

lines of this comment on March 1, 1926: "Messrs. Johnson and Gordon both possess voices which serve them faithfully and well; they sing with a fervor which carries conviction to the hearer . . ." <sup>10</sup>

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. Gordon sang many of the songs solo, with Johnson as piano accompanist. <sup>13</sup>

For the rest of the 1920's, Taylor Gordon's reputation as a singer was his passport into two remarkable American cultures, New York's Harlem and her white high society. While the two overlapped in a few places, Gordon moved in both of them. As he ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ reminisces today, however, it is plain that they were two separate worlds. Perhaps, unconsciously, he groups his memories about each into separate sets.

To hear him tell it, ~~perhaps~~ the greatest revelation to Taylor <sup>Lein,</sup> Gordon, arriving in New York as a young man who <sup>from</sup> ~~grew up in~~ a <sup>Mountain</sup> cowntown, was not the urban glitter of the hugest American metropolis, but the fervent life of the black city within the <sup>metropolis.</sup> 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 and Langston Hughes in poetry, Duke Ellington,

think this could change slightly to give more sense like "came from" "had its origins in" "was caused by"

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. <sup>14</sup>

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." Negro novelist Wallace Thurman dubbed the black artists subsisting on the admiration of influential whites "the Niggerati." <sup>15</sup>

Harlem was no bed of roses, black, <sup>and</sup> or any other shade. Gordon's letters to Van Vechten, although generally written in a bemused tone, make this clear. Some <sup>File</sup> three hundred thousand Negroes <sup>produced in</sup> had crowded into the neighborhood, and Harlem, <sup>as the</sup> largest urban society of black people in this country, <sup>scored</sup> had the tensions and smoldering tempers (which go with any society).

<sup>Good example</sup> Color worked its prejudices, <sup>(even within Harlem)</sup> 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 <sup>was</sup> Gordon remembers 139th Street as "Scriver's Row," the exclusive abode of black lawyers and doctors. <sup>16</sup>

As with the <sup>was</sup> 1920s being celebrated across town in the salons of the white intelligentsia, <sup>The Blacks of the year</sup> Harlem's 1920s had its material for fond legend. Carl Van Vechten claimed he was drunk throughout

The two parts of the sentence were inverted.

in Harlem

the winter of 1925-6 and still managed to write a novel?, Heywood Broun would excuse himself briefly from the card table and return with the most literate column in America for tomorrow's New York World? Mabel Dodge collected artists as if they were performing puppies? The Harlem versions, no less intriguing, ran more to the personalities of Father Divine and Madame Walker. Father Divine was a social revelation to Taylor Gordon; Madame Walker provided his entry into white high society.

Gordon is a man of definite views on issues. He 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~~ <sup>him</sup>. He believes that Father Divine was a vital social agency when the Harlem 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."<sup>21</sup>

For Gordon, as for many Harlem residents, the ultimate in black high society was Madame C.J. Walker. Madame Walker was

a St. Louis laundress who invented a method of straightening the crinkle out of hair. In those days <sup>long</sup> before the Afro look and "natural" hair styles, some <sup>enough</sup> blacks regarded kinky hair as a stigma <sup>to make</sup>. Madame Walker's 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.'" It worked that way for Taylor Gordon. <sup>22</sup>

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 could be called the Floating Salon. <sup>23</sup>

The Floating Salon was a mode of behavior, not a geographical setting or a firm grouping. Its wit was the Dorothy Parker-Alexander Woollcott 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 it was more than coincidence that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, both working their way to greatness, were not members of the New York crowd.

Yet, the Floating Salon had a significance <sup>in its</sup> 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 H.L. 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, editorial advice, 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 way of the conjunction between Madame Walker's gatherings and the Floating Salon. By the spring of 1926 they were good friends, each acting as the other's guide into an exotic world. Gordon recounts:<sup>24</sup>

"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."<sup>25</sup>

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

"I remember one night we went to a party," Gordon said 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?'"<sup>26</sup>

On his part of the exchange, Gordon found himself clinking *white intelligentsia* 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."<sup>27</sup>

In many ways, Gordon is a wary man. He will look at you carefully now and again as he decides if you are worth *(any)* trust. He believes that ideas and chances have been filched from him in the past. Also, he has had his share of the mean *(experiences so many blacks have undergone, in this (predominantly) white nation.* But when he talks today about the swirl of white

society he moved in during the late 1920s, he is unreservedly full of praise. In his case, at least, the entry token was talent, not color. He makes no claim to having been an intimate friend of all the white writers and artists he partied with, but it is evident that he watched the scene intently and with a sense of the era. His reminiscences are the sort of social history which is easily lost, and with it, the feel of a period and its people. Here, from a taped interview, are a few of his impressions from the elegant 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 . . ."

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."<sup>29</sup>

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!'"<sup>30</sup>

On columnist Heywood Broun:

"Heywood Broun was a big fellow, weighed about two hundred

making knack which intrigued Van Vechten: "These Hot days, the black gals are glorifying 7th Ave." <sup>34</sup>

Under Van Vechten's urgings, Gordon shaped his experiences into the book. Van Vechten correctly judged that Gordon is a gifted storyteller, and the task was to get the tones and nuances into print. Muriel Draper provided editing help. Van Vechten paused during a vacation in Spain to write a preface. Miguel ~~Covarrubias~~ <sup>Y</sup>arrubias 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 disappointment. <sup>35</sup>

It was not the only disappointment of the sort for Taylor Gordon in 1929 and the years after. "I wish the rent/was Heaven sent," black poet Langston Hughes wrote, and he could have been writing Gordon's case history. Not that the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression ruined any personal fortune for 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 <sup>could</sup> no longer could afford loans to black artists as in the past. Musical trends shifted; concert seasons for a singer of spirituals vanished. Van Vechten helped Gordon, <sup>financially</sup> but the lean years hung on. <sup>36</sup>

Early in June, 1931, Gordon held a rent party in Harlem, <sup>one of the more convivial results of the depression.</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup>

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 Divorcee.<sup>38</sup> But by late 1935, Gordon returned to Montana.

*Staf's why*

"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."<sup>39</sup>

Gordon hopes to write a sequel 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.<sup>40</sup>

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."

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and ten or twenty pounds, you know, about six feet two, <sup>had a</sup> 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."<sup>31</sup>

Out of such company, and especially out of Van Vechten's friendship, emerged the idea of a book by Gordon. Writing an autobiography is no small undertaking for a person who dropped out of high school. But then, any reader of Gordon's book, Born to Be, comes away aware of the staying power, the quest to be Somebody, that went into the writing. 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.<sup>32</sup>

"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 thrown in the wastepaper basket.'" <sup>33</sup>

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 <sup>the</sup> notes which he wrote while home in Harlem showed <sup>the</sup> a phrase-

whose  
words?

meaning?

## FOOTNOTES

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

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>3</sup>From 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.

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<sup>4</sup>Taylor Gordon, Born to Be, New York, 1929, ch. 1; TG.

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

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

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<sup>7</sup>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 someday would 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 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 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 hope of gaining partners to develop the attractions of the mineral springs.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 138.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 137.

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<sup>10</sup>OTG.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, The Book of American Negro Spirituals, New York, 1925.

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<sup>12</sup>OTG.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 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.

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<sup>15</sup>Kellner, Irreverent Decades, 133, 3, 198, 195.

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<sup>16</sup>TG; New York Times, April 17, 1926, March 1, 1926.

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<sup>17</sup>Concert program, CVV; The Book of American Negro Spirituals.

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<sup>18</sup>A 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.

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<sup>19</sup>Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, New York, 1948, 257; Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 245-6.

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<sup>20</sup>CVV; Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 248-9; TG.

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<sup>21</sup>TG.

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<sup>22</sup>Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 237-9, 259; TG.

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<sup>23</sup>Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1964, New York,

63.

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<sup>24</sup>CVV.

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<sup>25</sup>TG.

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<sup>26</sup>Letter of May 13, 1926, CVV; TG.

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<sup>27</sup>TG.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>32</sup>New York Herald Tribune Books, October 13, 1929, 5.

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<sup>33</sup>TG.

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<sup>34</sup>Letter of July 19, 1927, CVV; letter of May 30, 1927, CVV;  
letter of June 30, 1929, CVV.

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<sup>35</sup>Letter of November 30, 1930, CVV.

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36  
TG.

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

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38  
CVV.

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39 Letter of April 25, 1936, CVV.

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

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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~~ <sup>was</sup> often falsetto when ~~Gordon sits~~ <sup>Taylor sat</sup> back to tell stories of New York's intellectual and artistic society in the 1920's, <sup>assuming</sup> <sup>role</sup> taking all the parts in a party scene that might feature Sinclair Lewis, Rebecca West, Muriel Draper, Heywood Broun, Van Vechten, and a supporting cast of dozens of other personalities with whom he hobnobbed. But mostly <sup>however</sup> the voice ~~is~~ <sup>was</sup> tenor -- black tenor, fashioned for the Negro spirituals he <sup>dramatically</sup> sang so well.

He was a leading Negro singer in New York City during the 1920's, applauded by a New Republic critic as Paul Robeson's "latest rival" in performing spirituals. In the summer of 1968, when he was 75 years old and his artistic reputation was four hard decades behind him, he sang for my wife and me when we interviewed him at his home

in White Sulphur Springs, Montana. The power we heard that afternoon has kept the scene vivid for me. Taylor Gordon

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

*abruptly*  
"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."

Emmanuel Taylor Gordon was born in White Sulphur Springs on April 29, 1893, and died there on May 5, 1971. In the time between those gravestone dates, he made himself into a singer. 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 from the Garrick Theatre in New York City testifies to the moment when his determination finally paid off.

~~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."

Mannie Gordon from Montana, ~~who earned his first money~~ <sup>number of</sup> 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 <sup>then</sup> set the exuberant tempo <sup>then</sup> 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 <sup>as</sup> enjoyed ~~during the roaring years~~.

His appearance and personal style helped, too. He was an erect, striking figure; in the 1920's, he was a very striking figure. Even in his last years, his face would change moods like stage lighting to accompany whatever story he was telling, lining into full joy when he laughed, turning intently serious as he pried a name from memory. He had a slangy courtliness; his talk was as much Harlem as Montana, bright and slippery with unfinished words, <sup>with</sup> shortcuts right through some sentences, and <sup>with</sup> the hard-edged irony a black man learns in a white society.

Gordon <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ of the same cut as many men of my father's generation in Montana: the weathered types born and raised there

*where?*

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

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, <sup>and that is what this</sup>  
 article tries to do. <sup>precise</sup>

White Sulphur Springs, where Taylor Gordon grew up, is about  
 fifty air miles east from Helena. <sup>There</sup> 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 -- <sup>Taylor became his stage name</sup> Mannie to his friends --  
 was from a Negro family made little difference in his early  
 childhood, ~~he says now~~ <sup>insisted in later years</sup>. His mother did not make a point of  
 race; years later, when Gordon made his first trip to Florida,  
<sup>well</sup> he would be astonished at how many black people there were.

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~~ <sup>later said</sup> 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. <sup>4.</sup>

Moreover, Ringling <sup>he</sup> 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

happen to run to Wichita Falls, and in Missouri he owned the St. Louis and Hannibal, which didn't go very near ~~St. Louis~~ <sup>to</sup> 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. <sup>5.</sup>

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. <sup>6.</sup>

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 <sup>the</sup> age <sup>of</sup> seventeen, Gordon went to New York on a railroad pass supplied by Ringling, ~~ready to work and see what fortune would bring.~~ <sup>He</sup> 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,~~ <sup>he admits,</sup> ~~over his excitement.~~

Through Ringling, he came to know Minneapolis and New York, and had his first experience <sup>in</sup> with the American South. Running errands from Ringling's winter home in Sarasota, <sup>Florida,</sup> 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 <sup>ad</sup>  
~~as he looked back to that Southern exposure~~  
~~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 <sup>of</sup> 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 <sup>ad</sup>.

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 <sup>the</sup> a lengthy preface.

Gordon quit Ringling once again, setting himself for a  
 schedule of discipline and hard work. He took a railroad job, <sup>ad</sup>  
~~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 <sup>hard.</sup> 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 <sup>also</sup> tried a touch of professional larceny, ~~too~~. While with John Ringling, Gordon had <sup>heard</sup> ~~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, <sup>which</sup> Rosamond Johnson was forming, "The Inimitable Five," For the next five years, <sup>as</sup> Gordon recalls, <sup>ed it</sup> this singing group followed the circuit, that round of stale theaters and night trains which was either a performer's apprenticeship for the big time or <sup>simply</sup> only a lot of hard work.

Scornfully comparing vaudeville acts to modern television performers, Gordon <sup>said in later life,</sup> 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

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 <sup>face appearing</sup> head sticking out of the pantry door reassured <sup>the musicians</sup> 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 ~~the~~ 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." <sup>when Gordon knew him,</sup> 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. <sup>7.</sup>

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

"Go Harlem." Other quarters showed less enthusiasm for his talent hunt. Time magazine <sup>chided</sup> 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. <sup>8.</sup>

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. <sup>N</sup> 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 <sup>f</sup>, Gordon demonstrated <sup>remarkable</sup> 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, . . . ." <sup>9.</sup>

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

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

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.<sup>10.</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup>

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."

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, <sup>but</sup> still managing to write another novel; <sup>even so</sup> Heywood Brown supposedly would excuse himself ~~briefly~~ from the card table <sup>shortly after having written</sup> and return <sup>with</sup> 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 <sup>felt</sup> ~~foels~~ 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 <sup>revised</sup> ~~believes~~ that Father Divine <sup>↓</sup> 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,

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' <sup>12.</sup>" 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 Woollcott 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

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 <sup>recalled.</sup> ~~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~~

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~~<sup>was</sup> a wary man who ~~has~~ had his share of the mean experiences so many blacks have undergone in this predominantly white nation, he ~~speaks~~<sup>spots</sup> 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~~<sup>made</sup> no claim to having been an intimate of all the writers and artists he partied with, it ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> evident ~~that~~<sup>from his reminiscences</sup> 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~~<sup>said</sup>:

"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."

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?'

'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." <sup>13.</sup>

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 Salon.

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

Of Paris, he wrote: "I must tell you this place is the place of the world so far." <sup>15.</sup>

Gordon's perceptions and turns of phrase impressed Van Vechten.   
 As Gordon remembers <sup>edit</sup> ". . . 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 singing concert at the time," he recalls <sup>edit</sup>, "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 <sup>thirty-six</sup> 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.

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

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 <sup>from</sup> (now parted with Rosamond Johnson) could get few bookings.

Now that his autobiography was a financial failure and singing engagements <sup>were</sup> 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~~ <sup>assured me during an interview</sup>: "That's the consolation of never hoardin' any money." Van Vechten helped him financially <sup>even</sup> but <sup>time after time,</sup> that was not enough. <sup>with his concert dates</sup> And the crowd of eager sponsors and admirers dwindled.

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

Hughes wrote in a line that was the <sup>theme</sup> 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. <sup>17.</sup>

Gordon continued working on other manuscripts and taking singing jobs when they turned up. He ~~remembers being~~ <sup>was</sup> in the cast of a Heywood Brown-sponsored "cooperative" musical. He also landed a minor role in the Cole Porter stage musical, Gay Divorce, which starred Fred Astaire and Claire Luce.

By late 1935, however, he returned home to Montana, broke. After the first winter back in the mountains near White Sulphur Springs, 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." <sup>18.</sup>

It was false jollity. ~~however~~. He hungered to get back to the good times in New York; his letters to Van Vechten abounded with plans to return east. For several years he had tinkered with small inventions -- mostly toys and games -- and he still hoped to hit it rich with one. Also, he was writing a second book, a novel he called Daonda. These hard years were made even more cruel by his suspicion that publishers and movie companies were stealing ideas from his writing.

This period of his life -- from the middle 1930's until he returned to White Sulphur Springs for good in 1959 -- Gordon would not

be interviewed about. He insisted that he was saving the material for a sequel to Born to Be, in which all the injustices he suffered would be revealed. But his correspondence with Van Vechten in those years shows that he attempted an endless series of lawsuits on grounds of plagiarism. His most persistent delusion, which he nurtured the rest of his life, was that John Steinbeck had plagiarized sections of The Grapes of Wrath from the unpublished manuscript of Daonda.

A 1946 letter from Gordon to Van Vechten was replete with excerpts from Daonda and from Steinbeck's novel to "prove" the theft. It was a pathetic claim. Steinbeck had written of such events as a revival meeting and an auto trip ~~through~~<sup>across</sup> mountains in telling the story of his Okies, and so had Gordon in the narrative about his Negro cast of characters. But the specific incidents had no real similarity, and Steinbeck's prose clearly owed nothing to Gordon's amateur effort. Perhaps saddest of all, the Daonda excerpts reveal how immense was the debt Gordon owed Van Vechten, Muriel Draper, and other literary figures who shaped Born to Be into publishable form. <sup>19.</sup>

In the late 1930's, Gordon did manage to return to New York City. Nothing came of his abortive lawsuits, ~~nor~~<sup>there</sup> of his attempts to regain his concert career. He survived somehow, always in debt, always in hopes of big money coming soon. In 1947, his life took the most wrenching tilt yet. "I was locked up July 3rd about 2 AM at Bellview [Bellevue Hospital] by a misunderstanding on my landlord's part," Gordon wrote to Van Vechten, "and I made the mistake of trying to tell a 'psycho doctor' why I was there." He was confined in Manhattan State

Hospital at Ward's Island, New York, for 16 months, then for at least four more months a few years later. <sup>20.</sup>

Although one odd corner of his mind still harbored bitterness about "double-crossing lawyers" and John Steinbeck, <sup>Taylor</sup> Gordon was otherwise a steady citizen after he returned to White Sulphur Springs in 1959. Part of the time he puttered with an antique shop in the Wellman Building he owned on Main Street. In 1967, he wrote and paid for the publication of a small book of local history, about the Meagher County rancher and mining man, Byron R. Sherman, The Man Who Built the Stone Castle. 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 in these last years was a valuable link to both with ~~his~~ reminiscences of his boyhood in White Sulphur Springs and his concert career in the giddy Twenties.

He lived with his sister, Rose, until her death in 1968. Occasionally he still sang for local club meetings. He took daily strolls through town. He went to the funerals of other Meagher County old-timers. But he never wrote that sequel to Born to Be.

#

## 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 cattleman'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.

4. Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, The Circus Kings, New York, 196~~8~~<sup>0</sup>, 138.

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.

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.
19. CVV, letter of June 19, 1946.
20. CVV, letters of January 27, 1948; October 9, 1948; May 10, 1949; and September 16, 1952.

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

###

REWRITE (by Montana staffer)

My comments in red and  
attached - Ivan Doig

7-5-70

TAYLOR GORDON

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 Broun, 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 sings so well.

While 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 tenors in New York City, ranked by a New Republic critic with Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes. He was somebody, just as he had been determined to be. The years of success came

No -  
can't use  
without  
precise citation.

after much drifting and bouncing, but this Montanan shows the toughness which took him through to where he wanted to go.

In <sup>the little town</sup> ~~White Sulphur Springs~~, where Taylor Gordon was born on April 29, 1893, and ~~in~~ where he has lived permanently since 1959, <sup>he</sup> Gordon 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 as his mother sang, working over her washtub.

~~A long and rough road has led Gordon out of his home town, ~~across~~ around the continent and across the Atlantic, finally leading home again.~~

unnecessary, a bit trite

"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."

~~Gordon seems to have followed this principle both on and off the stage, making his best efforts never to let himself become dominated by circumstance or people. Once he was on his way toward the concert stage, his fortunes may have wavered, but his determination never did. Gordon felt free to hop from job to job to get the best combination of salary and working schedule. The~~

No - no way of proving any of this, it stands it makes him sound like a saint - which he isn't.

~~music lessons were central in his life and all else had to be planned around them.~~

*No - can't  
move this, ↓  
doubt it's  
entirely true.*

That the payoff did come, a concert program in the Carl Van Vechten papers at Yale testifies. Dating from 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."<sup>1</sup>

Mannie Gordon from Montana, who had earned his first money running errands for <sup>the</sup> brothels in town, had found his role in the 1920's 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 came directly 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

1. From 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.

NO - I doubt that he was.

interest in the older spiritual music. Gordon was successful at several types of singing, but his versatile tenor and his sincerity with spirituals were the keys to the international success he enjoyed during the roaring golden 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 whose 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 around the turn of the century who now are the old cowboys, the storytellers, the elders of the tribe. That Taylor Gordon is black <sup>merely</sup> puts a <sup>slightly</sup> ~~slightly~~ different accent on his own success story.

White Sulphur Springs, where he 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 boys there have done.

NO - I'm sure this line would please Taylor, but it just isn't so. From spending 15 years in the same town with him, I can't believe the differences are slight. Really, the point of this article is the different perspective he has had by dint of being black.

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 <sup>Negro</sup> from the only family in town made little difference in his early childhood. Years later, when he made his first trip to Florida, he would be astonished at how many black people there were. But at home he didn't know, and his mother refused to brighten her children by telling them what this might mean.

If anything separated him from his peers, it was poverty rather than pigmentation. Gordon's father had been killed in a railroad accident before the boy could

remember, when he was a railroad cook temporarily working in Canada. Mrs. Gordon did laundry and <sup>and occasionally</sup> acted as cook for large dinner parties. ~~White Sulphur Springs ladies, including those from that certain section of town where they were not called~~

~~"ladies."~~ 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.

Having lost some time in school through illness, and being large for his age, Gordon came to feel awkward in the classroom, behind those his own age. For him in those days, the only point to school was to get <sup>it</sup> finished,

No way of proving - directly to Taylor.

sharpen  
 No - many of his peers were at least as poor.

and he finally quit before completing high school.

The color line hampering a black person provided young Taylor Gordon with experiences 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 John Ringling came to White Sulphur Springs.

The great circus started by his family was flourishing, and he 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.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Ringling 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 too near St. Louis. In Montana he decided to build the White Sulphur Springs and Yellowstone Park line--which still operates today, about one hundred

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

miles north of Yellowstone Park.<sup>3</sup>

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3. 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 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 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.

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.<sup>4</sup>

Gordon went to John <sup>R</sup> Ringling and got a job--rather, jobs. At various times, he was Ringling's chaffeur, and 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. As he rode across the continent, Gordon took in the new scenery disdainfully, affecting a sophisticated veneer over his youthful excitement at what was happening.

attribute directly to T.G.

Through Ringling, he came to know Minneapolis and New York, and had his first experience with the American South. In <sup>running</sup> making errands from Ringling's winter home in Sarasota, Gordon soon learned that he would be called by some, a "niggah." He decided this was somehow different from a word used in Northern cities, "nigger." He also quickly realized that a "niggah's" freedom of movement was directly proportional to his employer's wealth.

"They used to call me 'Ringling' all the time," he laughs now. "And so, if anything happened wrong,

4. Ibid., 138.

anybody wanted to do somethin' to me, they'd say, 'Oh, don't do it, watch out for him, that's Ringling's boy."

*NO - this is too shabby unless he elaborates. Why was he paid that much? & he still probably was not really "one of the highest paid"*

Drafted a few days before Armistice Day, Gordon was released within a week "one of the highest paid men in the army...eleven dollars a day and some cents." Shortly thereafter, 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 a year of false starts with different teachers, he found J. Rosamond Johnson.

*Must be wary of dates & time periods - Taylor is very unreliable on them now*

Rosamond Johnson, a Boston Conservatory graduate, lived for music, playing it, arranging it, teaching it at his school in Harlem. His brother was the poet and novelist, James Weldon Johnson, and Together they produced the definitive Book of American Negro Spirituals. Rosamond did the musical arrangements and James Weldon wrote critical-historical essays on the selections.

*NO - Saw-England manuscript of Muse*

*NO - he wrote a long preface.*

*NO - too large a claim.*

Gordon quit Ringling for the last time, setting for himself 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

*NO - too definite; the Van Vechten letter indicate he T.G. likely worked for Ringling after this.*

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."

Other self-study involved just a touch of professional larceny. While with the Ringling<sup>s</sup>, Gordon had seen Caruso perform, and ~~now~~ to study the great man's techniques, he bought Caruso records. "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, you can learn all their technique...but singin' fast, you'd never get it, see. Turn it slow and then you learn a tremendous lot about singin'."

Gordon was doing well as Johnson's student, well enough that <sup>in 1919</sup> he was brought into a vaudeville act Johnson was forming, "The Inimitable Five." For the next five years, <sup>this singing</sup> ~~the~~ group followed the 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.

Comparing vaudeville acts to modern television performers, Gordon says, "They don't have to work on a stage-set where guys up in the balcony could throw shoes, pennies and cans at you if you were not good. It never

No - I don't know  
this for sure. More  
reliable to say his  
voice was  
promising  
enough

again, this  
is uncertain;  
attribute  
directly to  
T.G.

happened to us, but it sure help<sup>ed</sup> you stay on your toes, knowing it could happen."

Gordon got his break from the circuit by way of the Johnson brothers and their spirituals anthology. They knew Carl Van Vechten, novelist, critic, and informal promoter of the Harlem 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 it was the head sticking out of the pantry door that reassured them--when they saw the Negro maid listening closely, Gordon says they knew they "had passed the test."

Gordon describes Van Vechten as "a big Dutchman, who had very buck teeth, rabbit teeth like...He dressed very immaculate...liked two colors, two tones. He liked pants one color and his shirt another...He wore rings, y'know, exotic rings, something that would stand out, or a bracelet, somethin' like that."<sup>5</sup>

Born in Iowa, Van Vechten was then in his forties, using Vanity Fair and other magazines to promote and encourage Negro artists during the 1920's flow of black-identity creativity. With his enthusiasm, staying power, and money, he reveled in his role of Park Avenue

<sup>5</sup>  
10. 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.

*NO. In my interview with him, the context made it plain enough this probably did happen to him. This is a face-saving after-thought -- most likely inaccurate & really detracting from his climb to the concert stage.*

*flat*

ambassador to Harlem.

"Go inspectin' like Van Vechten!" ran a line in the song 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!"<sup>6</sup> In fact, he was later to write the preface for Taylor Gordon's autobiography.

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 1925, they were on their way.

By April of the following year, The New York Times remarked that Johnson and Gordon had sung in New York "on no fewer than 15 occasions this season." Johnson, accompanying Gordon at the piano, sang a baritone obbligato on many songs. In his solos, Gordon demonstrated the extreme range of his voice, from bass through falsetto. 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..."<sup>7</sup>

*No - unless we have definite proof. I don't.*

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

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

For the rest of the 1920's, Taylor Gordon's reputation as a singer was his passport into two remarkable American cultures, New York's Harlem and her white high society. While the two overlapped in a few places Gordon moved in both of them. As he reminisces today, however, it is plain that he saw them 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 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 and Langston Hughes, <sup>in poetry</sup> Duke Ellington, James Weldon Johnson, and Paul Robeson in music.

The Black Renaissance took its strength as much from the breadth as from the depth 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 are the marks of a genuine cultural movement.<sup>8</sup>

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

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8. 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.

white elephants or black roses." Negro novelist Wallace Thurman dubbed the black artists subsisting on the admiration of influential whites "the Niggerati."<sup>9</sup>

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."

Gordon knew, too, that there were color prejudices operating 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.

*Restore "Savvy Row" sentence to restore the point.*

The white intelligentsia of the time were becoming celebrities in salons across town, while the blacks were forming their own fond legends in Harlem.

The stories told in white salons were more or and less bizarre: Carl Van Vechten claimed to have been drunk throughout the winter of 1925-26, still managing to write a novel; Heywood Brown supposedly would excuse

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

himself briefly from the card table and return with the most literate column in America for tomorrow's New York ~~World; Mabel Dodge was said to expect artists as of the~~ 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 congregation, left striking memories with Gordon as a provider of aid. He believes that Father Divine was a vital social agency in Harlem at the right time:

*- No - a following, not simply a congregation.*

"...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...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. ~~There the Negro intelligentsia and artists could meet influential and wealthy whites, particularly publishers, critics, and potential sponsors.~~

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.'" <sup>10</sup> It worked that way for ~~Taylor~~ 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 and the people who followed it. The wit was the Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott 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. Maybe it was more than

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10. Ottley and Weatherby, Negro in New York, 237-9, 259.

coincidence that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, both working their way to recognition, were not members of this New York crowd.

The Floating Salon's significance in its time was in 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 by way of the link between the two groups. 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 <sup>says,</sup> ~~said~~ recently, "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?' "11

On his part of the exchange, Gordon found himself clinking glasses at white intellectuals' parties jammed with bylines and stage names. He describes <sup>his</sup> a rule of thumb for such affairs: "If I wasn't talking, about some

11. See also CVV, letter of May 13, 1926.

← Restore NY  
 Retreat of Books  
 companion as  
 necessary  
 point of  
 reference.

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."

Though Gordon is a wary man, partially from his negative experiences 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.

flat, restore original language; it's hardly arguable that Negroes have been abused in this country, and I believe it's pertinent to say so, strongly, in this context.

One of those he observed was 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'...Boy, he could really sing songs... I knew about two hundred; I think he knew more...He knew 'em all. My mother--I thought my mother knew a lot of 'em, but he..."

On writer Muriel Draper, author of Music at Midnight, he says:

"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. That was before wigs were the style. One night we's at a party and some woman

a fashion, and wig wearers were considered deformed.

-NO -  
see  
comments  
page

insinuated, that 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...every<sup>#</sup>word had to be cut out just like that."

On Rebecca West and other visiting English writers:  
all

"Most 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 clock, they'd come in about twelve, twelve-thirty, and Muriel Draper'd be sitting in this big chair. She had what she called her "queenly" chair, she'd be sitting back and she could observe everybody that hit the door, see...

"I remember one time when Rebecca West came. I saw her standing just outside of the door. What is she waiting for, I wondered. It seemed a long time to me. Finally, Muriel said, "Ooh, Rebecca!" and Rebecca answered, "Aah, Muriel!" and they rushed to each other's arms.

"Heads turned toward the two women. People asked, in low voices, 'Who is that?' Someone in the know, before Muriel could get to it, said, 'Why, that's Rebecca West.' Graciously, Muriel smiled and thanked the speaker, then proceeded to introduce Miss West, her friend..."

On columnist Heywood Broun:

"...had a very fine sense of humor...I met him a number of times downtown at parties, and at his home.

NO-  
he doesn't  
talk this  
way. See  
comments  
page.

He introduced me to a number of foreign people...

"He was a very big man...I had the feeling that he was afraid that he'd break down the chairs, and that was the reason that he'd get his glass and lay on the floor... to talk to people."

In 1927, Johnson and 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 in the Westminster Gazette in this way:

"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."<sup>12</sup>

As Taylor Gordon travelled and discovered Europe, he wrote his impressions in letters to Carl Van Vechten, who in turn read them to the Floating Salon.

From England, one letter to "Carlo" proclaims, "Man. Last night we were out to a party where we met ten Lords."<sup>13</sup>

Of Paris, he said, "I must tell you, this place is the place of the world, so far."<sup>14</sup>

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

13. CVV, letter of July 19, 1927.

14. CVV, letter of May 30, 1927.

*OK to use  
as definite  
citation  
only if you  
see the  
clippings  
he has*

Van Vechten wrote back, Gordon says, "Your letters are such a tremendous success at the parties, you've gotta write a book when you come back."

full quote makes the point much better. TG doubted his ability to write a book, & had to be almost pushed into it.

Besides having a flair for phrase-making, Gordon looked at the world with a combination of naivete and sophistication, melded by humor for his own and others' actions. Neither wealth nor position affected him, but he would have infinite respect for someone with kindness and warmth in his personality.

No - I can't prove this, & I doubt a lot of it.

Van Vechten and Muriel Draper cajoled until Gordon agreed to attempt a book. "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."

He told the story of his 37 years of life, the childhood pranks in White Sulphur Springs having as much weight as the experiences in Europe. He showed himself to be that he is truly one who goes through experiences always learning from them, eyes wide open taking in the world but not being taken in by it.

No - I'm afraid he, as with most of us, was taken in plenty of times

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.<sup>15</sup>

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

lit flowery

Van Vechten and Muriel Draper had had the wisdom not to delete Gordon's unorthodox spellings, and contractions, <sup>alter</sup> even though his typist had warned the manuscript would <sup>syntact,</sup> be thrown away at the publishers. Born to Be had to be one of the more spontaneous and exuberant books, even with its serious segments, on the scene that year.

*Edna Thomas, quite a bit more vivid*

*No - this is too big a claim. That was a great era of books.*

It was selling well, until the stock market collapsed. Money was suddenly too scarce to buy the autobiographies of singers, or to attend their concerts. Even though spirituals would seem to be the most appropriate songs for the Depression Decade, Gordon and Johnson could get few bookings.

*No - see comment sheet*

Now that his autobiography was a financial failure, and singing engagements far apart, Gordon had entered the lean years along with most of the country. Van Vechten helped him financially, but that was not enough. And the ~~great~~ crowd of eager sponsors dwindled.

"I wish the rent / was Heaven sent" poet Langston Hughes wrote in a line that was the anthem of the 1930's. The "rent party" became a standard form of entertainment. But when Taylor Gordon gave a rent party, with his love of showing his friends a good time, <sup>A</sup> Harlem newspaper reported: it was

"...the season's most successful party for everybody except the rent man."<sup>16</sup> And for the host, who lost ten dollars on the affair.

16. CVV, clipping from Inter-State Tattler, June 4, 1931.

No - I only know 23  
there were "other"  
manuscripts - I doubt  
there were  
"several"

He continued working on several manuscripts and taking singing jobs when they turned up. Gordon was in the cast of a Heywood Broun-sponsored "cooperative" musical. He also landed a role in the Fred Astaire stage musical, The Gay Divorcee.

No - I thought this was correct, too, but checking with an old theater program of the NY Times, I find the show was called Gay Divorce - at least when it opened in NY.

In late 1935, though, he returned home to Montana.

As always, he made the best of the <sup>change</sup> decline in his fortunes, and enjoyed himself. After the first winter back in the mountains, he wrote to Van Vechten:

No - his letters to Van Vechten show there were very bad times for him.

"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."<sup>17</sup>

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 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 is also planning the sequel to Born to Be, to cover the years since 1929.

No - restore. hopes to write a sequel. He has talked about it years, but without the tremendous help of Van Vechten & Murrell Draper, it's a very dubious project at his age.

That "molasses laugh" Carl Van Vechten described is still there, still bright and quick as Gordon remembers the good times and the bad. He has ridden his personal

17. CVV, letter of April 25, 1936.

> No. I frankly don't  
see anything "classic" 24  
about his story

ups and downs in the classic American way, this  
man whose life spans those two glamorous eras of  
our history, the Western frontier, and the 1920's in  
New York--Taylor Gordon.

---

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

Taylor Gordon's material

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TAYLOR GORDON---A MONTANAN, SANG

Many people had the pleasure of hearing Taylor Gordon sing over the "radio" when he was with J. Rosamond Johnson's group "The Dixie Echoes," on C.B.S., in 1929---Joseph Adam, music-critic on the Bozeman Daily Chronical : April 8, 1927, wrote:

Large Crowd Enjoys Music,, Last of Season's Entertainments Fostered by Collage Draws Most Appreciative Audience,---

An ever recurring pathos in human history has it that some of the choicest products of literature, music and art in general were conceived and produced under most adverse circumstances, and sometimes even in the face of severest pressure or hardship. One is reminded of the finest specimens of old testament literature, which had their origin during the time when Egyptian slaves - drivers yielded their whips over the exiled Jewish nation. Perhaps these spiritual Hebrew bards were inspired by the noble example of their olive tree, whose ripe fruit yielded its sweet oil under the pressure of heavy stones.

The attentive hearer was inevitably led to such reflections when J. Rosamond Johnson and Taylor Gordon in concert of Negro Negro spirituals at the State Collage last night. These Negro artist brought without question the best and most appreciated concert of the year to this city, concluding the five-number series of the years' artistic course. They held the large audience spellbound from beginning to end, and in general, and of their own particular. There was an atmosphere of romance, the warmth of the Southland, sudden out-burst of pathos and humor. Their music is void of that sophistication or conscious artfulness with which the white man often attempts to make his music effective; it is simple and naive as the thought of a child. And true to the native setting it was interpreted by last night's soloist ... Mr. Johnson,

A collector, discoverer, and arranger of international fame, clothed these melodies in the simplest harmonies and Mr. Gordon sings them with child like sincerity. In this The latter is aided by a voice of unusual beauty and flexibility. In range he might be perhaps officially classed as a tenor which the sky is the limit; but perhaps he is a great baritone or even a bass. His soto voice is marvellous and he employs it frequently to the best advantage especially when the score calls for meditative moods. As indicated in the beginning, one wonders whether the race which these men represent, could have reached such beauty of melody invention if they had not undergone that age-long suffering which was their lot; their minor strain, their constant longing for existence on the other shore hardly leaves any other solution..

The Negro with his spirituals is generally credited with the starting point of our "jass". This naturally suggest the question: In developing the simple Negro spirituals into jass, has the white man improved on it?--We fear last night's concert would tempt us very much to answer the question in the negative.

It is about fifty air miles east of Helena to White Sulphur Springs, Montana, where Taylor Gordon was born, April 29, 1893. He fought his snow-ball fights and trudged across town to the grade school on the hill, as hundreds of White Sulphur Springs boys have done. The Sulphur Springs, 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-course 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 supply center for out laying ranches and farms in Meagher County. To boys, the town mattered because it was his place to grow up.

IN those days all the boys and girls had to do some kind of chores; carry in the wood; wash the dishes; bring in the water and be busy in general about the house. Taylor had those things to do, too. But he always found time to be doing things for other people.

Charles H. Sherman and his wife Sarah employed him most of the time. They showed him how to milk a cow, for which he got half the milk to take home. That was a great help to his mother, in raising

X the kids...But his most "lucrative small-change job" was running errands for the local brothels. The sort of job a community half expected a black boy to be filling...The series of add-jobs, later, stood him in good stead; they taught him to fend for himself.

Taylor gave up the classroom early in high-school, because he was tall, and many of the "sheltered" boys and girls were running too far a head of him, however his size served him well.

It makes little sense for a white historian to try to describe the emotional side of a black boy parents' life, in boyhood or any other phrase. But a black person's own memories and words and actions can be "examined," and that is what this article tries to do. The story here and now is this black man's career in the 1920's and how he found it.

X If there can be such a demeanor, there is slangy courtliness about Taylor Gordon. His talk is as much about Harlem as Montana, bright and slippery with unfinished words; shortcuts, right through the same sentence, and the hard-edged irony a black man learns in white society. It all tumbles from a tall erect-man now 76 years old, who seems more impressive than his surroundings, whatever they happen to be. His face makes the right moves, that is, it lines into full joy when he laughs, turns instantly serious as he tries to pry a name from his memory, changes moods like stage-lights to accompany the story he is telling. He is the cut of many men of my father's generation in Montana; the weathered type born and raised there around the turn of the century, who now, the old cowboys, the storytellers, the elders of the tribes. The difference is that Taylor Gordon is black, and that is a difference which has put this story into a perspective little noticed in American History, until recent years.

(--Incidentally. In large terms; the little noticed circumstances was that: The black man has had a part in Montana about as long as the white man's... York. Lewis and Clark's Stewart accompanied the Lewis and Clark expedition. ---In later decades, there were Negro cowboys on the Montana range, a contingent of an estimated five-thousand Negro cowboys in the American West... Two historians have written about The Black man in the West point out, however, that sharing the "frontier heritage" did not always gain the Negro a share of social respect. ---)

Taylor Gordon has been back home ,since February,1959;from his wide-ranged career.He really sang for my wife and me,when we asked him to...He closed his eyes.His even white teeth are the only white in his dark face.The melody,strong and claer,rolled in the room and out of the house,just as it did six or seven decades ago, when neighbors heard Taylor's mother singing as she worked over the wash-tub,---John Francis Gordon,a graduated "chef" of Wilberforce University,Wilberforce,Ohio,in the 1850's,bought the house for his family.in 1882,---Taylor's father left home and was killed in a train-wreck,before Taylor was born.

The Gordon family was among the early settlers in White Sulphur Springs, Montana---Upstanding, enterprising.His mother took in washing to support the four boys and one girl...Rose and Taylor, both said ,"that they first encountered the real sharpness of "prejudice "away from home."( By-the-way---Rose B.Gordon became "valedictorian"of her class,when she graduated in 1904,and she died November 19th,1968,at 85 years old;and had a funeral nearly as large as her mother;s,in 1924.That was one of the most extensive burials ever held in White Sulphur Springs, Montana.

About 1906.Herman Spencer,(Barney) was his nick-name;one of Almon Spencer's sons---Almon was a pioneer merchant in the valley..Barney took Taylor in hand.He was a fine automobile mechanic and a good mech-in-ist.He taught Taylor how to fix automobiles...Then about 1907, there was a Mr.Calkins went to White Sulhur Springs, Montana,and fell in love with the Smith River Valley.He had many friends in the east, with plenty of money.Taylor's luck was,that one of his friends happened to be John Ringling.--

Ringling and Calkins setup a land office.They bought 90.000 acres of farm,range and timber land .They named it,"The Smith River Developing Company. Barney Spencer got the job of caring for their cars. When he needed another driver to take the customers over the holdings,they had to sell,Barney got Tay;or to help,by driving the second car-load...The company sold many acres of land before they had hard-luck in "dryland farming" No rain fell for sometime. It was an unusual period for the valley.

Ringling wanted to putup 51% of the money to develop the "hot

water at the springs, but some of the wealthiest farmers "blessed" him out. Besides, G.K. Spencer, one of the bankers had the water in litigation. (As a matter of fact: When he was a young man, Mr. Sam G Gelluley, Director of Montana Historical Society; was well acquainted with G.K. Spencer and family.)

Next, Ringling and his friend, were going to build a railroad from Harlowton to Seattle, Washington, to run through <sup>the</sup> Smith River Valley. It would have cutoff 200-miles on the trip. The surveyors were going along fine until they ran into Smith River Canyon, some forty-miles northwest of the springs. It stopped the deal right there. That canyon is about four miles long and the sides are lined with rock, hundreds of feet high.

However, Ringling did build the "White Sulphur Springs and Yellowstone Park Railroad Line"-It runs south out of the Springs to the town of Ringling. Bypassing the old Stagecoach and train junction of "Dorsey, by about three-miles. It was nicknamed (The Galloping Goose) and it is owned by two brothers, "George JR., and Gary Wetherell. The "Line" is doing good in serving the, "V.K.V. Lumber Co., and its eastern affiliations. --- Ringling bought the old DR William Parberry Mansion, a few extra sized "Crain bathtubs" had them installed in the old brick bathhouse, with permission, and stayed in White Sulphur Springs. \*\*\* Come to think about it: Those springs have been sold three or four times in the past forty years: A man, Mr. Conrad had them in the teens and twenties. I think another party had them before Mr. Robert Lyng and his wife owned them. They made a great deal of improvements on the property, and named it, "The Spa." Sometime in 1969, they sold to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Daniels. It is said, that water is excellent bathing water. \*\*\*

Well. --- In the summer of 1910, John Ringling had a friend, Mr. L. N. Scott and his wife "Lillian", visit him... Taylor Gordon drove them about the valley a quiet a bit, and the Scotts took a liking to Taylor. --- When they left on Ringling's private car, and got back to St. Paul Minnesota, they sent for Gordon to come and be their "Chauffeur." He took the job, but didn't stay very long. He bounced a round a couple a years, before <sup>he</sup> found himself back working for Ringling, again... Mr. Ringling was an "indulgent man." Like most "tycoons" who will rehire a man that had quit him before, especially. If he knows he's honest and a good worker. They know that he's broke and hungry, and just as soon as he gets fed up, a few dollars in his pockets, that he'll probably quit again. But, they also know that will take some time. --- However. The thing about it is the

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time that it saves. All he has to do is give the experienced man the keys and tell him where the car is, and when he wants to be leaving town. A man breaking in new 'help' that don't know his likes-and dislikes, in his way of living, is quite a painful task.

Leaving New York City, Taylor Gordon was cook and porter on the Ringling private car, going south... He had never seen so many of his race before, it was a notable experience, for him.. When the car got to Sarasota, Florida; it looked like the whole Ringling family was there. They were living in two big white houses on the bay.

Ringling was a very strict man regarding the conduct of his help, who worked for him. He also, showed his unbiased integrity, when he learned the truth regarding any "contention".. Taylor Gordon found that out, in the south, when a woman was involved.

It was in Sarasota, Florida that Taylor met Richard Ringling. Alfred (Alf, T.) Ringling. he forth boy of the "seven brothers" was his father. \*\*\*Come to think about it; Only a few people are left that knew all ( the seven brothers.)-- Montana has one: Mr. E. E. ( Boo) MacGilvra, of Butte. He was born in Baraboo, Wisconsin; worked with the Circus when he was a boy... The Circus Kings, by Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, tells all about the seven brothers and the rest of the Ringling family. \*\*\* Richard at the time, about 1916, was dickering with John Ringling to take over his holding's in Montana. Not long after that meeting (Dick) as they called him, was in White Sulphur Springs, Montana. And after a short courtship, he married Miss. Aubrey Black, one of the two daughters, of Powell Black, a pioneer lawyer.

When they came back from their honeymoon, and settled down in the big Parberry dwelling, he began spending money, creating the biggest boom, since the silver-mining and gold digging days.-- He built the largest "dairy barn" that was in the world, at the time... Dams, roads, and plowed up many acres of virgin-land-- Then sent east, and had the best "jersey cows " that could be bought and had them brought to White Sulphur, Springs, Montana. It wasn't long before he was selling "butter", in many directions, as far away as New York City.

Somewho-or-nother. He fell into a "sheepdeal" over a round Boz-man. It didn't work out as intended and cost him a lot of money-- Not long, a few months, after that, he was in an "automobile Accident. He was broken up pretty bad. Infact. He never did get over it. Richard Ringling is the father of two girls and one boy. Paul Ringling; was Representative and Senator of Meagher County, in 1950's.

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---Richard Ringling is the only Ringling buries in Montana.

X It was in the summer of <sup>1</sup>1916, that one of Ringling's friends told Taylor Gordon that he could earn more money singing, than he could cooking. So, when he got back to New York City, Taylor went to Mr. Ringling for money to learn how to sing. John Ringling was willing to help him, if he could find a teacher. Taylor went to a few couple of studios, they told him he had a good voice, but they couldn't take him, because he was black... Determined to sing, he quit Ringling for the last time, and started russeling for himself. "Gordon was raised to the throb of his mother's spirituals and hymns, but he had no professional training, except "parting" as he explained: "I'd sit at the opera and hear "Caruso" and then, at home, I'd take his records and turn them way down low, till they sounded like "a baritone." I'd do that with "soparno records", until thy sounded like "altos." You can hear all their tricks, and get their technique of what they are doing, see... But singing fast you'll never get it. Turn it slow and you will learn a tremendous about singing."

For a man who hopped from job to job all his working life, he showed remarkable persistence in music. Gordon made it plain, in talking about his life that he had always been a man who liked good times...

By the end of "World War One" He had seen some of the world-through life syle of John Ringling. Such "tutelage" surely, he had not failed to notice that the way to high-life was vis money and reputation---A singing career was his first chance at any apprecitable denomination of either.

X For about a year, Taylor met a lot of voice-teachers. Some too expensive, some too-bad... It was in 1917 that he went to J. Rosamond Johnson's Music School, in Harlem. (Johnson was a Boston Conservatory graduate.)... Gordon had to quit the job he was on and get a job as waiter on the New York Central Railroad, so he could have time to met Johnson for his lesson... Self-discipline was required as well as session with Johnson... He used to run from the Subway station to the Jersey Central Yards, a distance of about a mile, when he was with Ringling, to keep his western-breath. He did that when he was working on the New York Central, the east side of the river, too.

X Taylor Gordon was drafted in 1918 just before the end of the war. ...And in his own words, "I stayed in the army six-days, They turned me out one of the highest paid men in the army; eleven dollars and some cents a day. As soon as I got in the street, I went back to the railroad job and the lessons."

X In 1919, M.S. Bentham, Rosamond's old booking agent asked him to make-up a new act for "vaudevillie!". Rosamond quickly got four other men and he asked Taylor to join them. --With himself, he called the act, "J. Rosamond Johnson and the Inimitable Five." The act opened up in New Jersey, June 1919. It was a hit, and for the next seven years, J. Rosamond Johnson and his Inimitable Five, played all the big-time from coast-to-coast and in Canada. In 1924 the group broke up. But Taylor had served his "apprenticeship" for high art.

"You ever been before a big audience ? Taylor asked now. "No." ---Well. I'll tell you, you gotta know what you're doin", and you gotta whip them, too, you know. When you first come in the stage; the first thing, they challenge you right-a-way, mentally, say (Well. --What can you do?) And if you don't dominate them, they'll sure dominate you." ---Gordon reveals the brunt of the "circuit" when he points to the Television Set, and says, of today's performers: They don't have to work on a stage-set where guys up in the balcony could throw shoes, pennies and cans, at you "if you were not good. It never happened to us, but it sure hept you on your "toes"; knowing it could happen,"

7. X James Weldon Johnson, who had been ambassador to Haiti, and written considerable amount of poetry; ---Best known of his, "God's Trombones" was J. Rosamond's brother. They had been gathering material to publish "The Anthology of American Negro Spirituals." They both knew Carl Van Vechten well, and before they got in too deep, they wanted to get Carl's opinion on them. ...So Taylor and Rosamond rehearsed a few and went to see Carl, one evening. ...Carl, his wife Fania, one guest, and even the maid stuck her head through the pantry-door, to listen. ...Since she was a colored woman, Rosamond and Taylor knew they had passed the test.

In the next series of acquaintances which did so much to boost Gordon's singing career, the break from vaudeville-circuit appearances came from Carl Van Vechten. ...For three or four weeks, while Johnson and Taylor worked hard to prepare a program, Mr. Van Vechten

was spending hours trying to find a place to sing it. Finding a place for two unknown-concert singers to sing, in New York City, is a mighty task.

In Carl Van Vechten's papers at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. There is an old "concert program" which cites the evening when "dominating 'em" on a big scale became vital to Taylor Gordon. The time and the place "The Garrick Theater in New York City, Sunday Evening 15, 1925. 8.40 P.M. --- The program reads: J. Rosamond Johnson the Book of the American Negro Spirituals, and Taylor Gordon in Program of Negro Spirituals --- On the border of the program is penciled: Dear Carl. This was the starting-point. -- Due to your efforts in persuading Mr. Langner to give us a start. -- Yours Rosamond."

This pitched Taylor Gordon into the legend concert dates and reviews in the New York Times: The <sup>M</sup>usic Critic's Column, and columns of many other publications. He was compared with Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson: -- (Taylor Gordon acclaimed Singer... Somewhere in the 1920's the drama critic of the New Republic named: Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and Taylor Gordon as the three out-standing singers of their generation, giving Gordon the slight edge on range and power, and later saying he had but one peer."

During the haydays the New York Herald Tribune" had this to say of Taylor and his accompanist. "J. Rosamond John: Last night at the Garrick Theater the two Negro singers who made such a deep impression last month with their striking arrangements of the spirituals of their race gave another program, in which many of the most effective numbers were repeated. All the arrangements except: I Got A Home In Dat Rock, and Get On Board Little Chullin, were of Rosamond Johnson's and played the accompaniment and sang a baritone a bligota to the solo of Gordon, "Once again the audience listened

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with rapt attention and burst into storms of approval and excited "Bravi" at the conclusion of each group. No one should miss hearing singers who bring to their performance a devotion, and emotional simplicity and direction unique to this city...

At last he was somebody; just as he had been determined to be... This Montanan showed the necessary toughness that carried him to his desired position.

Following the opening night; the necessary association and contacts to advance Taylor Gordon's singing career, was also made by Van Vechten... Gordon described his friend, "Mr. Carl Van Vechten, was a big Dutchman, with very buck-teeth, rabbit teeth like, and weighed about two hundred and ten or twenty pounds, and about six-feet tall. But you wouldn't call him a "pot-bellied six ." He was a prominent man, a very fine dresser. He dressed very immaculate... He liked the colors, the two-tones; you know exotic always, something that would stand-out, or a bracelet, antique. Something like that. He was quite a character... Being the brother to a millionaire he could do those things."

Gordon once wrote, "That one time I met him, and he 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, in the 1920's vividly played the white advocate for many black talents. "Go inspecting like Van Vechten." ran the line in the song "Go Harlem." Other quarters showed less enthusiasm for the Van Vechten talent hunt... Time said in 1926: Sullen mouthed, silkey-haired Author VAN Vechten has been playing with Negroes, lately, going to Harlem."

In Vanity Fair and other magazines, Carl Van Vechten praised Negro artist, as one of the better-writers on the New York scene in the 1920's, he also had enough money to help out hard-pressed singers or writers, with enthusiasm, staying power, and with his money; Van Vechten revealed in the role of Park Avenue Ambassador to Harlem,

Starting with the promotion by Van Vechten, in the 1920's, Gordon and Johnson were kept busy with concert appearances. Johnson's notes about "the starting point" Van Vechten helping them was "gratifying to many people... On April 17, 1926 the New York Times remarked: That Johnson and Gordon had sung in New York City no fewer than 15 o

occasions this season" There reviews in the Times were usually along this line of coment on March 1, 1926: "Messers. Johnson and Gordon both possess voices which sever them fathfully and well; they sing with fever which carries conviction to the hearers"...

A tipical Program was likely to include twelve to fifteen Negor spirituals. Among the se/songs Gordon and Johnson feature were Go Down Moses; Don't Foun<sup>t</sup> My Los<sup>t</sup> Sheep; It's Me Oh Lord; Singin' wid a sward in Ma Han'; Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel; Witness: Father Abraham; and Band O' Giddèon. Johnson had worked up musical arrangements for the songs when he and James Weldon Johnson prepared their book of Spirituals. Gordon sang may of the songs solo, with Johnson as piano Accompanist."

For the rest of the 1920's Taylor Gordon's reputation as a singer was his pass-port into remarkable American culture's, New York's Harlem and her white society. While the to over-lapped in a few places, Gordon moved in both of them. As he reminisces today, However, it was plain that it was two separate worlds. Perhaps, unconsciously, he groups his memories about each into separate sets.

To hear him tell it, the greatest revelation to him, arriving in the New York City as a young man from a Montana Cowtown, was not the urban glitter or the hugest American Metropolis, but the black captal of America. The most giffted of Negro artist there in the 1920's were powerful talents by any mesure: Contee Cullen and measure Langston Hughes in poetry, Duke Ellington, James Weldon Johnson and Paul Robeson in music. But in exclamatory term "Black Renaissance" owed most to the breath of Harlem talent. The secndary writers and musicians who do solid work of their own and challenge the best of their colleague into greatness are the marks of the genuine culture movement.

Harlem had such a squardron. It's reputation grew both in the black world and the white, dispite occasiona; cyncicism from each. Carl Van Vechten ragged against the white editors who regarded Negor artist as novelities, "like white Elephants and black-roses," Negor novelist Wallace Thurman dubbed the black artist subsisting on the admiration of influential whites "the Niggerate."

Harlem was no bed-of -roses, black, red or any other shade. Gordon

letters to Van Vechten, although generally written in bemused tone, makes this clear.---The three hundred thousand Negroes had crowded into the neighborhood, and Harlem was the largest urban society of black people in the country had the tension and smoldering tempers which goes with any society..

Even there, color worked its prejudice. The Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway played some of the best music of the era, was known for its performances for "high yellows) completion. And Gordon remembers 139th Street as "Strivers Row" the exclusive abode of the black lawyers and doctors, (but that was money controlled.) As with the 1920's celebrated down town in the salons or the white intelligentsia, Harlem's 1920's had their material for the legend. Carl Van Vechten claimed he was drunk throughout the winter of 1925-6 and still managed to write a novel? Haywood Brown would excuse himself briefly from a card table and return, after writing the most "literate column in America for tomorrow's New York Herald Tribune? Mable Dodge collected artist like they were performing puppies?---The Harlem version, no less intriguing, ran more to personalities of Father Devine (who came to Harlem late) and Madam Walker. Taylor knew the Walkers before he sang, professionally... Devine Devine was a "social revelation" in a different way:

Gordon is a man of definite views on issues... He keenly feels that the "haves" of this America society provide the "have nots" with little chance to make a go of it... Father Devine, a small man who gathered a large religious following, left a stirring memories with him. He believes that Devine was a vital social agency when the Harlem community needed one, especially, during the Depression. In the 1930's... Every body was broke, a lot of people would go to Father Devine's and get the best meal in the world for thirty-five cents, see. And you'd be surprised the: white, black, blue, green and all the others; they eat in Father's because when people could not afford to eat downtown, they'd go to Devine's and get a "whole-half-chicken" you'd get a meal you'd have to pay \$2.00 for downtown, for only thirty-five-cents: at times, ice cream with it, dessert.../And he had 'em lined up. You'd have thought there was a baseball game going on."

For Gordon, as for many Harlem residence, the ultimate in black high society, was Madam J.C. Walker. (The Madam was the St. Louis laundress who invented a method of ironing)

Walker

deress who invented the method of straightening crinkle hair.) in those days, before the Afro-look, and natural hair style, some blacks regard kinky-hair as a stigma. Madam Walker's product made her a millionaire. She built a mansion in Harlem and Irvington on the Hudson, and gave Harlem a rich streak of high society. When she died in 1919, her daughter Aliela Walker Robinson inherited both the money and the informal title "Madam Walker". It is the second Madam Walker, of whom one historian of Harlem relates; at her "salon" the "Dark-Tower," Negro intelligentsia met influential white people, that in particular, publishers, critics, and potential sponsors. "It worked that way for Taylor Gordon.

"In the making of The President 1964, "Theodore H. White offered the useful conception of the Perfumed Stockade," the dress packers, "mingle and effect our life style," in New York in 1920's, similar to Mr. White's perfume stockade in cohesiveness and durability rather than outlook or influence, there was a miniature of such an establishment. It could be called the, "Floating Salon." The floating salon was a mote of behavior, not geographical setting of a firm grouping. Its wit was Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott brand which flashed across the dinner table and pinked the target low on the edge. Its entertainment was late and liquid. Its literary out-put generally showed more stylization than style. Maybe it was more than a coincidence that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, both worked their way to greatness, were not members of the New York crowd.

Yet the Floating Salon had its significance to its time, perhaps roughly the sort of significance that a future historian may find in the New York Review of books group of our days. Some of the intellectuals current 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 English writers to American literary powers. It mixed writers with composers, and sponsors, editorial advice, and illustrators if you had a book in mind.

In Carl Van Vechten's papers at Yale indicate that Van Vechten and Gordon became acquainted in late 1925, by the floating salon.

...By the spring of 1926, they were good friends acting as each other's guide into an exotic world, Gordon's accounts:

"They'd call me up, two or three o'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 them a round... They always wanted to have at least one colored person with them, for protection, see, if any argument came up."

"I could kick you for not being at the theatre to night for the (Hoffer's Midnight Gamble.) 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 said in the interview. "Carl and I were dressed as in Harlem, dressed in kinda satir... Some man gave us both hell...(You got something to offer the world. You don't have to do anything out of "the ordinary" just be yourselves!" Carl and I said, "Well, Can't we have some fun?"

On his part of the exchange, Gordon found himself clicking glasses at parties jammed with by-lins and stage names. "If i wasn'tt talking about some trip or something to the west, I kept my mouth shut. He relates now." Those people all had collage educations and experience in the world;---Best way to be was just listen and drink."

In many ways Gordon is a wary man. He will look at you carefully now and again, as he decides if you are worthy of any trust. He believes that ideas and chances have been flitched from him, in the past. Also, he has had his share of mean experiences so many blacks have undergone in this predominantly white nation. But when he talks today, about the swirl of the white society he moved in during the late 1920's, he is unreservedly full of praise. In his case, the entry token was talent, not color. He makes no claim to have been an intimate friend of all the writers and artist he partied with, but it is evident that he watched the scene intently and with a sense of the era. His reminiscences are the sort of social history which is easily lost, and with it the feel of the period and its people. Here from a tape interview, are a few impressions from the elegant "human eddies" of the 1920's.

On 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 use to get there about two or three in the morning; in his apartment--Boy. He could really sing songs.---He knew more "secular and hymnals" like Methodist and Presbyterian songs. He knew 'em all. I thought my Mother knew a lot of songs, but He..."

On writer Muriel Draper, Author of Music at Midnight and leading character in the "Floating Salon": She was an exotic person. A little eccentric in her hats and dress, see--She had a lot of dark-blond hair; weighted around 130-pounds.. (The Mother of two boys. The youngest, I can't think of his name, they nick-named him (Smugg.) he was killed in Canada, in the beginning of the Second World's war, by an airplane wreck.--Paul Draper the famous dancer, is his brother.!).

Mrs. Draper's hair went down to her waist, and she always shaped it tight on the top of her head, like she had on a "wig." One night at a party, some woman insinuated she had on a "wig." (That was before wigs were a fashion, and the wearers were considered "deformed.")--So Muriel didn't say anything, just took off the net, all the hair-pins out and let the hair down, to her waist, right there at the dinner-table... She was an English -type of woman. Sharpe features and lived in England before her husband died.--She was a very fine "elo-cutionist" you know, and always talked with her lips extended a bit, to shape the tones "round" like So and so and so; every word had to be cut out just like that."

On Rebecca West and other English writers :

Most of the English writers had a funny thing about them, when they came to a party, over here.--There would be thirty or fifty people in a room; and if the party was supposed to be at eleven-thirty, they'd come about 12, or 12.30, o'clock.--This particular night, Muriel was sitting up in her "Queenly Chair" as she usually did on such occasions. From there she could see anyone who entered the door. When they did, she'd say "Ooooooh ! So and so and so... I'm so glad to see you!" Then <sup>ee</sup> proceeded to introduce the comer to the people; after which they always gave the "celebrity" the "Grand Salaam." \*\*\* No matter who the known person might be, they

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always got the "Grand Salam."\*\*\* I remember one time when Rebecca West came: I saw her standing just outside of the door. "What is she waiting for, I wondered." It seemed a long time, to me... Finally, Muriel said, "Ooooooooooh ! Rebecca ! And Rebecca, answered" AaaaaaaH; Muriel!! "and they rushed to each other's arms... Heads turned toward the two women. People asked, in low voices "Who is that?" --Someone in the know, before Muriel could get to it, said, "Wyeeeeeeeeh. That's Rebecca West !".... Graciously. Muriel smiled and thanked the speaker, then proceeded to introduce Miss. West, her friend; collectively to the people. After which, they gave their Grand-Grand Salaam...

On Columnist Haywood Broun:

Haywood Broun was a big man, weighed around two-hundred and ten to twenty pounds. Over six-feet tall, and had a very fine sense of humor... I met him a number of times downtown at parties, and at his home. He introduced me to a number of foreign people. Some from South Africa; Australia, Japan, The-British-West-Indies, France. I had the feeling that he was afraid that he'd break down the chairs, and that was the reason that he'd get his glass and lay on the floor, from where he would talk to people. --(When he put on the show "Shoot The Works;" a "Cooperative" for the actors, during the Depression, I was in the cast.) I hope they won't have to sing "Pie In the Sky, soon a gain, on Broadway, in New York City."

In 1927, J. Rosamond Johnson and Taylor Gordon went to London, England with their concerts. They were there nine months. Taylor found an "English cast" at the floating Saloons to hobnob with; = The Westminster Gazette.. 104 Shoe Lane, E.C.A. 16 July 1927 and the (Daily Sketch. 100 Grey's Inn Road, W.C.I. & Withy Grove, Manchester. 16, Jul. 1927) ran this account on the event":

#### A FEMINA PARTY

The winner of the year's femina Prize, Miss Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge, gave one of the most successful literary parties of the season at their lovely house in Kensington.

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 Golsworthy took one of those lowley seats. He and Robert Cunningham Gramh made a distinguished pair in the front row of these improvised stalls, and were obviously enchanted with the spirituals.

Johnson and Gordon are really great Artist, and I think dully deserve the success they are having.--I have never heard two artist who are so tireless--They sang song after song, and when it was suggested that they should have a rest, they remarked "they hadn't begun yet."

#### Silver Eton Crop

About 11.30 stage folk began coming in, and the party went on to the not very small hours of the morning.

Ernest Thesiger arrived about the same time as Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson, and they sat together. Mrs. Thesiger looked very striking ~~appearing~~ with her silver Eton crop, came earlier, and another beautiful woman there was Helen Beauclerk, who wrote "The Green Lacquer Pavillion." She wore black and has almost jet black hair.

Sir Sidney and Lady Iow I saw also, and Edmund Dulac, Dr. Frank Collie and his wife Welhelmina Stich, Richard Pryce, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Hopkins, Mrs. Norman Flower and her son Desmond, Mrs. Gavin ( who is Lady Troubridge's sister,) and her Mother Mrs. Harry Taylor, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Rees, Mr. Henry Berlein, Miss Margaret Irwin, and Mr. and Mrs. St. John Adcock and their daughter Almey.

#### WOMEN IN DINNER JACKETS

It was an interesting gathering from a point of dress. Three women wore dinner jackets, following the fashion of Miss Radclyffe Hall, who of course, always wears this form of evening dress, and had on one heavy black silk moire, with frilled skirt. Here see Her. (There was a picture on the clipping.), The other wearers were Ursula Greville, who edits the "Sackbut." and Evelyn Irons, and both wore men's starched collars.

On the other hand there were several picture frocks-- Mrs. Gavin wore one of pale grey taffeta, with pink roses in her hair, and Mrs. Gerald Hopkins wore a patterned chiffon one which reached the ground.

Mrs. Golsworthy wore evening white and silver, with ermine wrap, and Lady Troubridge, gold.

Out of such company, and especially, out of Carl Van Vechten's friend-

ship, emerged the idea of a book by Taylor Gordon. Writing an autobiography is no small undertaking for a person who dropped out of high school. But, then, any reader of Gordon's book "Born To Be," comes aware of the staying power, the quest to be somebody, that went into the writing. "Born To Be" was published in the autumn of 1929. Among the favorable reviews were in the New York Herald Tribune Books, two pages after a review of a work by young William Faulkner's, The Sound and the Fury.

"I would not have written Born To Be if it hadn't have been for Carl Van Vechten." Gordon says now of Van Vechten's encouragement. "When I went to Europe, why, going around London I'd see all these things and I'd write back to Carl, and he'd read them to the group. So, He wrote back and said, "Your letters are a tremendous success at the parties. He said "You gotta write a book when you come back home." I said, " Carl! ) I Can't write a book. I can't even spell." He said, " Don't worry about the spelling. You write the book." "When I came home they kept after me..." "I'd say, Well, if you insist."

I was singing concerts at the time, and so..." It didn't take me long, not more than five or six months to write it... I would write it between mid-night and six o'clock in the morning, because that's the time Harlem is the quietest and nobody would bother me... When you write you gotta hole up some place. You can't write if anyone is going to breakup your continuity..." I wrote it in long-hand, see, and when it came to the typing it out, I got (Edna Thomas.) She had a Boston education. She was a very cultured woman..." So. We started typing the book, and Edna would say, "You can't put that down that way ! That is just not so !" "You put it down anyway, I'd say ."

" Oh. My God ! -- It'll be throwed in the wast-paper basket." Edna says.

Some of Gordon's letters 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 describes the trouble of getting used to French plumbing: I must tell you, this place is the place of the world, so far." Even the 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.,"

Under Van Vechten's urging's, Gordon shaped his experiences into the book. Van Vechten correctly judged that Gordon was a gifted story-teller, and the task was to get the tones and nuances into print.

Muriel Draper provided gifted editing help---Van Vechten paused during a vacation to Spain to write a preface.\*\*\* but no one has been entirely successful until Taylor Gordon somehow got himself on paper, lanky six-feet, falsetto voice, molasses laughter, and all and an eye that can see. The results probably a "Human document" of the first order, to be studied by sociologists and Freudians for years to come. Fortunately, for you who have purchased *Born To Be*, it is something more than that; it is an extremely amusing book \*\*\*

I feel I have a good PERSPECTIVE of the FLOATING SALON-- the ROYAL PARTIES in LONDON--CARL VAN VECHTEN and his wife FANIA, since I have seen MEGUEL COVARRUBUS'S ILLUSTRATIONS in *BORN TO BE*, and read the book.

Altho "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 disappointment... (Being the "top of the best sellers list")--Then the "crash"; many publishers went broke and individuals ...

It was not the only sort of disappointment for Taylor Gordon in 1929's and the years after. I wished the "rent" was heaven sent." black poet Langston Hughes wrote, and he could have been writing Gordon's case history. Not that the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing "Depression" ruined a personal fortune for Gordon. "That the consolation of never hoarding any money," he says now of the absence from the national financial trauma. But he soon became found out 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. Musical trends shifted, Concert seasons for a singer of spirituals vanished, Van Vechten helped Gordon, financially; but the lean years hung on.

Early in June 1931, Gordon held a rent party in Harlem. A tenant

low in funds would arrange for entertainment, and send out invitations and friends would pay a small admission fee. The "Rent party" was one of the most convenient results of the Depression. Gordon's rent party, "was singularly convivial: It was the season's most successful party," a Harlem Newspaper reported, "For every body except the rent man. Gordon lost ten dollars on the affair."

Meanwhile, he was working on other manuscripts and taking singing engagements where ever he could find them. A break came when he landed a roll in the Fred Astair stage musical, THE GAY DEVORCEE.

But by 1935 Gordon returned to Montana.

"I wish you could take a picture of my 'whiskers.'" He wrote to Carl Van Vechten after spending the 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."

Gordon hopes to write the "sequence" 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 Montana Ranch and Mining man named Bryon R. Sherman.

Two of the most vivid parts of the history, at least we generally think of them were the frontier days and the 1920's. Taylor Gordon's story combines both, a boyhood in White Sulphur Springs and a concert career in the twenties. This Black Montana.

*E. T. Taylor*

## Noted Singer Dies in White Sulphur Springs

*Wed. would be May 5, 1971*

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS —Emmanuel Taylor Gordon, 77, whose mother was a slave but went on to become an outstanding tenor, died here Wednesday.

Services will be at the Twitchel Funeral Home at 2 p.m. Tuesday with Rev. James Anderson officiating, burial will be in the family plot of the Mayn Cemetery in White Sulphur Springs.

Gordon was born here. His father had come to the area by Missouri River steamboat, and worked in White Sulphur Springs as a chef and baker. He earlier came to this country from Scotland with a family named Gordon and adopted that name.

Gordon's mother was a slave in Kentucky before she met and married his father. She came to Montana a year after her husband.

At the time, White Sulphur Springs was a thriving cowtown. John Ringling, of circus fame, often visited his ranch here and young Gordon learned to drive and repair cars from the Ringling chauffeur.

He later became a chauffeur

for an official of the Minneapolis Opera Co and his musical career was launched. He held many jobs, however, before he settled permanently on music and on occasions Ringling assisted him in his career.

He appeared in many musicals on the East Coast including one with Fred Astair, and made many tours of the nation and Europe.

He retired in 1960, returning here to live with a sister, Rose. She died in 1968.

Following his return, he gave several concerts in Montana. Among the last was one in Great Falls in 1961.



E. T. GORDON