

Generations of Achievement: The Family and Early Life of Orchid Ramsey Jordan in Clay Center, Kansas, 1910–1928

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Introduction

“Orchid Ramsey married a man by the name of Jordan who was murdered. They lived in Missouri. Orchid was or is a member of the Missouri Legislature.”¹ In so few words, the life of Orchid Ramsey Jordan was summarized by Josephine Haney in her collected history of “Black People of Clay Center,” written in 1983. As is often the case, there was so much more to Ms. Jordan’s story than what could be included in just three sentences. These lines in Josephine Haney’s account were first brought to my attention by Dr. M.J. Morgan, professor of history at Kansas State University, in her course on African American’s in Kansas. Though scholarly works are few and far between, the history of African Americans in the state is rich and diverse, as illustrated by Orchid Jordan’s life and its roots in Clay Center, Kansas. Orchid Ramsey’s story is one of a small-town African American girl born in 1910. She went on to marry Leon Jordan, a prominent Kansas City Civil Rights activist, and to take over his position in Missouri’s General Assembly for sixteen years after he was assassinated in 1970, and so much more. Though her entire life should be noted as significant, this study will focus primarily on Orchid Ramsey Jordan’s family history and her formative years in Clay Center between 1910 and 1928.

When investigating Ms. Jordan’s life and background, I used many varied resources. These resources included historical census data made available online by the Kansas State Historical Society and Ancestry.com, as well as historic plat maps and documents located at the Clay County Historical Society and the University of Missouri-Kansas City Miller Nichols Library Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections. A special thank-you is due to Mrs. Cathy Hafner of Clay County Historical for her unique insight and support in locating resources, and to Kelly McEniry for giving up his Saturday to open UMKC’s Special Collections

¹ Josephine Haney, *Black People in Clay Center*, 1983, p. 10, from Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay Center, KS.

area for my research. Additional thanks are due to Dr. Robert M. Farnsworth, Emeritus Professor at UMKC, and author of the most complete biography of Orchid Jordan's husband, Leon Jordan. Dr. Farnsworth graciously allowed me to interview him about his insight into the Ramsey and Jordan families. In examining the bits of information each of these resources provided, and piecing them together, an incredible story of three generations of hard work, perseverance, and achievement became apparent.

Early Clay Center and Orchid's Grandparents

Clay County, Kansas, was first designated in 1857. Located in the central northeast region of the state, the county was named for Henry Clay, "The Great Compromiser," best known for keeping the balance between free and slave territories prior to the Civil War. During the Civil War, the county was not yet fully organized and had few inhabitants, but in the years following the war, the first major settlements were established in the area.² One of these settlers was Harvey Ramsey, Orchid Ramsey Jordan's paternal grandfather.

Born a Missouri slave around 1847, Harvey Ramsey fled slavery to fight for his freedom in 1862. Though the *Clay County Illustrated* published in 1901 claims that he joined the "10th Missouri Infantry," this was not an African American unit.³ Based on federal records, it is more likely that Mr. Ramsey went by the first name "Washington" and was a part of the 10th Regiment of the US Colored Infantry, a regiment that supported General Benjamin Butler's actions in the siege of Petersburg and Richmond in 1864.⁴

² Frank W. Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Etc. ... with a Supplementary Volume Devoted to Selected Personal History and Reminiscence*, (Chicago, IL: Standard Pub., 1912) 361.

³ W. P. Anthony, *Clay Center Illustrated*, ed. John W. Johnson and Jesse R. Johnson, (Clay Center, KS: Clay Center Dispatch, 1901) 65.

⁴United States National Park Service, "Soldier Details," National Parks Service Webpage, December 2, 2014, accessed December 2, 2014. <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers-detail.htm>; United States National Park



Figure 1. Portrait of Harvey Ramsey, 1901.
Source: *Standard Atlas of Clay County*. Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co. 1900.
Located at the Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

After the war ended in 1865, Ramsey came to Kansas and worked twelve years as a farm hand to earn money to buy 30 acres of federal land in 1867.⁵ This land was along the Republican River in Clay County and his closest neighbors were settlers in Wakefield.⁶ Wakefield was settled primarily by immigrants from England, where much of the population had been staunchly against American slavery in the South prior to and during the Civil War.⁷ There is no indication of racial discrimination against Ramsey and his residence was even mentioned in a report in 1869 intending to encourage more English settlers.⁸ Over the following thirteen years, not only did Ramsey's land grow by 100 acres, but so did his family. Between 1867 and 1878, Harvey Ramsey married Celestine, "a very estimable wife" according to *Clay County Illustrated 1901*.⁹ Celestine Ramsey was a light-skinned African American woman from New York, nearly 15

Service, "Battle Units Details," National Parks Service Webpage, December 2, 2014, accessed December 2, 2014.; <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm>.

⁵ Anthony, *Clay Center Illustrated*, 65.

⁶ *Standard Atlas of Clay County (Kan.): Including a Plat Book of the Villages, Cities and Townships of the Count*, (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1900), 33.

⁷ William J. Chapman, *Wakefield Colony; a Contribution to the Local History of Kansas*, (Topeka, KS: State Printing Office, 1908).; Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning Anti-slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) 21-40.

⁸ Chapman, *Wakefield Colony*, 8.

⁹ Anthony, *Clay Center Illustrated*, 65.

years his junior.¹⁰ By 1895, the couple had eight children all considered “well educated and highly esteemed.”¹¹ The oldest of these children was Merriman Ramsey, Orchid Ramsey’s father. Harvey Ramsey, a highly successful African American “farmer and stock-raiser” was deemed “a man of more than usual intelligence” by his community. He is pictured in front of his home, with his family, below.

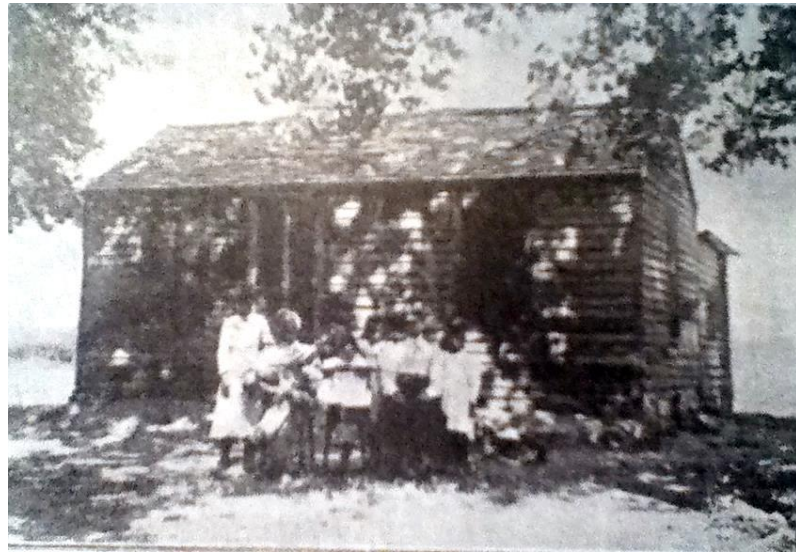


Figure 2. Harvey Ramsey and his family outside of his home near Wakefield, KS. Source: W. P. Anthony, "Residence of Harvey Ramsey," *Clay Center Illustrated*, ed. John W. Johnson and Jesse R. Johnson, (Clay Center, KS: Clay Center Dispatch, 1901) 65. Located at the Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

Orchid’s mothers’ parents were Charles Addisin Eyre and Susan Eyre. Charles Eyre, a butcher, was most likely born in the United States around 1833, although census records are unclear as to the location. Mr. Eyre’s parents immigrated to the United States from England near

¹⁰ The 1880 Census designates Celestine Ramsey’s race as “M” or “Mulatto,” an ambiguous label between “Black” and “White,” most likely indicating she was mixed-race; Ancestry.com, “Celestine Ramsey,” *1880 US Federal Census, Republican Township, Clay County, KS, District 031*, (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com, Inc.: 2009) 109A, accessed November 12, 2014.

¹¹ Anthony, *Clay Center Illustrated*, 65.

the time of his birth.¹² Maud Eyre, his wife, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, around 1842. Both were designated as “White” in census records. The couple had at least six children, of which Maud Eyre, Orchid Ramey’s mother, was the second youngest. Most records for Charles and Susan Eyre have them frequently moving and residing in Nebraska, though census data also indicates that the family lived in Topeka, Kansas, in 1885.¹³

Orchid’s Parents

Orchid’s father, Merriman Ramsey, was born to Harvey and Celestine Ramsey in Clay County, near Wakefield, August 17, 1878. Merriman, the oldest of eight and an African American, grew up going to Wakefield’s integrated Congregational Church.¹⁴ Though he was likely educated in local school up until a certain age, when Merriman Ramsey was 16-years-old, he had returned home to help his father farm.¹⁵ Soon Merriman married Susan Ramsey. Though his obituary notes that the wedding took place in 1893, this is unlikely as Merriman would have been 14 years old and still living with his parents.¹⁶ More likely is the date provided in Mrs. Ramsey’s obituary, October 29, 1902.¹⁷ Born Susan Eyre in Jewell County, Kansas, on August 7, 1880, to Charles and Maude Eyre. Susan had spent most of her childhood in Superior, Nebraska, but moved to Wakefield, Kansas upon marrying Merriman Ramsey. In 1902, the marriage of white, Susan, and African American, Merriman, would have been illegal in 26 states with

¹² Jane Dorian Jarosak, "Charles Addisin Eyre," Geni Family Tree, April 11, 2007, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://www.geni.com/people/Charles-Eyre/3931718?through=4123887>; Ancestry.com, “C.S. Eyer- Kansas State Census 1885,” *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com, Inc.: 2009) accessed November 12, 2014.

¹³ Ancestry.com, “Susan A Eyer- Kansas State Census 1885,” *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com, Inc.: 2009), accessed November 12, 2014.

¹⁴ “M.H. Ramsey,” *Clay Center Times*, February 1, 1924, Obituaries sec. 1983 from Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay Center, KS.

¹⁵ Ancestry.com, “Kansas State Census 1895,” *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com, Inc.: 2009) accessed November 12, 2014.

¹⁶ “M.H. Ramsey” Obituary; “Kansas State Census 1895.”

¹⁷ “Mrs. Susan Maude Ramsey.” *Clay Center Dispatch*, October 12, 1962, Obituaries sec. from Clay County Museum and Historical Society, Clay Center, KS.

legislation prohibiting inter-racial marriage, including Susan's home state of Nebraska.¹⁸ In Kansas, however, their marriage was permitted, even socially acceptable in their locality. Additionally, there is no indication that Susan's Nebraska-dwelling parents did not approve of the marriage as Merriman Ramsey's obituary states that C. A. Eyre, Susan's father, had even attended Mr. Ramsey's funeral.¹⁹

The married couple soon moved into the nearby town of Clay Center, where Merriman began work to raise a family.²⁰ Merriman was designated in his obituary as a blacksmith, but his draft registration record from 1918 indicates that he was an automobile mechanic.²¹ The 1915 Kansas State Census also designated that the couple ran a home laundry business as well.²² Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey gave birth to four children, Gladys, Harvey (named after his esteemed grandfather), Florence, and Orchid Ramsey.

Orchid's Early Childhood (1910-1924)

Orchid Ramsey was the youngest of Merriman and Susan Ramsey's children. Born in Clay Center on August 15, 1910, Orchid grew up with her brother Harvey and sister Florence, as Gladys had died in infancy.²³ All three of the children attended Clay Center's integrated elementary schools and were heavily involved in many activities. This thorough integration would have been unthinkable in many parts of the country when Orchid was attending school.

¹⁸ "Legal Map," Loving Day Fights Racial Prejudice through Education and Builds Multicultural Community, January 1, 2012, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://www.lovingday.org/legal-map>.

¹⁹ "M.H. Ramsey" Obituary.

²⁰ "Mrs. Susan Maude Ramsey" Obituary.

²¹ "M.H. Ramsey" Obituary; Ancestry.com, "Maraman Harvey Ramsey," *U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* [database on-line]. (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2005) accessed October 30, 2014.

²² Ancestry.com, "Kansas State Census 1915," *Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925* [database on-line]. (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com, Inc.: 2009) accessed November 2, 2014.

²³ Orchid Ramsey Passport, Box 7, Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri- Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri.

Kansas, for the most part, did not have segregated schools as a matter of practicality in a primarily rural state with few schools that had to serve wide areas. In 1879 however, Kansas legislature passed a bill allowing cities of over 15,000, including Topeka, Leavenworth, and several others, to opt to create segregated schools. Clay Center, a small town with a population nowhere near 15,000, had integrated schools, and more, integrated clubs, churches, and other extra-curricular activities.



Figure 3. Orchid Jordan (Second Row, Far Right) as part of Clay County Community High School's "Promoter Staff," 1925. Source: Clay County Community High School. *The Orange and Black*. 1925 edition. Used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections.

All three of the Ramsey children attended the integrated Clay County Community High School.

Orchid was part of the “Normal” training program for future teachers and was very much involved in extra-curricular activities.²⁴ Orchid’s brother, Harvey, was a “football star” and her

²⁴ Clay County Community High School, *The Orange and Black*, 1928 edition, Clay County Museum and Historical Society, 22.

sister, Florence, was “talented in art.”²⁵ Orchid was involved in many activities. One of these was acting as part of the “Promoter Staff” that organized the high school’s yearbook, *The Orange and Black*, during her freshman year in 1925. Orchid is pictured as part of the group in the preceding photograph.²⁶

Changes for Orchid (1924- 1928)

Orchid Ramsey’s freshman year, despite her participation in creating her school’s yearbook, was laced with tragedy. Her father, Merriman Ramsey, died early on the morning of February 20, 1924 when “his heart went back on him.” No one had suspected Merriman to die so young and at the age of 45. He left behind not only his parents, Harvey and Celestine, but his own wife and children. Mr. Ramsey had been “a kind father” according to the *Clay Center Times*, “an industrious man, hardworking, [who] always sought to give his children an education, the best heritage a man can leave.”²⁷

Devastated, Orchid was sent to school in Kansas City, Kansas, the home of her uncle, but only attended the segregated school for her sophomore year. In his biography of Leon Jordan, Dr. Robert Farnsworth, Emeritus Professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, indicates that Orchid “found going to an all-black high school scary after being used to the relative integration of Clay Center.”²⁸ Attending a segregated school likely made Orchid aware of her mixed-race parentage, perhaps even discriminated against by fellow students for her lighter skin color in Kansas City. This experience likely molded Orchid’s understanding of and opinions

²⁵ Haney, *Black People of Clay Center*, 10.

²⁶ Clay County Community High School, *The Orange and Black*, 1925 edition, Leon M. Jordan Collection, 81.

²⁷ “M.H. Ramsey” Obituary.

²⁸ Robert M. Farnsworth, *Leon Mercer Jordan, The Founder of Freedom, Inc.: Following in the Footsteps of His Father and Grandfather*, E-Book ed., (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2013), 95-96, <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col-collections/jordan/farnsworth-manuscript> .

about race. In Kansas City, Orchid was exposed to the harsh realities of school segregation that existed all over the country, even in her home state, the same state that later yielded the Supreme Court case which legally prohibited racial segregation in schools, *Brown v. Board of Education*.



Figure 4. Orchid Jordan Senior Photograph, 1928.
Source: Clay County Community High School. *The Orange and Black*. 1928 edition.
Located at the Clay County Museum and Historical Society.

Ms. Ramsey returned to Clay Center the next year and reenrolled as a junior at Clay County Community High School in 1927. She continued her courses in the Normal program and became a part of the Claxton Club, an organization named for Philander Claxton, the U.S. Commissioner of Education between 1911 and 1920.²⁹ The club emphasized the importance of rural school teachers and aimed to garner confidence in public speaking.³⁰ Though her education had been interrupted by her father's death, she continued to fulfil his hopes for his children's

²⁹ Clinton Allison, "Philander Priestley Claxton," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, December 25, 2009, accessed November 29, 2014, <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=271>.

³⁰ Clay County Community High School, *The Orange and Black*, 1925 edition, 71.

educations and graduated in 1928. Her senior picture (above) was printed in the Clay County Community High School yearbook, in alphabetical order, alongside her white classmates.

In 1928, Orchid Ramsey also met the man who would change her life forever: her future husband, Leon Jordan. Visiting family in Topeka, Orchid had just left an ice cream parlor, cone in-hand, and approached a local playground “to ask if anyone wanted a lick” when she met Jordan, who was attending college at Washburn University in Topeka.³¹ A short time later, Orchid Ramsey enrolled at Wilberforce University, a traditionally black college, in Ohio to continue her education in the fall semester of 1928. Her father, who had been so proud of his children’s “advancement,” and her former-slave-turned-successful-farmer grandfather, would no doubt have been even more proud to see Orchid continue on the path of higher education from high school in Clay Center to college in Ohio.³²

College, Married Life, Liberia (1928-1955)

Although he had previously been attending Washburn, Leon Jordan followed Orchid to Wilberforce, where the two continued to grow closer and closer. The relationship however did not hinder Orchid’s academics, graduating in 1932 with a degree in elementary education.³³ After her graduation, Orchid returned to Clay County, Kansas, and the two were married August 15, 1932; Orchid Ramsey became Orchid Jordan.³⁴ The newlyweds moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where Leon taught for several years before becoming one of the first African American police officers in the city, later becoming a detective. His police badge is visible in the

³¹ Farnsworth, *Leon Mercer Jordan*, 92.

³² “M.H. Ramsey” Obituary.

³³ Farnsworth, *Leon Mercer Jordan*, 96.

³⁴ Marriage Certificate of Leon Jordan and Orchid Ramsey, August 15, 1932, Box 1, Folder 2, Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri- Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri.

picture of Leon and Orchid below. About fifteen years after getting married, the Jordan's marriage was tested and the couple divorced, but remarried within four months when Mr. Jordan agreed to go to the African country of Liberia to train their then-disorganized police force.³⁵ In Liberia, reported one Kansas City paper in 1949, "One of Jordan's greatest helpers is his wife, Orchid. In the afternoon and evening, she has taken time off to teach finger printing to the men and women of the force."³⁶

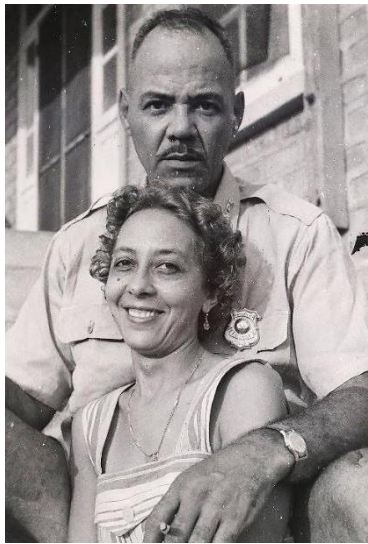


Figure 5. Leon and Orchid Jordan, ca. 1948.

Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri. Used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections.

The Jordans revolutionized Liberia's police force and upon their return from Africa, Orchid helped Leon to run his businesses.³⁷ One was a store that contained many goods from

³⁵ Mike McGraw and Glenn Rice. "Unsolved Killing of Leon Jordan Echoes Civil Rights Era." *Kansas City Star* Archives. Accessed December 2, 2014. <http://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/article296947/Unsolved-killing-of-Leon-Jordan-echoes-civil-rights-era.html>.; Farnsworth, *Leon Mercer Jordan*, 117-119.

³⁶ Jacob Browne, "Praises Leon Jordan for Modern Police Force in Monrovia, Liberia," *KC Call*, August 26, 1949, City sec. from Leon M. Jordan Collection.

³⁷ Matt Campbell, "Orchid Jordan, Former Legislator, Dead at 85." *Kansas City Star*, December 27, 1995 from Leon M. Jordan Collection.

Africa and the other the tavern Mr. Jordan purchased in 1955, the Green Duck. Orchid is shown with wares from the shop in the photograph below.



Figure 6. Orchid Jordan and African wares, ca. 1955.

Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri- Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri. Used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections.

Civil Rights Activism and the Assassination of Leon Jordan (1955-1970)

When the Jordans returned from Africa, the American Civil Rights Movement was well underway. Both took part in various related organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Mr. Jordan, along with Bruce R. Watkins also founded the first black political club in Kansas City, Freedom Inc., and in 1964 became a state representative for the 4th District of Jackson County, Missouri.³⁸ Tragically, Leon Jordan, considered by the Kansas City Star “the state’s most powerful black politician” was assassinated nearly six years

³⁸ Farnsworth, *Leon Mercer Jordan*, 180

later on August 15, 1970.³⁹ Mr. Jordan's death was one of the most notorious unsolved murder cases in Kansas City history until it was reopened in 2010 for further investigation. The 2010 search concluded that he had been killed by three members of Kansas City's black mafia.⁴⁰

Orchid and Leon Jordan had never had children.

Orchid's Political Career and Legacy (1970-1986)

When Leon Jordan was killed, he left behind not only his wife Orchid, but also his political seat in Missouri's House of Representatives. But three short weeks after Leon's death, Orchid was elected to fill his seat, where she hoped to "do everything [she could] to make Leon's dream of dignity, equality, justice, and freedom a reality."⁴¹ Orchid continued to be reelected to the position by a wide margin for 16 years, but maintained a "low profile," acting in her "own quiet way" to accomplish goals.⁴² All throughout this time, she remained an active member of many organizations and clubs, including the Kansas City chapter of Links Inc., a women's organization that promoted diverse cultural events, as well as the Kansas City Urban League, the Kansas City Council on Crime Prevention, and the Inter-City Dames.⁴³

³⁹ McGraw and Rice, "Unsolved Killing of Leon Jordan Echoes Civil Rights Era."

⁴⁰ Laura McCallister and Chris Oberholtz, "Investigation Team Leader Explains How 40-year-old Murder Case Was Cracked," KCTV 5 News and Meredith Corp, July 14, 2014, Accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.kctv5.com/story/19467594/investigation-team-leader-explains-how-40-year-old-murder-case-was-cracked>.

⁴¹ Matt Campbell, "Orchid Jordan, Former Legislator, Dead at 85." *Kansas City Star*, December 27, 1995 from Leon M. Jordan Collection.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Delia C. Gillis, *Kansas City*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007) 93.

Below is a photograph of Mrs. Jordan speaking before the Missouri House of Representatives before her resignation in 1986.



Figure 7. Orchid Jordan before the Missouri House of Representatives, ca. 1985.
Source: Leon M. Jordan Collection, LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri- Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri. Used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections.

Orchid Ramsey Jordan's Legacy

Nine years after her resignation from the House, Orchid Jordan passed away in December 1995. Orchid had reached a position in government and in life that neither her grandfather, Harvey Ramsey, nor her father, Merriman Ramsey, could hardly have fathomed and built upon a foundation of their hard work. Orchid's legacy was not only her own, but that of her parents and grandparents, the roots of her achievements toward the advancement of civil rights. Defying the odds, Harvey Ramsey had transformed his life from slavery's bondage to a successful farming career and family life in Kansas. Merriman Ramsey continued this tradition, marrying Susan Eyre in a time when bi-racial marriage was outlawed in a majority of the United States and working hard to provide his family with the best education possible. Finally, Orchid Ramsey Jordan's life served to extend the kind of racial acceptance her hometown in Clay Center had provided and to pave the way for future advancement in Kansas City, Missouri and the

importance of education, not only in the United States, but abroad in place like Liberia. Though her memory is often hidden behind that of her husband's, and more by her husband's assassination, Orchid Ramsey Jordan's story, from childhood in small town Kansas to a big city supporter of Civil Rights, an educator and Missouri legislative representative, should not be forgotten.

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