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Museum Musings
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Remembering King Speak at K-State: Part 2

On January 19, 1968, just months before his untimely assassination, 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.

"Now it is a fact that we have come a long, long way," King said that evening, "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. ...

"We don't have to look very far to see this. We merely need to look around in our communities, to open our newspapers, and to turn on our televisions. Day in and day out, we are reminded of the fact that no area of our country can boast of clean hands in the realm of brotherhood.

Sometimes, the tragedies of racial injustice are expressed with more overt expressions of man's inhumanity to man as ugly violence. There are some counties in the deep South where murder of a civil rights worker, whether he be white or black, is still a popular pastime. In the state of Mississippi, for instance, over the last four years, more than sixty-two Negro or white civil rights workers have been brutally murdered, and not a single person has been convicted for these dastardly crimes. A few days ago, some were convicted in reference to the murder of three civil rights workers in 1964. We must remember that they were not convicted for murder on the state level. They were convicted through a Federal conspiracy law. No one has yet been convicted in the state of Mississippi for these sixty-two murders that I mentioned earlier.

"Over the last two years, some fifty Negro churches have been burned to the ground in the state of Mississippi. Nothing has been done about it. It seems that they have a new motto in Mississippi now — not 'Attend the church of your choice,' but 'Burn the church of your choice.' Oh, how tragic this is! It tells us that we still have a long, long way to go.

"The problem does not end with physical violence. There is another kind of violence; there is another kind of murder that is as injurious as physical violence to the person that it is inflicted upon. It is possible to lynch an individual psychologically and spiritually. And by the millions in the ghettos of our nation, North and South, Negroes are being murdered and lynched every day in the spiritual and psychological sense.

"We must not overlook the fact that more than 34 per cent of the Negro families of our country live in sub-standard housing conditions. In most instances, they do not have wall-to-wall carpets, but rather wall-to-wall rats and roaches. Conditions are so depressing that they would humiliate anyone facing them.

"And all over our country, young Negro students are forced to attend inadequate, overcrowded, segregated schools. That is not only still true of the South, but it is still true all over the country. So often, year after year, thousands of Negro boys and girls finish high school

reading at an eighth or ninth grade level — not because they are dumb, not because they do not have native intelligence, but because the schools are so inadequate, so overcrowded, so devoid of quality, so segregated if you will, that the best in these minds have never come out. "Then there is the other problem, which is probably the most crucial problem — namely, the economic problem. The vast majority of Negroes in America are still perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. More than 40 per cent of the Negro families of our country are poverty stricken, in the sense that they make wages less than the poverty level. Eighty-nine per cent of the Negro families of America earn less than \$7,000 a year.

"The unemployment rate in the Negro community is still at a depression level. Government figures would say that unemployment in Negro communities is about 8.8 per cent nationally, but these figures would only deal with individuals who were once in the labor market and who still go down to the employment office to try to find a job. These figures do not deal with what we refer to as the discouraged — thousands and thousands who have given up, who have lost hope, who have had so many defeats and so many doors closed in their faces that they have lost motivation — the people who have come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. If you add these, the unemployment rate would probably be 16 or 17 per cent of the Negro community. And when we come to Negro youth the unemployment rate is between 30 and 50 per cent. ...

"The problem is not only unemployment but it is underemployment. The fact is that most of the poverty stricken people in our country work every day, but they make wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of economic life of our nation. They work in our hospitals; they work in our hotels; they work in our laundries. The vast majority of them are in domestic service — working every day, long hours, and yet earning so little that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of the nation. This has made for a great deal of despair.

"The economic, the housing, the educational problems have made for a great deal of bitterness. We have seen angry explosions of this bitterness in the form of violence over the last two or three summers...."

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.