

Katie Goerl
Museum Musings
January 17, 2021

Remembering King Speak at K-State: Part 1

On January 19, 1968, months before he was murdered, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Kansas State University about "The Future of Integration." To an audience of more than 7,000, King spoke about the future of the Civil Rights Movement, non-violence, and Vietnam.

"We have come a long, long way," King said that evening, "but we still have a long, long way to go before we have a truly integrated and just society. ...

"We have seen an absolute crumbling of the system of legal segregation which pervaded so much of the South and the border states for so many, many years. We all know the history of the system of segregation. It has its legal beginning in 1896 when the Supreme Court rendered a decision as the Plessey vs. Ferguson decision. This established the doctrine of 'separate but equal' as the law of the land.

"Of course, we all know what happened as a result of the Plessey doctrine. There was always a strict enforcement of the 'separate,' without the slightest intention to abide by the 'equal.' The Negro ended up being plunged into the abyss of exploitation where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

"But something else happened; it was on May 17, 1954. On that date, after examining the legal body of segregation, the United States Supreme Court pronounced it constitutionally dead. It said in substance that the old Plessey doctrine must go: that separate facilities are inherently unequal — that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law.

"After the legal turning point, we noticed the psychological turning point where people by the thousands began to act. They started engaging in direct actions to fulfill the real ends expressed in the legal turning point. So there was the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956, where 50,000 Negroes decided that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to accept segregation and humiliation in the midst of the conditions of life. Then, in 1960, the student movement came into being — the 'sit-in' movement. By the thousands, students and adults sat in at lunch counters in order to protest segregated conditions. When they sat in at those lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and carrying the whole nation back to those wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Then came other movements like the Birmingham movement, the Selma movement.

"All of these movements, over the last ten years, had a powerful impact in bringing an end to legal segregation and the humiliation surrounding that system. So we have seen many changes as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We have come a long, long way since 1896.

"Now this would be a very good place for me to end my speech. First, it would mean making a relatively short speech, and that would be a magnificent accomplishment for a Baptist preacher. But beyond that, it would mean that the problem is just about solved now, and that

we really don't have much to do. It would be a wonderful thing if speakers all over our country could talk about the problem of racial injustice in terms of a problem that once existed but no longer exists. But if I stop at this point, I would merely be stating a fact and not telling the truth.

...

"Now it is a fact that we have come a long, long way, but it isn't the whole truth. And if I stopped at this point, I am afraid I would leave you the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality, and we would all go away the victims of a dangerous optimism. And so, in order to tell the truth, it is necessary to move on, and not only to talk about the problem in terms of the progress that we have made, but also to make it clear that we still have a long, long way to go before the problem of racial justice is solved. ..."

Excerpts of King's speech will continue next week. For comments or questions, please contact GearyHistory@gmail.com, or call 785-238-1666. The museum is open to visitors Tuesday through Saturday, 1-4 p.m.