's letter appeared, Cotterill wrote McGilvra a long letter full of the information "you requested of me."¹⁷¹ Thomson included a note, and a week later McGilvra responded:

Mr. Cotterill's statement of the scheme is very clear, and his reasons for the adoption of it, certainly very urgent . . .

I have always opposed and shall continue to oppose contracting debts for municipal luxuries, such as ten million dollar schemes for Parks and Boulevards and other wild and vicious speculations that might be named, but when it comes to the matter of security to property and the necessities of life, I will take the liberty to think twice, yes sir, I will think twice.¹⁷²

In the next few weeks Thomson and Cotterill sent McGilvra other information about their plan for Cedar River.

Two of the most vivid parts of our history, at least as we generally think of them, were the frontier days and the 1920's.

Taylor Gordon's life combines both -- a boyhood in White Sulphur Springs, a concert career in the Twenties. This black Montanan

has been through a remarkable portion of our history -- "Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him."

He was born in 1894, and grew up in the frontier days. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier. He was a boy when the frontier was still a frontier.

access to certain sources, especially files dealing with foreign policy. Recurrently there are gripes about the Roosevelt Library as well, even though the FDR papers have contributed impressively to a number of solid historical studies.

This silk gloves battle forever goes on, almost entirely within the pages of scholarly journals, about the right of ^{researchers} ~~scholars~~ to examine fairly promptly the official papers of persons formerly in high office, especially the office of President. When it is proudly announced, as at the Roosevelt Library five years after FDR's death, that eighty-five per cent of a set of presidential papers are open to scholars, many a historian will react with the cry: "You mean fifteen per cent aren't open?"

To all appearances, Lyndon Johnson merely is following precedent about which papers will and won't be open immediately to research. That is, his staff men talk about the ex-President's devout wish that materials be open to scholarship, then in the next breath mention that of course "deliberate speed" will have to dictate when some of the paperwork can become available. Officially, ^{not least to release} ~~as~~ guidelines to government archivists who administer the presidential files, ^{cite} ~~there are~~ three customary categories of presidential papers which are to remain restricted:

--Materials containing statements which may in any manner

FOOTNOTES

1. The New Republic, March 3, 1926, 43.
2. From the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters in the Yale University Library. The author is indebted to the Yale University Library for permission to examine copies of material relating to Taylor Gordon in this Collection and in the Carl Van Vechten Papers in the Yale Collection of American Literature, and for permission to quote from these sources.

3. For instance, comparatively little attention has been paid to the fact that black men have had a past in Montana about as long as the white man's. York, William Clark's slave, accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-6. In later decades, there were Negro cowboys on the Montana range, a contingent of an estimated five thousand Negro cowboys in the American West in the years after the Civil War. Two historians who have written about the black man in the West point out, however, that sharing the frontier heritage did not always gain Negroes a share of social respect:

"There were probably fewer Negro cowboys in Idaho and Montana than in any other part of the cattlemen's West. One reason was race hatred and bitterness: early steamboat traffic up the Missouri had resulted in the immigration into Montana of many 'unreconstructed' Southerners and the simultaneous arrival of a number of transient

Negro steamboat crewmen and river front roustabouts. . . ."

Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, The Negro Cowboys, New York, 1965, 3, 140.

✓ OK 4. Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, The Circus Kings, New York, 196⁰~~5~~, 138.

OK 5. Ibid., 138-9. Ringling's grandly-named little railroads at times brought him joshing within the family, such as: "It may be only twenty miles long, but it's just as wide as anybody's railroad. Actually, John Ringling's railroading and other financial interests in Meagher County may be viewed as a worthwhile bet that White Sulphur Springs would someday emerge as a resort town. Ever since the town's birth just after the Civil War under the name of Brewer's Springs, various entrepreneurs have tried to profit from the mineral water which boils continuously from local springs. For awhile, the Montana Mineral Water Company bottled the White Sulphur Springs water and shipped it around the country for sale. The town's founder, James Brewer, built a bath house; during much of the town's history, gazebos built over the springs have beckoned to anyone willing to try the therapeutic attractions of the water. John Ringling is said to have talked up the potentials of White Sulphur Springs in hopes of gaining partners to develop the attractions of the mineral springs.

check on line bet n Eastland & B near water, Tex

0¹² 6. Ibid., 138.

7. Van Vechten's story is well told in the biography by Bruce Kellner, Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades, Norman, Okla., 1968. An earlier and briefer study is by Edward Lueders, Carl Van Vechten and the Twenties, Albuquerque, 1955.

8. Kellner, Irreverent Decades, 198, 195.

9. The New York Times, March 1, April 17, 1926.

10. A useful perspective on Harlem in the 1920's has been provided by Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby, eds., The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History, New York, 1967.

11. Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, New York, 1948, 257; Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 245-6.

12. Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 259.

13. Westminster Gazette, July 16, 1927. Clipping in possession of Taylor Gordon.

14. Letter of July 19, 1927, in the Carl Van Vechten Papers. Subsequent references to this source will be designated CVV.

15. CVV, letter of May 30, 1927.
16. New York Herald Tribune Books, October 13, 1929, 5.
17. CVV, clipping from Inter-State Tattler, June 4, 1931.
18. CVV, letter of April 26, 1936.

Quotes by Mr. Gordon not credited to other sources are taken
from a taped interview by the author, July 3, 1968.

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TAYLOR GORDON: BLACK MAN SINGING

America lost pieces of itself back in the slave ships and cotton fields. The promise of this new land lost much of its luster when black people were harnessed into the American adventure as one more breed of farm animal. Ever since, the nation's self-respect decayed a bit every time a dark person was denied an education as good as a white student's, or a job, or the right to get by in this world without having to kowtow before every mean prejudice.

The sharpest loss, ~~the one tearing most cruelly at the nation~~ today, has been the missed chances for black and white to know each other as persons instead of races. This curious barrier of color largely has kept each from knowing what the other is like ordinarily. Usual contacts between white and black Americans take place amid social tension, subtle or otherwise.

For most of us, any breaching of the barrier probably happens in circumstances out of the ordinary -- friendship born of pressures shared in military service or on the athletic field, or respect nurtured by mutual dedication to such causes as civil rights. For a few others, the barrier may be broken down with an attribute called

talent. And that is where the story of Taylor Gordon must begin.

Taylor Gordon. "Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him," his friend Carl Van Vechten once ^{wrote} marveled. The voice often is falsetto when Gordon sits back to tell stories of New York's intellectual society in the 1920's, taking all the parts in a party scene starring Rebecca West, Sinclair Lewis, Muriel Draper, Heywood Broun, Van Vechten, and a supporting cast of dozens of other personalities he hobnobbed with. But mostly the voice is tenor -- black tenor, fashioned for Negro spirituals.

In White Sulphur Springs, where Taylor Gordon was born on April 29, 1893, and where he has lived since returning from his wide-ranging career, he sang for my wife and me when we asked him to. He closes his eyes. The even teeth are the only white in the dark face. Then the voice, still strong and clear. The song ^{rolls} goes out of the house, just as six or seven decades ago the songs sung by Gordon's mother as she worked over her wash tub went out all through this end of town.

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing,

To make a poet black and bid him sing!

--Countee Cullen

The voice still has life, but Taylor Gordon's reputation is forty years and 2,000 miles from White Sulphur Spring, Montana. In the 1920s, he was one of the leading Negro tenors in New York City, ranking close to Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes.....

Outline for TAYLOR GORDON: BLACK MAN SINGING

The article will be about Gordon's youth in Montana and his singing career in New York in the 1920s. Harlem at the time was at the height of the "Black Renaissance," an impressive flowering of Negro art, writing, and music, and Gordon was part of the scene. There is mention of him in several books about this "Black Renaissance," which can add a good deal to the article.

But more important, historically, Gordon was part of the larger New York intelligentsia in the 1920's. There's much material about him moving in the same circles as Sinclair Lewis, Carl Van Vechten, Heywood Brown, Franklin P. Adams, Miguel Covarrubias -- the groups which produced much of the notable artistic achievement of the era and gave the decade its characteristic tone. As I hope the quotes show, Gordon is good at providing colorful material about the people he knew. And this is fresh material -- the viewpoint of a black man in the best white American society of the time.

An added note on the Montana level: the article of course would include the role of circus king John Ringling played in Gordon's career.

The article, in short, is about a black man from a small Montana town pulling himself rather high into the New York intellectual whirl. It was a remarkable journey and both the qualities in Taylor Gordon which helped him achieve it and the breaks he received make him an interesting subject, I think.

P.S. You'll note near the bottom of p. 2 an italicized quote from Negro poet Countee Cullen. I'd like to ~~quote~~ include some quotes from black writers and musicians throughout the article; it would bring in their language and emotion better than I can paraphrase it. What do you think?

On singing before large audiences:

They want to try your air, see if you get buck ague and run off. You ever been before a big audience? No? Well, I tell you, you gotta know what you're doin' and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you come out, the first thing they challenge you right away mentally, say, "Well; what can you do?" And if you don't dominate 'em, they'll sure dominate you.

On partying with Carl Van Vechten:

I remember one night we went to a party. Carl and I was dressed as in Harlem, dressed in kind of satire... Some man gave both of us sam hill. He said, "What, you people -- dressed in satire? You got somethin' to offer the world. You don't have to do anything out of the ordinary. Just be yourselves." Carl laughed and said, "Well, can't we have a little FUN?"

On travelling in the South with circus man John Ringling:

They used to call me "Ringling" all the time. And so, if anything happened wrong, anybody wanted to do somethin' to me, they'd say, "Oh, don't do it. Watch out for him, that's Ringling's boy."

On women:

A woman was tellin' me one time, she says, "Taylor, I would marry you, you're a lovely man, but you're such -- colored people are such lousy providers." I said, "What do you mean?" "Well, if they marry a beautiful woman, they can't take care of them. They won't, positively won't take care of them." I says, "They WON'T take care of 'em? They couldn't take care of 'em if they wanted to." I says, "Where do they get the money from? They're always squeezed out of any place there's any money, you understand what I mean? The only colored people made any money was a prizefighter, or a political man, or some burglar."

On not being affected by the 1929 stock market crash:

That's the consolation of never hoardin' any money.

On Harlem in the 1920s:

Most of the guns, killing, in Harlem was love affairs or racketeer gamblin' affairs... In fact, Harlem wasn't a gun place. Let me tell you somethin'. Negro people only in the last twenty years have become gun people. Most Negro people -- we used to have clans, they have clans in the South -- were cutters... Used to have a sayin', back in the '14s and '15s, y'know, they could tell what section of the country the fella come from by the brand that was on him, y'see. If he was cut here, he was from Geechyland. If he was cut this way, he was from Selma, Alabama... They could tell where he'd been in a fight.

Reason why those marks came from those places was, the games that they played and how they were cheatin'. If you were shootin' craps, you more or less would be bendin' down when you got cut and that way you'd get it here. Whereas if you were playin' poker, you were more apt to be settin' up, then you'd be apt to get this one here (across the cheek). Then if you were playin' what they called 'skin', why you'd apt to get this other. So they could tell what area he came -- we used to laugh about that. So-and-so, instead of call him by his name, they'd call him "Alabama," "Geechy," or somethin' like that....

On Sinclair Lewis:

Say, that Sinclair Lewis, he was somebody. You know, he could sing more spirituals than I could. Oh, he used to get down there three-four clock in the mornin' in his apartment... and we'd end up singin' songs, after talkin' all about Marx and all about the politics of the world... Boy, he could really sing songs. He knew more songs. I knew about 200. I think he knew more than I did... He knew more secular spirituals -- I mean, Christian songs -- than I did; like Methodist and Presbyterian songs. He knew 'em all. My mother -- I thought my mother knew a lot of 'em, but he....

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On Father Divine:

He came up there durin' the Depression, when everybody was broke, and a lot of people would go to Father Divine and get the best meal in the world for 35 cents, see. And you'd be surprised, white, black, blue, green, and the other, they'd eat in Father Divine's, because when you couldn't eat downtown you could go to Father Divine's and get a whole half a chicken. You could get a meal you couldn't pay two dollars for downtown for 35 cents, including ice cream dessert... And he had 'em lined up, I mean you'd thought a baseball game was goin' on.

Picture suggestions for TAYLOR GORDON: BLACK MAN SINGING

It seems to me the best illustrations for the article would be the Covarrubias pictures in Gordon's book, BORN TO BE. Covarrubias at the time was one of the best caricaturists in the country, working for the magazine Vanity Fair, and he went on to become a renowned painter and ethnologist. I think his work for BORN TO BE is excellent, much more expressive than photos could be.

As to photos, Taylor has some -- probably more than I've seen, in fact -- but I'm afraid it would be up to you to get them. I don't plan to be in White Sulphur any time soon, and I can't think of anyone there who might persuade him to let you use them. Maybe you do. Or maybe a letter from you to him, telling him what you'll pay for use of photos, might do it. He is a cautious man. He's been bilked many times before, I think; also, he says he hopes to write another book, and he's reluctant, at least until he gets to know a person, to let out much about himself.

There's a photo of Taylor in the 1928-29 edition of Who's Who in Colored America, ed. Joseph J. Boris. If you'd like, I can have a print made from the copy of the book here at the University of Washington Library. There are at least two photos of Taylor as a boy in the pictorial history of Meagher County; the book is not pagednumbered, but the pictures are near the center of the book.

Other pictures you may be interested in:

-- John Ringling, also in the Meagher County pictorial history, and in The Circus Kings (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), by Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch.

-- Carl Van Vechten, in Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades (Norman, Okla., 1968), by Bruce Kellner. There's an especially striking picture of Van Vechten in 1926, when Taylor knew him.

-- Pictures of Sinclair Lewis, Father Divine, Marcus Garvey, Heywood Brown, and others who will be mentioned in the article can be found in books about them, I'm sure.

Another thought on Taylor: in the cover picture of his pamphlet, The Man Who Built the Stone Castle, I have a hunch that the fellow atop the pole is Taylor. If you contact him about photos, you might ask him.

I hope these ideas are enough. Naturally I'll be glad to help with pics, if I can.

Ivan Doig
15004 Linden Ave N.
Seattle, Wash. 98133

TAYLOR GORDON: BLACK MAN SINGING

by Ivan Doig

America lost pieces of itself back in the slave ships and cotton fields. The promise of this new land lost much of its luster when black people were harnessed into the American adventure as one more breed of farm animal. Ever since, the nation's self-respect decayed a bit every time a dark person was denied an education as good as a white student's, or a job, or the right to get by in this world without having to kowtow before every mean prejudice.

The sharpest loss has been the missed chances for black and white to know each other as persons instead of races. This curious barrier of color largely has kept each from knowing what the other is like ordinarily. Usual contacts between white and black Americans take place amid social tension, subtle or otherwise.

For most of us, any breaching of the barrier probably happens in circumstances out of the ordinary -- friendship born of pressures shared in military service or on the athletic field, or respect nurtured by mutual dedication to such causes as civil rights. For a few others, the barrier may be broken down with an attribute called talent. And that is where the story of Taylor Gordon must begin.

Taylor Gordon. "Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him," his white friend Carl Van Vechten once wrote. The voice often is falsetto when Gordon sits back to tell stories of New York's intellectual society in the 1920s, taking all the parts in a party scene starring Sinclair Lewis, Rebecca West, Muriel Draper, Heywood Broun, Van Vechten, and a supporting cast of dozens of other personalities he hobnobbed with. But mostly the voice is tenor -- black tenor, fashioned for Negro spirituals.

In White Sulphur Springs, MONTANA, where Taylor Gordon was born on April 29, 1893, and where he has lived since returning from his wide-ranging career, he sang for my wife and me when we asked him to. He closes his eyes. The even teeth are the only white in the dark face. Then the voice, still strong and clear. The song rolls out of the house, just as six or seven decades ago the songs sung by Gordon's mother as she worked over her wash tub went out all through this end of town. ¹

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing,

To make a poet black and bid him sing!

--Countee Cullen

The voice still has life, but Taylor Gordon's reputation is forty years and two thousand miles from White Sulphur Springs, Montana. In the ^{late} 1920s, he was one of the leading Negro tenors in New York City, ranking not so far from Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes.

"You ever been before a big audience?" Taylor Gordon asks now. "No? Well, I tell you, you gotta know what you're doin' and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you come out, the first thing they challenge you right away, mentally, say: 'Well; what can you do?' And if you don't dominate 'em, they'll sure dominate you."²

In the Carl Van Vechten papers held by Yale University, there is an old concert program which cites the evening when dominating 'em on a big scale became vital to Gordon.

The Garrick Theatre in New York City, Sunday Evening, November 15, 1925, 8:40 P.M.

J. Rosamond Johnson, Arranger of the Book of American Negro Spirituals, and Taylor Gordon in a Program of Negro Spirituals.

On the border of the program is pencilled: "Dear Carl -- This was our starting point -- due to your efforts in persuading Mr. Langner to give us the start -- Yours, Rosamond."³

This start pitched Taylor Gordon into the 1920s of legend. Concert dates reviewed in the New York Times. The swirl of parties and nightclubbing. Appearances on network radio. Harlem in glory time. A book, written wild and free in the hours beyond midnight. The spree of success at last was smothered,

as was the Jazz Decade itself, by the Depression. But that is a chapter Taylor Gordon himself still vows to tell one day; the story for here and now is this black man's version of the 1920s and how he found his way in.

. . . laid on top of the Rocky Mountains, hatched out by the broiling sun, educated by the grizzly bear . . .

--Taylor Gordon to Carl and Fania Van Vechten,

February 6, 1926.

About fifty air miles east from Helena is White Sulphur Springs. Taylor Gordon grew up there, fighting his snowball fights and trudging across town to the grade school on the hill as hundreds of other White Sulphur boys have done. The sulphur spring burbling down on the flat probably divided young Taylor and his companions, as it has other generations of boys, into those who swore the hot, coarse water was the healthiest elixir a soul could imbibe and those who likened it to rotten eggs and wouldn't touch the stuff.

To adults, White Sulphur Springs mattered because it was the county seat and the supply center for outlying ranches and farms in Meagher County. To a boy, the town mattered mostly because it could be an interesting place to grow up.

It makes little sense for a white historian to try to describe the emotional side of a black person's life, in boyhood or in any other phase. The slurs and barbs have to be felt personally to be understood, it seems to me. But a black person's

own memories and words and actions can be examined, and that is what this article tries to do.

Also, the circumstances shaping the boyhood of a Taylor Gordon can be examined. By and large, they are what they are, whether or not they feel differently to a white skin. One circumstance was that Taylor Gordon's family was among the early settlers in White Sulphur Springs and was respected as upstanding and enterprising. His parents came from Kentucky, where his mother grew up in slavery on a plantation. Gordon's father left White Sulphur Springs when Taylor (Gordon) still was very young, but his mother took in washing and raised the four boys and one girl. Taylor and his sister, Rose, both have said they first encountered the real sharpness of prejudice away from their hometown.⁴

In larger terms, the little-noticed circumstance was that black men had a past in Montana about as long as the white man's. York, William Clark's slave, accompanied the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-6. In later decades, there were Negro cowboys on the Montana range, a contingent of an estimated five thousand Negro cowboys in the American West in the years after the Civil War. Two historians who have written about the black man in the West point out, however, that sharing the frontier heritage did not always gain Negroes a share of social respect:

"There were probably fewer Negro cowboys in Idaho and Montana than in any other part of the cattlemen's West. One

reason was race hatred and bitterness: early steamboat traffic up the Missouri had resulted in the immigration into Montana of many 'unreconstructed' Southerners and the simultaneous arrival of a number of transient Negro steamboat crewmen and river front roustabouts. . . ." ⁵

But in a way, the color line which hampered a black person provided Taylor Gordon with an education which made him a man of the world very quickly. Giving up on the classroom early in high school, he became an errand boy for local brothels and saloons -- the sort of job a community half-expected a black boy to fill. A series of odd jobs of the sort taught him to fend for himself, a training which later would stand him in good stead in New York City. Then he went to work for John Ringling.

Cont next

De gospel train's a-comin',

I hear it just at han';

I hear de car wheels movin',

An' rumblin' through de lan'.

Git on board, little chillen . . .

--From a Negro spiritual.

The great circus started by the Ringling family was flourishing, and John Ringling was a wealthy man. He had a reputation among the other Ringling brothers for investing -- apparently on hunch alone, sometimes -- anywhere in the country, buying up a streetcar line in one place, adding a steam laundry to his concerns in another. ⁶

John Ringling also was a railroad buff of the most venturesome sort: he liked to build short-line railroads. In Texas he built the Eastland, Wichita Falls, and Gulf line, which didn't happen to run to Wichita Falls, and in Missouri he built the St. Louis and Hannibal, which didn't go anywhere very near to St. Louis. In Montana he decided to build the White Sulphur Springs and Yellowstone Park line -- which still today operates about one hundred miles north of Yellowstone Park.⁷

Drawn to the area by his railroad visions, Ringling made various investments in and around White Sulphur Springs in the first decade of this century. Eventually the Ringling holdings included, besides the WSS & YP RR, a large house, an enormous dairy barn, and about 70,000 acres in various parts of Meagher County.⁸

Ringling's grandly-named little railroads at times brought him some joshing within the family, such as, "It may be only twenty miles long, but it's just as wide as anybody's railroad." Actually, John Ringling's railroading and other financial interests in Meagher County may be viewed as a worthwhile bet that White Sulphur Springs someday would emerge as a resort town.⁹

Ever since the town's birth just after the Civil War under the name of Brewer's Springs, various entrepreneurs have tried to profit from the mineral water which boils continuously from local springs. The notion of taking curative waters, after all, has not been restricted to the nineteenth century Europeans who

encamped at Baden-Baden and other spas. For a while the Montana Mineral Water Company bottled the White Sulphur Springs water and shipped it around the country for sale. The town's founder, James Brewer, built a bath house. During much of the town's history, gazebos built over sulphur springs have beckoned to anyone willing to try the therapeutic attractions of the water. John Ringling is said to have talked up the potentials of White Sulphur Springs in hope of gaining partners to develop the attractions of the mineral springs.¹⁰

But for all the hopes, including any which Ringling may have had, White Sulphur Springs remains a ranching and logging town, and young men such as Taylor Gordon frequently have felt the need to go elsewhere for bright lights and new experiences. Gordon went to John Ringling and got a job. Or, rather, jobs; at various times, he was Ringling's driver and a handyman on Ringling's private railroad car. Ringling was an indulgent employer who would hire a man back after he had quit and tried his hand elsewhere for awhile; he extended this rehiring policy even to a Chinese cook whose lone culinary talent seemed to be the ability to make "seventeen kinds of hash."¹¹

Taylor Gordon took his opportunity and left White Sulphur Springs in 1910, at the age of seventeen. For the next several years he tried various jobs, including whatever John Ringling would have available at the moment. He got to know Minneapolis and New York and had his first experience in the American South.¹²

Ringling had a winter home in Sarasota, Florida. When Gordon ran into racial threats, Ringling let it be known that anyone bothering Gordon would be tangling as well with Ringling and his considerable local influence.¹³

"They used to call me 'Ringling' all the time," Gordon laughs now. "And so, if anything happened wrong, anybody wanted to do somethin' to me, they'd say, 'Oh, don't do it, watch out for him, that's Ringling's boy.'"

Gordon was drafted a few days before Armistice Day, 1918. Soon after he was released from the army, he made his decision to try singing as a career. "I didn't start to sing until I thought I could make some money with it," he recalls.¹⁴

The decision to sing for his living led to Gordon's long association with a black musician named J. Rosamond Johnson.

Lift every voice and sing

Until earth and heaven ring.

--James Weldon Johnson.

Johnson was a singing teacher and arranger. His brother, James Weldon Johnson, wrote God's Trombones, and the two Johnsons eventually collaborated on a well-known anthology of American Negro spirituals. Shortly after World War One, Taylor Gordon turned up, informing Rosamond Johnson that he wanted to be a singer.¹⁵

Gordon grew up to the throb of his mother's spirituals, but had no professional training. In the latest of his roustabout

what one?
 jobs, he was working on a railroad. He stuck with the job and studied under Rosamond Johnson in his spare time.

"When I was railroadin'," he explains, "I could sing, learn how to sing better. I could get better time off to meet Mr. Johnson. At that time he had a school in Harlem, a colored music school in Harlem, and I could make my arrangements to meet him much easier by railroadin' than could any other job because he had limited time, y'know. . . ." ¹⁶

Self-discipline was required as well as the sessions with Johnson: "I used to do my calisthenics at midnight, running out of the Jersey Central station to the yard, about half a mile, so I could keep my western breath up." There was other self-study, too, which involved a little professional larceny:

"I'd sit there and hear Caruso, see, and listen. . . . I'd take his records and turn 'em way down low and steal from that. So I learned how to sing that way. . . . If you take a soprano or a tenor and turn 'em slow so they sound like a baritone, or a soprano sound like an alto, you can learn all their technique of what they're doin', see. But singin' fast, you'd never get it, see. Turn it slow and then you learn a tremendous lot about singin'." ¹⁷

Gordon's tenor voice was so promising that Rosamond Johnson brought him into a vaudeville act he was forming. For the next several years, the act -- under various names -- followed the vaudeville circuit, that round of stale theaters and night

what names?

trains which was either a performer's apprenticeship for the big time or just a lot of hard work.

The next in the series of acquaintanceships which did so much to boost Gordon's singing career: the break from the vaudeville circuit to concert appearances came from Carl Van Vechten.

A tall, well-built young man, he might have been a dutchman, a scandinavian or an american and he wore a soft evening shirt with the tiniest pleats all over the front of it. It was impressive, we had never even heard that they were wearing evening shirts like that.

Belongs in a footnote

--A first impression of Carl Van Vechten,
from Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein.

"Carl Van Vechten was a big man," Gordon describes his friend. "He was a big Dutchman, he had very buck teeth, rabbit teeth like, an' weighed about two hundred pounds, let's say, and was six feet tall. But he wasn't what they called a pot-bellied six. He was a prominent man, a very fine dresser. He dressed very immaculate . . . he liked two colors, two tones. He liked pants one color and his shirt another, tie another. . . . He wore rings, y'know, exotic rings, something that would stand out, or a bracelet, somethin' like that. He was quite a character. . . . Bein' a millionaire he could do those things." 18

Gordon once wrote that the first time he met him, Van Vechten was wearing "a phantom red New Mexican cowboy shirt."

Van Vechten, born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1880 and a critic and novelist in New York City by the 1920s, vividly played the white advocate for many black talents. "Go inspectin' like Van Vechten!" ran a line in the song Go Harlem. Other quarters showed less enthusiasm for Van Vechten's Harlem talent hunt. Time said in 1925: "Sullen-mouthed, silky-haired Author Van Vechten has been playing with Negroes lately, writing prefaces for their poems, having them around the house, going to Harlem." ¹⁹

In Vanity Fair and other magazines, Van Vechten praised Negro artists. As one of the better-known writers on the New York scene in the 1920s, Van Vechten also had enough money to help out a hard-pressed singer or writer. With enthusiasm, staying power, and money, Van Vechten reveled in his role of Park Avenue ambassador to Harlem.

To us on the outside it seems magnificent, a dream
come true, the doctor continued, sipping his Sauterne.
A Negro city almost as large as Rome!

-- Carl Van Vechten, in his novel Nigger Heaven.

Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

--Claude McKay, in Harlem Shadows.

Perhaps the greatest revelation to Taylor Gordon, arriving in New York as a young man from a cowtown, was not the urban glitter of the hugest American metropolis, but the fervent life of the black city within the city. Harlem was the black capital

of America. The most gifted of the Negro artists there in the 1920s were powerful talents by any measure: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes in poetry, Duke Ellington, James Weldon Johnson, and Paul Robeson in music. But the exclamatory term "Black Renaissance" owed most to the breadth of Harlem talent. The secondary writers and musicians who do solid work of their own and challenge the best of their colleagues into greatness are the marks of a genuine cultural movement. ²⁰

Harlem had such a squadron. Its reputation grew in both the black world and the white, despite occasional cynicism from each. Carl Van Vechten raged against white editors who regarded Negro artists as novelties, "like white elephants or black roses." The Negro novelist Wallace Thurman dubbed the black artists subsisting on the admiration of influential whites "the Niggerati." ²¹

Harlem was no bed of roses, black or any other shade. Some three hundred thousand Negroes had crowded into the neighborhood, and Harlem as the largest urban society of black people in this country had the tensions and smoldering tempers which go with any society. Color worked its prejudices even within Harlem. The Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway played some of the best music of any era, was known for its preference for "high yellow" complexions. And Taylor Gordon remembers 139th Street as "Scrivers' Row," the exclusive abode of black lawyers and doctors. ²²

But as with the 1920s being celebrated across town in the salons of the white intelligentsia, Harlem's 1920s had its material

for fond legend. Carl Van Vechten claimed he was drunk throughout the winter of 1925-6 and still managed to write a novel? Heywood Broun would excuse himself briefly from the poker table and return with the most literate column in America for tomorrow's New York World? Mabel Dodge^g~~we~~ collected artists as if they were performing puppies? The Harlem version, no less intriguing, ran more to the personalities of Marcus Garvey, Father Divine, and Madame Walker.

Garvey and Divine were popular leaders among Harlem's blacks, and Taylor Gordon's reminiscences will sketch them later in this article. Madame Walker deserves mention at this point because her Harlem parties mingled black performers such as Gordon with whites who took an interest in the careers of black performers.

Madame C.J. Walker was a St. Louis laundress who invented a method of straightening the crinkle out of Negro hair. Her product made her a millionaire; she built mansions in Harlem and at Irvington-on-the-Hudson and gave Harlem a rich streak of high society. When she died in 1919, her daughter, A'Leilia Walker Robinson, inherited both the money and the informal title "Madame Walker." It was this second Madame Walker of whom one history of Harlem relates: "At her 'salon,' the Negro intelligentsia met influential white people, particularly publishers, critics, and potential 'sponsors.'" ²³

Y "You are all a lost generation."

--Miss Gertrude Stein.

In The Making of the President 1964, Theodore H. White

offered the useful concept of the Perfumed Stockade -- the Manhattan enclave where "the image makers, the idea brokers, the dream packagers" mingle and affect our life style. In New York in the 1920s, similar to Mr. White's Perfumed Stockade in cohesiveness and durability rather than outlook or influence, there was a miniature of such an establishment. It might be called the Floating Salon. ²⁴

The Floating Salon was a mode of behavior, not a geographical setting or a firm grouping. Its wit was the Dorothy Parker-Alexander Woolcott brand which flashed across the dinner table and pinked the target low on the ego. Its entertainment was late and liquid. Its literary output generally showed more stylization than style. Maybe there is more than coincidence in the fact that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, both working their way to greatness, were not really members of the New York crowd.

Yet, the Floating Salon had a significance to its time, perhaps roughly the sort of significance a future historian may find in the New York Review of Books group of our own day. Some of the intellectual currents of the time showed up in the Salon's marathon conversations. Also, the Floating Salon had some importance because of the people it knew and what it could do for them. It chatted with Mencken when he was in town from Baltimore. It introduced English writers to American literary powers. It mixed writers with composers and actors with painters.

And as Taylor Gordon discovered, the Floating Salon was perfectly capable of providing you with a publisher, sponsors, and an illustrator if you had a book in mind.

The Van Vechten papers at Yale indicate that Carl Van Vechten and Taylor Gordon became acquainted in late 1925. By the spring of 1926 they were good friends, each acting as the other's guide into an exotic world. Gordon recounts: ²⁵

"They'd call me up, two or three clock in the morning, and say, 'We want to come to Harlem. What are you doing? Are you in bed? Get up, we want to see so and so and so.' And I'd get up and take 'em around. . . . They always wanted to have at least one colored person with 'em for protection, see, if any argument comes up." ²⁶

"I could kick you for not being at the theater tonight for the Hoofers midnight gambol," Gordon wrote to Van Vechten in May, 1926. "Oh but they had a corking good show." Missing such an event seems to have been rare for the eager Van Vechten.

"I remember one night we went to a party," Gordon told me in an interview. "Carl and I was dressed as in Harlem, dressed in kind of satire. . . . Some man gave both of us sam hill. He said ' . . . You got somethin' to offer the world. You don't have to do anything out of the ordinary, just be yourselves.' Carl laughed and said, 'Well, can't we have a little FUN?'" ²⁷

On his part of the exchange, Gordon found himself clinking glasses at parties jammed with bylines and stage names. "If

I wasn't talkin' about some trip or somethin' to the West, I kept my mouth shut," he recalls now. "Those people had college educations and experience of the world. Best way to be was just listen and drink."²⁸

Here are some of his impressions from the swirl of the 1920s:

On novelist Sinclair Lewis:

"We'd get down in Greenwich Village and Sinclair Lewis, in his apartment -- say, that Sinclair Lewis, he was somebody! You know, he could sing more spirituals than I could! Oh, we used to get down there three, four clock in the mornin' in his apartment. . . . Boy, he could really sing songs. He knew more songs. I knew about two hundred; I think he knew more than I did. . . . He knew more secular spirituals . . . like Methodist and Presbyterian songs. He knew 'em all. My mother -- I thought my mother knew a lot of 'em, but he . . ."²⁹

On writer Muriel Draper, author of Music at Midnight and a leading character in the Floating Salon:

"She was exotic. A little eccentric in her dress at times, see. . . . She had long hair. Her hair went clear down to her waist, and she'd always do it up tight, like you'd think she's wearin' a wig. One night we's at a party and some woman insinuated, thought that she had on a wig. So Muriel didn't say a thing, just took all the pins out of her hair and let it all clear down there. . . . She was an English-type woman,

sharp features. . . . She's a very fine elocutionist, you know, and she always talked with her lips kinda out, like so and so and so, every word had to be cut out just like that." ³⁰

On Rebecca West and other visiting English writers:

"Most all of them English people had a funny thing about comin' to a party. There would be forty-fifty people in a room, and if the party was supposed to be at eleven o'clock, they'd come in about twelve, twelve-thirty, and Muriel Draper'd be sittin' in this big chair. She had a great big queen chair, she'd be sitting back and she could observe everybody that hit the door, see. . . . Muriel says, 'Ooooh, so and so, and so and so!' Then they'd say, 'Aaaah!' Then the grand entry . . . whoever the celebrity was, they always got the grand slam. . . . I remember one time when Rebecca West came in, and I saw Rebecca standin' there. 'What's she waitin' for, what's she waitin' for?'

*Finally Muriel said, 'Ooooh, Rebecca!'

And then: 'Ooooh, Muriel!'

Everybody: 'Who was that?'

'That's REBECCA WEST!'" ³¹

On columnist Heywood Broun:

"Heywood Broun was a big fellow, weighed about two hundred and ten or twenty pounds, you know, about six feet two, and very fine sense of humor. . . . I met him downtown at lots of these parties, and he introduced me to more foreign people. He'd get

people from South Africa and from England and Australia and Japan and all over, all sorts of people in his home . . . Heywood was quite a friendly fellow. I always figured he's afraid he'd break the chair down, that's why he laid on the floor. Lay on the floor and get his glass and talk there." ³²

Messrs. Johnson and Gordon both possess voices which serve them faithfully and well; they sing with a fervor which carries conviction to the hearer . . .

-- The New York Times, March 1, 1926.

Although nostalgia has done its best to deny it, there was a working side of the 1920s. Even the Floating Salon took time, somehow, to write books and articles. Taylor Gordon and Rosamond Johnson were kept busy with concert appearances. Johnson's note about the "starting point" Carl Van Vechten helped them with in November, 1925, was well taken. On April 17, 1926, The New York Times remarked that the pair had sung in New York "on no fewer than 15 occasions this season." ³³

A typical program was likely to include twelve to fifteen Negro spirituals. Among the songs Gordon and Johnson would feature were Go Down, Moses; Done Foun' My Los' Sheep; It's Me, Oh Lord; Singin' wid a Sword in ma Han'; Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel; Witness; Father Abraham; and Band o' Gideon. Johnson had worked up musical arrangements for these songs when he and James Weldon Johnson prepared their book of spirituals. ³⁴

Peace! Good health, good appetite, prosperity, and
a heart full of merriness. I give you all and everything.

--Father Divine

But for all the success on the concert stage and the friendships in the white world, Gordon's life in the late 1920s centered on Harlem and the fact of being a Negro.

Two of the memorable figures in Harlem at the time made large careers out of their particular approaches to the fact of being black. Gordon recalls both Marcus Garvey and Father Divine.

Garvey established a Negro newspaper and the Black Star steamship line, but he is more clearly remembered for his back-to-Africa movement. Gordon remembers shaking his head about Garvey's financial manipulations in Harlem shortly before Garvey was sent to prison in 1925 on a charge of using the mails to defraud.³⁵

Father Divine, the small man who gathered a large religious following, left more striking memories with Gordon. He believes that Father Divine was a vital social agency when the community needed one:

"... When everybody was broke, a lot of people would go to Father Divine and get the best meal in the world for thirty-five cents, see. And you'd be surprised -- white, black, blue, green, and the other, they'd eat in Father Divine's, because when you couldn't eat downtown you could go to Father

Divine's and get a whole half a chicken. You could get a meal you couldn't pay two dollars for downtown for thirty-five cents, including ice cream dessert. . . . And he had 'em lined up, you'd thought a baseball game was goin' on." ³⁶

Taylor Gordon's own sense of being a black man in a white nation emerged as a book about his life. Born to Be was published in the autumn of 1929. Among the favorable reviews was one in the New York Herald Tribune Books, two pages after a review of a new work by young William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury. ³⁷

"I wouldn't have written Born to Be if it hadn't been for Carl," Gordon says now of Van Vechten's encouragement. "When I went to Europe, why, goin' around London I would see all these sights and I'd write back to Carl, and he'd read the letter to the group . . . So he wrote me back and he said, 'Your letters are such a tremendous success at the parties,' he says, 'you've gotta write a book when you come back.'

I said, 'Carl, I can't write a book. I can't even spell.'

'Don't worry about the spelling,' he says, 'you write the book.'

When I came back they kept after me . . . I'd say, 'Well, if you insist.'

I was singin' concert at the time and so . . . it didn't take me more than five or six months to write it. . . . I would write it between midnight and six o'clock in the morning,

because that's the time Harlem is the quietest and then nobody would bother me. When you write you gotta be holed up someplace. You can't write if anybody's gonna break into your continuity. . . . I wrote it in longhand, see, and when it come to typin' it out, I got Edna (Thomas). Edna had a Boston education, she was a very cultured woman. . . .

So she started typing my book, and Edna'd say, 'You can't put that down that way. That's just not so.'

'You put it down that way anyhow,' I'd say.

'Oh, my God, it'll be throwed in the wastepaper basket.' ³⁸

Some of Gordon's letters from Paris and London in 1927 are among Carl Van Vechten's papers, and they indeed are lively reading. "Man last night we were out to a party where we met ten Lords," runs one letter to "Carlo." From Paris he described the problems of getting used to French plumbing and concluded: "I must tell you this place is the place of the world so far." Even notes he wrote while home in Harlem showed a phrase-making knack which intrigued Van Vechten: "These Hot days, the black gals are glorifying 7th Ave." ³⁹

Under Van Vechten's urgings, Gordon shaped his experiences into the book. Muriel Draper provided editing help. Van Vechten paused during a vacation in Spain to write a preface. Miguel Covarrubias did the illustrations. Although Born to Be gave Gordon the satisfaction of having put his life into print and brought such comments as "delectable" and "amusing and

even exciting" from reviewers, the author soon wrote to Van Vechten that the work was a large financial dissapointment.⁴⁰

I wish the rent

Was Heaven sent.

--Langston Hughes.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression did not ruin any personal fortune for Taylor Gordon. "That's the consolation of never hoardin' any money," he says now of his absence from the national financial trauma. But he soon found that the Depression did affect him; musical bookings became scarce and white sponsors no longer could afford loans to black artists as in the past. Van Vechten helped Gordon, but the lean years hung on.⁴¹

Early in June, 1931, Gordon held a rent party in Harlem. A tenant low on funds would arrange for entertainment, send out invitations, and friends would pay a small admission fee; the rent party was one of the more convivial results of the Depression. Gordon's rent party was singularly convivial; it was "the season's most successful party," a Harlem newspaper reported, "for everybody except the rent man." Gordon lost ten dollars on the affair.⁴²

Meanwhile, he was working on other manuscripts and taking singing engagements wherever he could find them. A break came when he landed a role in the Fred Astaire stage musical, The Gay Divorce.⁴³ But by late 1935, Gordon returned to Montana.

"I wish you could take a picture of my whiskers!" he wrote to Carl Van Vechten after spending the next winter in the mountains. "If they were straight they'd be a FOOT LONG! I can pull them out, and let them snap back, and knock myself out at will. It's a new idea."⁴⁴

Gordon hopes to write a sequel⁴⁵ to Born to Be to cover his years after 1929. Living in White Sulphur Springs for the past several years, he has written and published The Man Who Built the Stone Castle, a small book about a Meagher County rancher and mining man named Byron R. Sherman.

Two of the most vivid parts of our history, at least as we generally think of them, were the frontier days and the 1920s. Taylor Gordon's story combines both -- a boyhood in White Sulphur Springs, a concert career in the Twenties. This black Montanan has been through a remarkable portion of our history -- "Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him."

I wonder what I was born to be.

--Taylor Gordon.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Interview with Taylor Gordon by the author, July 3, 1968;
subsequent references to this source will be designated TG.

²Ibid.

³From the Carl Van Vechten Papers in the Yale Collection of
American Literature. Subsequent references to this source
will be designated CVV. The author is indebted to the Yale
University Library for permission to examine copies of material
relating to Taylor Gordon and for permission to quote from it.

⁴Born to Be, New York, 1929, ch. 1; TG.

⁵Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, The Negro Cowboys, New York,
1965, 3, 140.

⁶Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, The Circus Kings, Garden
City, N.Y., 1966, 138.

⁷Ibid., 138-9.

⁸Ibid., 138.

⁹Ibid., 139.

¹⁰Early attempts to develop the springs are discussed in Meagher
County: An Early-Day Pictorial History, 1867-1967, 12.

¹¹Circus Kings, 137.

¹²TG.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵The Book of American Negro Spirituals, New York, 1925; TG.

¹⁶TG.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid. Van Vechten's story is well told in the biography by
Bruce Kellner, Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades, Norman,
Okla., 1968. An earlier and briefer study is by Edward Lueders --
Carl Van Vechten and the Twenties, Albuquerque, 1955.

¹⁹Kellner, Irreverent Decades, 133, 3, 198, 195.

²⁰A useful perspective on Harlem in the 1920s has been provided by Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby, eds., The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History, New York, 1967.

²¹Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, New York, 1948, 257; Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 245-6.

²²Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 248-9; TG.

²³Ibid., 237-9, 259; TG.

²⁴Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1964, New York, 63.

²⁵CVV.

²⁶TG.

²⁷Letter of May 13, 1926, CVV; TG.

²⁸TG.

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²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³New York Times, April 17, 1926, 14.

³⁴Concert program, CVV; The Book of American Negro Spirituals.

³⁵TG.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷New York Herald Tribune Books, October 13, 1929, 5.

³⁸TG.

³⁹Letter of July 19, 1927, CVV; letter of May 30, 1927, CVV;
letter of June 30, 1929, CVV.

⁴⁰Letter of November 30, 1930, CVV.

⁴¹TG.

⁴² Clipping from the Inter-State Tattler, June 4, 1931, CVV; letter
of June 6, 1931, CVV.

⁴³ CVV.

⁴⁴ Letter of April 25, 1936, CVV.

⁴⁵ TG; Taylor Gordon, The Man Who Built the Stone Castle, White
Sulphur Springs, Montana, 1967.

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TAYLOR GORDON: BLACK MAN SINGING

~~Taylor Gordon~~. "Lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laugh, and all the rest of him," his white friend, Carl Van Vechten, once wrote. The voice often is falsetto when ^{Taylor} Gordon sits back to tell stories of New York's intellectual society in the 1920s, taking all the parts in a party scene featuring Sinclair Lewis, Rebecca West, Muriel Draper, Heywood Broun, Van Vechten, and a supporting cast of dozens of other personalities, ^{with whom} he hobnobbed with. But mostly the voice is tenor -- black tenor, fashioned for Negro spirituals.

In White Sulphur Springs, Montana, where Taylor Gordon was born on April 29, 1893, and where he ^{has} lived since returning from his wide-ranging career, he ^{recently} sang for my wife and me when we asked him to. He closes his eyes. The even teeth are the

only white in the dark face. Then the voice, strong and clear.

The songs ^{they did} roll out of the house, just as ^{when} six or seven decades ^{sang} ago ^{in White Sulphur Springs,} the songs sung by Taylor's mother as she worked over her wash tub went out all through this end of town.

^{Taylor Harbours} The voice still has life, but ^{his} Taylor Gordon's reputation is ^{this western Montana town.} forty years and two thousand miles from White Sulphur Springs,

Montana. In the late 1920s, he was one of the leading Negro tenors in New York City, ranking not ^{behind} so far from Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes. He was Somebody, just as he had been determined to be. The years of success came after much drifting and bouncing, but this ~~small town~~ Montanan shows the toughness which took him through to where he wanted to go.

"You ever been before a big audience?" Taylor Gordon asks now. "No? Well, I tell you, you gotta know what you're doin' and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you come out, the first thing they challenge you right away, mentally, say: 'Well; what can you do?' And if you don't dominate 'em, they'll sure dominate you."

In the Carl Van Vechten papers held by Yale University ^{in New Haven, Conn.,} there is an old concert program which cites the evening when ^{Taylor} "dominating 'em on a big scale became vital to Gordon." ^{Time and place:} The Garrick Theatre in New York City, Sunday evening, November 15, 1925, 8:40 p.m. ^{The program reads:}

"J. Rosamond Johnson, Arranger of the Book of American Negro Spirituals, and Taylor Gordon in a Program of Negro Spirituals."

On the border of the program is pencilled: "Dear Carl --
This was our starting-point -- due to your efforts in persuading
Mr. Langner to give us the start -- Yours, Rosamond." ✓

This start pitched Taylor Gordon into the 1920's of legend:
Concert dates reviewed in the New York Times, The swirl of
parties and nightclubbing, Appearances on network radio, Harlem
in glory time, A book, written wild and free in the hours
beyond midnight. The spree of success, at last ~~was~~ smothered ^{was} --
as was the Jazz Decade itself, by the Depression. But that
is a chapter Gordon himself still vows to tell one day; the
story for here and now is this black man's career in the 1920's
and how he found his way to it.

If there can be such demeanor, there is a slangy courtliness
about Taylor Gordon. His talk is as much Harlem as Montana,
bright and slippery with unfinished words, shortcuts right through
some sentences, and the hard-edged irony a black man learns
in a white society. It all tumbles from a tall, erect man who ^{now 76 years old}
~~(always)~~ seems more impressive than his surroundings, whatever
they happen to be. ^R He is a good-looking man. Photos show that
in the 1920s he was a very good-looking man. His face makes
the right moves; that is, it lines into full joy when he laughs,
turns ^{intently} ~~scholarly~~ serious as he tries to pry a name from memory,
changes moods like stage lighting to accompany the story he is
telling. He is of the same cut as many men of my father's
generation in Montana: the weathered types born and raised there
around the turn of the century who now are the old cowboys,

the storytellers, the elders of the tribe. The difference is that Taylor Gordon is black -- and that is a difference which has put his story into a perspective little noticed in American history until recent years.

About fifty air miles east from Helena is White Sulphur Springs, where Taylor Gordon grew up. He fought his snowball fights and trudged across town to the grade school on the hill as hundreds of other White Sulphur boys have done. The sulphur spring, burbling down on the flat, probably divided young Taylor and his companions ^{as} as it has other generations of boys ^{into} into those who swore the hot, coarse water was the healthiest elixir a soul could imbibe and those who likened it to rotten eggs and wouldn't touch the stuff.

To adults, White Sulphur Springs mattered because it was the county seat and the supply center for outlying ranches and farms in Meagher County. To a boy, the town mattered because it was ^{his} ^{for} a place ~~of~~ growing up.

It makes little sense for a white historian to try to describe the emotional side of a black person's life, in boyhood or in any other phase, ^{and wherever it may have been lived.} The slurs and barbs surely have to be felt personally to be understood. But a black person's own memories and words and actions can be examined, and that is what this article ^{will strive} tries to do.

^{certainly} Also, the circumstances shaping the boyhood of a Taylor Gordon can be examined. ~~By and large, they are what they are,~~

~~to not have the color of skin.~~
 whether or not they feel differently to a white skin. One circumstance was that Taylor Gordon's family was among the early settlers in White Sulphur Springs and was respected as upstanding and enterprising. His parents came from Kentucky, where his mother grew up in slavery on a plantation. His father left White Sulphur Springs when Taylor still was very young¹ but his mother took in washing and raised ^{her} the four boys and one girl. Taylor and his sister, Rose, both have said they first encountered the real sharpness of prejudice away from their hometown.²

In larger terms, the little-noticed circumstance was that black men had a past in Montana about as long as the white man's. York, William Clark's ^{servant} slave, accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition, ~~of 1804-6~~. In later decades, there were Negro cowboys on the Montana range, a contingent of an estimated five thousand Negro cowboys in the American West in the years after the Civil War. ⁷ Two historians who have written about the black man in the West point out, however, that sharing the frontier heritage did not always gain Negroes a share of social respect:

"There were probably fewer Negro cowboys in Idaho and Montana than in any other part of the cattlemen's West. One reason was race hatred and bitterness: early steamboat traffic up the Missouri had resulted in the immigration into Montana of many 'unreconstructed' Southerners and the simultaneous arrival of a number of transient Negro steamboat crewmen and river front

roustabouts. . . ." ³

But in a way, the color line which hampered a black person provided Taylor Gordon with an ~~education~~ ^{experience} which ^{quickly} made him a man of the world ^{(very) quickly}. Giving up on the classroom early in high school, he became an errand boy for local brothels and saloons -- the sort of job a community half-expected a black boy to fill. A series of odd jobs of the sort taught him to fend for himself, a training which later stood him in good stead ⁽¹⁾ ~~in New York City.~~ Then he went to work for John Ringling.

The great circus started by the Ringling family was flourishing, and John Ringling was a wealthy man. He had a reputation among the other Ringling brothers for investing -- ^{Sometimes} ~~apparently~~ on hunch alone, ~~sometimes~~ -- anywhere in the country, buying up a streetcar line in one place, adding a steam laundry to his concerns in another. ⁴

^{Moreover,} Ringling ~~also~~ was a railroad buff of the most venturesome sort: he liked to build short-line railroads. In Texas he built the Eastland, Wichita Falls, and Gulf line, which didn't happen to run to Wichita Falls, and in Missouri he built the St. Louis and Hannibal, which didn't go anywhere very near to St. Louis. In Montana he decided to build the White Sulphur Springs and Yellowstone Park line -- which still today operates about one hundred miles north of Yellowstone Park. ⁵

Drawn to the area by his railroad visions, Ringling made various investments in and around White Sulphur Springs in the first decade of this century. Eventually the Ringling holdings

railroad,
included, besides the ~~WSS & YP RR~~, a large house, an enormous dairy barn, and about 70,000 acres in various parts of Meagher County.⁶

~~For all the hopes on behalf of White Sulphur Springs down through the years, including any hopes which the enterprising Ringling may have had, the town remains a ranching and logging community. Young men such as Taylor Gordon frequently have felt the need to go elsewhere for bright lights and new experiences. His mother's life of taking in washing to feed and clothe the family may have set young Taylor toward farther goals. Certainly to talk with Taylor Gordon today is to talk with a man curious about the taste of that world beyond the horizon from home.~~

⁷ Gordon went to John Ringling and got a job, ^{or, rather, jobs} ~~or, rather, jobs~~. At various times, he was Ringling's driver, and a handyman on Ringling's private railroad car. Ringling was an indulgent employer who would hire a man back after he had quit and tried his hand elsewhere for awhile; he extended this rehiring policy even to a Chinese cook whose lone culinary talent seemed to be the ability to make "seventeen kinds of hash."⁹

In 1910, at the age of seventeen, Taylor Gordon took his opportunity and left White Sulphur Springs. For the next several years he tried various jobs, including whatever John Ringling would have available at the moment. He got to know Minneapolis and New York and had his first experience in the American South. Ringling had a winter home in Sarasota, Florida. When Gordon

ran into racial threats, Ringling let it be known that anyone bothering Gordon would be tangling as well with Ringling and his considerable local influence.¹⁰

"They used to call me 'Ringling' all the time," Gordon laughs now. "And so, if anything happened wrong, anybody wanted to do somethin' to me, they'd say, 'Oh, don't do it, watch out for him, that's Ringling's boy.'"

Gordon was drafted a few days before Armistice Day, 1918, *and in his own words, 'stayed in the army six days. They turned me out one of the highest paid men in the army... eleven dollars a day and home costs.'* Soon after he was released from the army, he made his decision

to try singing as a career. "I didn't start to sing until I thought I could make some money with it," he recalls. The decision to sing for his living led to Gordon's long association with a black musician named J. Rosamond Johnson. Johnson was a singing teacher and arranger in New York City. His brother, James Weldon Johnson, wrote God's Trombones, and the two Johnsons eventually collaborated on a well-known anthology of American Negro spirituals. Shortly after World War One, Taylor Gordon turned up at Rosamond Johnson's school, informing Johnson that he wanted to be a singer.⁹

Gordon grew up to the throb of his mother's spirituals, but had no professional training. *Although he* For a man who had hopped from job to job *to support himself,* he showed *his capacity for* remarkable *in music.* persistence Gordon makes it plain, in talking about his life, that he always has been a man who liked a good time. By the end of World War One, ^I he had seen some of the world through the

life style of John Ringling. Under such opulent tutelage, surely he had not failed to notice that the way to the high life was via money and reputation; a singing career was his first chance at any appreciable denomination of either. In the latest of his roustabout jobs, he was working on a railroad. He stuck with the job and studied under Rosamond Johnson in his free time.

"When I was railroadin'," he explains, "I could sing, learn how to sing better. I could get better time off to meet Mr. Johnson. At that time he had a school in Harlem, a colored music school in Harlem, and I could make my arrangements to meet him much easier by railroadin' than could any other job because he had limited time, y'know. . . ."

Self-discipline was required as well as the sessions with Johnson: "I used to do my calisthenics at midnight, running out of the Jersey Central station to the yard, about half-a-mile, so I could keep my western breath up." There was other self-study, too, which involved a little professional larceny:

"I'd sit there and hear Caruso, see, and listen. . . . I'd take his records and turn 'em way down low and steal from that. So I learned how to sing that way. . . . If you take a soprano or a tenor and turn 'em slow so they sound like a baritone, or a soprano sound like an alto, you can learn all their technique of what they're doin', see. But singin' fast, you'd never get it, see. Turn it slow and then you learn a

tremendous lot about singin'." ¹³

Gordon's tenor voice was so promising that Rosamond Johnson ¹⁴ brought him into a vaudeville act he was forming. For the next several years, the act followed the vaudeville circuit, that round of stale theaters and night trains which was either a performer's apprenticeship for the big time or only a lot of hard work.

The next in the series of acquaintanceships which did so much to boost Gordon's singing career: the break from the vaudeville circuit to concert appearances came from Carl Van Vechten.

"Carl Van Vechten was a big man," Gordon describes his friend. "He was a big Dutchman, he had very buck teeth, rabbit teeth like, and weighed about two hundred pounds, let's say, and was six feet tall. But he wasn't what they called a pot-bellied six. He was a prominent man, a very fine dresser. He dressed very immaculate . . . he liked two colors, two tones. He liked pants one color and his shirt another, tie another. . . . He wore rings, y'know, exotic rings, something that would stand out, or a bracelet, somethin' like that. He was quite a character. . . . Bein' a millionaire he could do those things." ¹⁵

Gordon once wrote that the first time he met him, Van Vechten was wearing "a phantom red New Mexican cowboy shirt." Van Vechten, born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1880 and a critic and novelist in New York City by the 1920s, vividly played

the white advocate for many black talents. "Go inspectin' like Van Vechten!" ran a line in the song Go Harlem. Other quarters showed less enthusiasm for Van Vechten's Harlem talent hunt.

Time said in 1925: "Sullen-mouthed, silky-haired Author Van Vechten has been playing with Negroes lately, writing prefaces for their poems, having them around the house, going to Harlem." ¹⁵

In Vanity Fair and other magazines, Van Vechten praised Negro artists. As one of the better-known writers on the New York scene in the 1920s, he also had enough money to help out a hard-pressed singer or writer. With enthusiasm, staying power, and his money, Van Vechten reveled in his role of Park Avenue ambassador to Harlem.

Starting with the boost from Van Vechten in November, 1925, Gordon and Rosamond Johnson were kept busy with concert appearances.

Johnson's note about the "starting point" Van Vechten helped them with was well taken. In several years together, the Johnson-

Gordon act ^{had} scarcely ^{had} risen above the vaudeville circuit. Gordon

reveals the brunt of that circuit when he points to a television

set and says of today's performers: "They didn't have to work

on the stage where the guys up in the balcony could throw shoes

at you and pennies and cans at you if you weren't good." But

with the lift to the concert circuit in late 1925, ^{was signed up by Van Vechten,} the pair

found better times. On April 17, 1926, the New York Times remarked

that ^{Johnson and Gordon} they had sung in New York "on no fewer than 15 occasions

this season." Their reviews in the Times usually were along the

no sense