

# A Tale of Two Cities: Separation and Contact Between Dallas's Black and White Communities, 1919-1936

by Hunter Vermeer

In 1936, the Federal Writers' Project, "a WPA program designed to employ writers, journalists, [and] historians," opened an office in Dallas to coordinate research into local, North Texas history.<sup>1</sup> For six years, the Dallas team worked to produce the *WPA Dallas Guide and History*, an extensive study of the city during the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> Referring to Dallas as "a young, vigorous, rich city," the Federal Writers specifically praised the city's financial, industrial, and educational achievements.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these praises, the Writers did find cause for worry in Dallas's outlying "slum areas," which they identified as "Little Mexico, parts of South Dallas, and a belt of Negro neighborhoods...across the north central part of the city." The disparaging remarks against Dallas's ethnic communities were made even more severe by the Federal Writers' later conclusion that "Dallas has no Greenwich Village, Left Bank, or French Quarter" to call its own.<sup>4</sup> By discounting Dallas's ethnic communities as mere slums, the Federal Writers turned a blind eye to decades of artistic and cultural achievement in those communities.

Of particular note is the African American district of Deep Ellum which, during the 1920s and 1930s, was the geographic and cultural center of Dallas's separate black neighborhoods. During this period, Deep Ellum fostered an explosion of literature, art, and music, participating in the large national movement that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. The most visible sign of Deep Ellum's emerging cultural significance was its brightly-lit string of movie houses, known collectively as "theatre row." This essay will argue that Deep Ellum developed as a strong, independent community despite the violent racial politics that characterized early-twentieth-century Dallas. As a result, in the early twentieth century, Deep Ellum was an established community that was able to participate in the national Harlem Renaissance movement. This essay will also show that unlike in other regions, the deep-seated racism within

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<sup>1</sup> Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration in the City of Dallas, *The WPA Dallas Guide and History*, (Dallas: University of North Texas Press, 1992), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Unable to find financial backing for publication, the manuscript was housed after 1942 in the Dallas Public Library where it was made available to researchers. In the 1990s the library partnered with the University of North Texas to finally publish the Dallas Guide. The team was stationed in Dallas in order to contribute to a larger, state-wide history that they worked on alongside the Dallas Guide. *Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State* (New York: Hastings House, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> *The WPA Dallas Guide and History*, 3-8.

<sup>4</sup> *The WPA Dallas Guide and History*, 9.

Dallas prevented meaningful cultural exchange between Dallas's black and white communities.

The *WPA Dallas Guide* identified Deep Ellum as “the survival of the ‘Freedman’s Town’ settlement of former slaves established after the emancipation proclamation.”<sup>5</sup> This summary demonstrates further the ignorance that the white Federal Writers shared towards Dallas’s black community. As noted by local Deep Ellum historians Alan Govenar and Jay Brakefield, the Federal Writers confused Deep Ellum with many of Dallas’s other African American neighborhoods—which did have their origins as freedman’s towns following the Civil War. In reality, Deep Ellum first established itself with the arrival of the railroad in Dallas during Reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> In preparation for the arrival of the H&TC railroad, trees were cleared in an otherwise empty lot of land to the north and east of Dallas proper in the space that would become Deep Ellum.<sup>7</sup> On July 16, 1872, the first train rolled into town on the newly constructed track, and “within a year...between 750 and 900 new buildings were erected” around the tracks.<sup>8</sup> In these early days, most of the new buildings were cheap “shotgun houses” created by merchants who had followed the H&TC as it extended across the state, setting up shops at each new city connected.<sup>9</sup> Many of these early settlers were Eastern European Jews, who would form a small but resilient community themselves around the tracks. Dallas’s black communities benefited from the new railroad as well. The railroad itself hired on many local African Americans, while others “found jobs in the industrial area” around the track “in planning mills, meatpacking plants, oil works, waste mills, and dairies.”<sup>10</sup> In 1870, only 2,109 African Americans called the entire Dallas county “home.” By 1930, Dallas city by itself housed 50,407 black citizens, half of which had arrived in just the previous decade.<sup>11</sup> Often, blacks migrated to the city in search of job opportunities. Many fled from poor farming conditions like boll weevil infestations which devastated the Texas countryside in the 1890s.<sup>12</sup> Whatever their reasons, new arrivals flocked to the established African American communities on the outskirts of Dallas. Centrally-located

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<sup>5</sup> *The WPA Dallas Guide and History*, 294.

<sup>6</sup> Alan B. Govenar and Jay F. Brakefield, *Deep Ellum: The Other Side of Dallas*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 31, 33.

<sup>9</sup> The term “shotgun houses” was a derogative term indicating that “a shotgun shell fired through the front door would travel out the back without hitting anything.” Govenar & Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Lewis, “Under Asphalt and Concrete: Postwar Urban Redevelopment in Dallas and its Impact on Black Communities, 1943-1983,” (Master’s thesis, Texas Woman’s University, 2019), viii. Lewis’s work focuses on how the rapid rise in black population coupled with segregation to create slum conditions within Dallas’s black communities. Following World War Two, aggressive urban development policies targeted these communities and created nearly irreparable harm for their inhabitants.

<sup>12</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 36.

Deep Ellum established itself as the commercial center for these various communities. Black-owned businesses mixed with the established Jewish-owned business (which also catered to blacks, unlike downtown white businesses) in increasing numbers. Cut off from white downtown Dallas by racial hostility and segregation, Deep Ellum became the commercial center for black Dallas.

Racial tensions in Dallas, along with the establishment of segregationist policies, forced black Dallasites to create independent, self-contained communities that could meet their needs. Unfortunately, the increasing influx of African Americans into the city would exasperate racial tensions and lead to continued hostility towards black Dallasites. During the early twentieth century, segregationist practices became legally codified in city statutes—upheld by whites through vigilante violence directed toward Dallas’s black community. Before 1896 when the “separate-but-equal” principle of *Plessy v. Ferguson* became law, segregation was mostly an informal, traditional custom. Following the Supreme Court decision, however, Dallas politicians were able to discriminate against Dallas’s African American communities legally. In 1916, a Dallas referendum vote created housing segregation based on race. The referendum allowed city officials to designate neighborhoods as white, black, or open (mixed). The ordinance was struck down by the Texas Supreme Court in 1917, but a similar measure was passed in 1921 that allowed residents of a neighborhood to designate their own block as white, black, or open.<sup>13</sup> Other laws moved beyond housing to limit contact between races in public transportation, dances, and entertainment venues.<sup>14</sup> Through discriminatory city codes and ordinances, separation became a way of life for Dallas’s black and white ethnic communities.

Periodically, violence would be used as a tool by Dallas whites to enforce harsh segregation policies. The *Dallas Express*, a black newspaper based in Deep Ellum, reported in 1919 on national statistics of lynching. Bitterly referring to lynching as “the great American pastime,” the paper highlights Texas’s role as the leading lynching state the previous year.<sup>15</sup> Even more dramatic shows of force erupted in 1927 and 1929 when blacks moving into predominately white neighborhoods had their houses bombed and burned.<sup>16</sup> Politically, Dallas’s black community was left with little recourse. In 1902, “black citizens were stripped of the suffrage by a poll tax.”<sup>17</sup> In the 1920s, as the Ku

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<sup>13</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 62-63.

<sup>14</sup> “Segregation in Dallas 1916-1968,” *Dallas Municipal Archives* (Dallas, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 26, No. 13, Ed. 1, January 11, 1919, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841-2001*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey J. Graff, *The Dallas Myth: The Making and Unmaking of an American City*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 169.

Klux Klan experienced a resurgence across the country, and “the local Klan chapter ran candidates for every office in the county elections...and won nearly every contest.”<sup>18</sup> Black Dallasites were visibly reminded of the Klan’s presence when 789 members led a silent march through the city in May 1921 accompanied with full robes, a flaming cross, and an American flag, halting traffic for nearly an hour.<sup>19</sup> Faced with open hostility from Dallas’s white population and politically isolated, Dallas’s black communities turned inward. Within their separate neighborhoods, they created a community built on black cultural pride—praising the educational, professional, and artistic achievements of African Americans. Deep Ellum served as the cradle for this emerging identity, the downtown for black Dallasites.

By 1920, Deep Ellum was the mecca of Dallas’s disparate black neighborhoods. Due to segregation and racial hostility, Deep Ellum became the black downtown of a city within a city. In effect, black Dallasites created a safe space for the emergence of a vibrant African American culture. In an interview with historian Jay Brakefield, Louis Bedford, Dallas County’s first African American judge, recalled, “it [Deep Ellum] was centrally located...it seems logical to me that if whites had a downtown section that was convenient for everyone, blacks would need the same thing.” Barred from the traditional white downtown, black Dallasites found that if “they had no place to eat because of the segregated atmosphere, there was Deep Ellum. They had to go to the restroom, there was Deep Ellum...It was the heart.”<sup>20</sup> Alongside restaurants and retail shopping, Deep Ellum provided office space for various black professionals. The most prominent building was the Grand Lodge of the Pythian Knights, completed in 1916. The first floor offered a barbershop and a drugstore. The second and third floors housed offices for local professionals as well as organizations such as the Negro Business Bureau, the American Mutual Benefit Society, and the Golden Chain of the World. The fourth floor housed a ballroom that was used for dances, concerts, and community events.<sup>21</sup> If Deep Ellum served as the center of black Dallas, the Grand Lodge, in turn, served as the central home for Deep Ellum’s professional class. The Grand Lodge also connected black Dallasites to prominent African American figures such as in January 1923, when “George Washington Carver demonstrated sweet potato products at the Pythian temple for an audience of eight hundred,” or when Marcus Garvey promoted his Back-to-Africa movement in a speech at the temple on June 19, 1922.<sup>22</sup> Garvey’s

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<sup>18</sup> Keven Portz, “Political Turmoil in Dallas: The Electoral Whipping of the Dallas County Citizens League by the Ku Klux Klan, 1922,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2015): 149.

<sup>19</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, Vol. 36, No. 234, Ed. 1, May 22, 1921, *The Dallas Morning News Archive*, Dallas, Texas.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Bedford, interview by Jay Brakefield, December 5, 1992, cited in Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 39.

performance proved so popular that the local paper, the *Dallas Express*, was forced to respond in August of that year that “neither the intelligent, prosperous Colored resident of Harlem, nor the field worker of Mississippi has any serious desire to go ‘back to Africa.’ It is no more a home land to him than Greenland would be.”<sup>23</sup>

For its own part, the *Dallas Express* played a prominent role in the formation of a joined African American identity in Dallas’s black population. The paper often featured topics promoting black business, education, and political issues (such as Garvey’s Back-to-Africa movement). Sharing national news stories, the paper connected readers with large movements or events such as Garvey’s black Zionism and the Harlem Renaissance. The *Dallas Express* also maintained awareness of local issues such as upcoming elections. Cut off from white Dallas by segregation, Deep Ellum took a further step in 1937 when the Negro Chamber of Commerce installed its own mayor and executive officers (including a president, secretary, and treasurer).<sup>24</sup> Captured for local Dallasites by the *Dallas Express*, the move clearly highlights black Dallasites awareness of their difficult situation. Denied honest political participation and representation by Dallas’s white residents, the black community created its own political body to address their needs. In doing so, black Dallasites officialized what had been a reality for decades—a distinct, independent African American city within a city.

The most recognizable feature of Deep Ellum was a row of brightly-lit theatres, leading it to gain a reputation as a late-night entertainment district. Film was one of the fastest-growing industries in the nation throughout the 1920s. The introduction of sound to film revolutionized movie houses and excited audiences. In his study of the period, social historian David Kyvig discusses movies’ involvement in the creation of “a centrally defined mass culture.”<sup>25</sup> Even in the midst of the Great Depression “going to the movies...remained the most widespread form of entertainment” Americans pursued.<sup>26</sup> Kyvig also notes that for minorities facing segregated seating or exclusion altogether, “separate theatres catering exclusively to minority audiences...cropped up in places with sizable black or Hispanic populations.”<sup>27</sup>

Certainly, this was the case in Dallas, where a growing black population patronized a string of theatres in Deep Ellum as an alternative to the segregated theatres on the white side of Dallas. Further, the “mass culture” that Deep Ellum’s theatres presented was often fiercely and proudly black, as can be seen by the frequent advertisements taken out within the *Dallas Express* by different local theatres. One

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<sup>23</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 29, No. 42, Ed. 1, Saturday, August 5, 1922, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>24</sup> *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, February 2, 1937.

<sup>25</sup> David Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 105.

<sup>26</sup> Kyvig, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Kyvig, 95.

advertisement for the Grand Central Theatre promoted the aptly-named “Colored Dallas,” a film study of “the most progressive Colored people in any city in the South.” The film offered black Dallasites an opportunity to “see yourself in the movies.”<sup>28</sup> While this advertisement was speaking literally, a range of films allowed black Dallasites to see themselves represented in the African American actors that frequented the big screen. The Grand Central Theatre advertised one of its movies as “a picture superior in moral with an all Negro cast of artists.”<sup>29</sup> The Mammoth Theatre regularly tagged itself as a theatre “operated by colored folks for colored folks.” Featuring African American films such as “The Homesteader,” the Mammoth Theatre promised, “not a white person appears throughout this wonderful photo-play.”<sup>30</sup>

Deep Ellum theatres did not limit themselves to just films; they were also a prominent venue for many female blues singers. Theatre row offered a stage blues and jazz artists such as Mamie Smith, Trixie Smith, Clara Smith, Bessie Smith, and Lillian Glinn—often giving the singers public exposure and even catapulting a few careers to national prominence.<sup>31</sup> With their bright lights and glamorous shows, Deep Ellum’s theatres were easily the most visible part of the district and were the section most commented on by visitors. As a result of its notoriety, film and theatre offered one of the few points of contact between the white and black sections of Dallas.

Theatres in Deep Ellum not only contributed to a surge of African American culture in the 1920s and 1930s, but they also acted as one of the few areas where whites and blacks regularly interacted. In another interpretation, the artistic and cultural renaissance was so potent within Deep Ellum that at times it overflowed into Dallas’s white communities. Cultural historians Govenar and Brakefield referred to the song *Deep Elem Blues* as “the best-known song about Deep Ellum,” first gaining widespread popularity in the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> The song’s lyrics tell what it is like to “go down in Deep Elem,” a transition between racial environments. Referring to Deep Ellum’s reputation (largely due to its vibrant theatre row) as a semi red-light and late-night neighborhood, the song depicts the city as a lawless world where loose morals reign. Regardless of the accuracy of its depiction (which is debatable), there does seem to be some truth behind its central narrative. Certainly, white Dallasites were aware of Deep Ellum’s many attractions, as a *Dallas Morning News* article—referring to Deep Ellum as “the Darkies’

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<sup>28</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 27, No. 16, Ed. 1, Saturday, January 24, 1920, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>29</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 29, No. 17, Ed. 1, Saturday, February 11, 1922, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>30</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 27, No. 26, Ed. 1, Saturday, April 3, 1920, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>31</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 55-57.

<sup>32</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, 17-20.

Parade Ground” — called Deep Ellum “the Broadway of the Dallas Black Belt...It is on ‘de tracks’ that the Negroes go to have a good time.”<sup>33</sup>

As depicted in the song *Deep Elem Blues*, it was common for white patrons to “go down” to Deep Ellum and visit black theatres. On Friday-night, many of the theatres offered a “midnight ramble” that offered entry to white patrons at a slightly higher admission price than normal.<sup>34</sup> Other, shadier, parts of Deep Ellum, such as drinking establishments, remained closed off to white patrons. In an interview, musician Sammy Price recalled that “if there were any whites” in those parts, “they were running a foot race.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically, by limiting white involvement within Deep Ellum, black Dallasites echoed the segregationist policies that they themselves had been subjected to for nearly a century. However, the widespread violence that blacks within Dallas faced was not replicated; white Dallasites could and did venture into Deep Ellum theatres to partake in the daily festivities. Given the context of Jim Crow-era discrimination, it is not surprising that blacks within Dallas were slightly guarded towards the intrusion of their independent community by white Dallasites. Physically going into Deep Ellum did not offer the only chance for interaction between the two communities, however, and other white Dallas residents managed to engage with the distant black community remotely.

Within a highly segregated city, a few individual white playwrights created works that attempted to bridge the gap, even slightly, between the two distant racial communities. However, these attempts highlighted the depth to which segregation had created racial barriers within the city. In 1924, white Dallas playwright John William Rogers wrote *Judge Lynch*, exposing the injustice of Jim Crow’s legal system against African Americans. The white Dallas Little Theatre took Roger’s play to New York, where they won first prize and the Belasco Cup for their performance. Returning from New York, the troupe again performed the play locally at the Majestic Theatre, a part of downtown white Dallas. The play “attracted some 23,000 people in a single week, a box office record for the time.”<sup>36</sup> The *Dallas Express*, in the same month as *Judge Lynch* returned, reported a story that juxtaposes the pro-African American play with the realities of Jim Crow South. The *Dallas Express* explains:

“The management of the Majestic Theatre last week went out of its way to invite a large number of the Negroes of the City to one of its performances as its guests. A large number of those so invited took advantage of the invitation and were

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<sup>33</sup> Cited in Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Sammy Price, interview by Alan Govenar, September 27, 1984, cited in Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Davis, *Twentieth Century Cultural Life in Texas*, (Boston: American Press, 1981), 17-18.

present. On entering they were shown to seats by the ushers and just as they were sitting down to enjoy the evening's performance they were peremptorily ordered from the seats that they occupied and told to find seats farther back. No amount of explanation brought any more courteous response than the peremptory command to move. It even happened that violence was threatened to the wife of one of the men present and but for the decision of a large number of those to leave the theatre, an ugly scene would have been precipitated."<sup>37</sup>

Was *Judge Lynch* the "performance" that inspired the Majestic Theatre's management to invite many of Dallas's black community to the stage that night? The play is not explicitly named; however, it remains tempting to connect the two. Regardless of whether *Judge Lynch* was the show that evening, the "ugly scene" that took place at the Majestic Theatre presents an ironic twist on Roger's creation. *Judge Lynch* was presented at a theatre that actively practiced segregated seating; black patrons were expected to purchase their tickets at a separate side entrance and sit in the balcony seats away from white guests. The confrontation that took place in the Majestic highlights the tensions within this system and how white violence was its enforcing agent. In the face of these deeply embedded forces, Roger's *Judge Lynch*—while a nice sentiment—was unable to inspire any real change in race relations.

Echoing the experience of *Judge Lynch*, in 1929, white Dallas school teacher Kathleen Witherspoon wrote *Jute*, a play criticizing gender and racial double-standards that allowed white men to "exploit black women while black men risked their lives if they looked in the direction of a white woman."<sup>38</sup> The play was originally performed by the Oak Cliff Little Theatre featuring an all-white cast (including Witherspoon) using blackface. Within a few months, the play was taken up by the Dallas Negro Players, who utilized an all-black cast. Both performances were well-received at the time, despite the play's controversial nature. However, in 1935 when Witherspoon and the Oak Cliff Little Theatre tried to stage *Jute* again with an integrated cast, city officials canceled the show by citing a 1907 segregation law.<sup>39</sup> The direct contact between whites and blacks on stage proved too much for white audiences. Once again, deeply imbedded racial tensions limited the cultural interaction that *Jute* had briefly offered. Despite attempts to bridge the gap between the two communities, they remained distanced from one another during Jim Crow South. This divide would play a crucial role in the creation of the Texas Centennial Exposition and the Hall of Negro Life.

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<sup>37</sup> *The Dallas Express*, Vol. 31, No. 28, Ed. 1, Saturday, May 24, 1924, Texas Digital Newspaper Program, The Portal to Texas History, University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Phillips, "North Texas's Black Art and Literature during the 1920s and 1930s: "The Current is Much Stronger," in *The Harlem Renaissance in the American West: The New Negro's Western Experience*, ed. Cary Wintz and Bruce Glasrud (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *North Texas's Black Art and Literature*.



In 1936, the Texas Centennial Exposition was brought to Dallas as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Texas Independence. The Centennial Exposition, which was meant to be a celebration of history and culture, offered an opportunity for black Dallasites to celebrate and share their own artistic and cultural achievements. This opportunity was vividly expressed in the Hall of Negro Life. This exhibit became the culmination of the previous two decades' artistic and musical creativity in which black Dallasites had actively participated. Despite claims that "race relations are probably more satisfactory in the Lone Star State than is true of any of the other Southern States," evidence indicates that many Dallas whites felt uneasy at the open display of African American culture.<sup>40</sup> The account of Jesse Thomas, who was actively involved with the hall's management, reveals many instances in which ingrained white prejudices dominated experiences at the hall.<sup>41</sup> From the beginning, the Hall of Negro Life experienced pushback from established white authorities. Despite its significance to Texas and Dallas history, "neither the State of Texas nor the City of Dallas appropriated a single dime to cover Negro participation in the Texas Centennial." Planners turned to federal authority to secure funding for the hall, enabling its participation.<sup>42</sup> Problems continued into construction, where a local contractor, believing "Negroes could not assemble enough exhibits to fill the building," opted to paint the walls red and green in order to give visitors "something pretty to look at."<sup>43</sup>

Despite its rocky start, the planners pushed forward, and the Hall of Negro Life was successfully introduced to the public alongside the rest of the Texas Centennial. One of its main features introduced another opportunity for theatre to bridge the gap between Dallas's white and black citizens. For more than a week, the performance of *Macbeth* attracted thousands of viewers. The Centennial's *Macbeth* was unique, however. Performed by an all-black cast from the Federal WPA Theatre project from New York, the version of *Macbeth* at the Centennial re-imagined the classic play in a Haitian setting—complete with voodoo doctors as witches. Hall-planner Jesse Thomas recalled that the Centennial's performance of *Macbeth* offered many of its white guests their first opportunity to watch a play with integrated racial seating, or even their first opportunity to see professional black actors.<sup>44</sup> According to Jesse Thomas and local

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<sup>40</sup> Jesse Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition*, (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1938), 7. Quoted material is from a foreword written by Emmett J. Scott, educator at the Howard University in Washington D.C.

<sup>41</sup> Jesse Thomas was an African American educator and civil rights activist coming out of the Tuskegee Institute. A protégé of Booker T. Washington, Thomas worked with the National Urban League in Atlanta. It was in this capacity that he was elected to manage the Hall of Negro Life in Dallas. See Rosemary Braxton, "Jesse O. Thomas (1885-1972)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 24 January 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, *Negro Participation*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, 64, 96.

newspapers, the Hall of Negro Life appears to have been well-received by many of its white visitors despite these controversies.<sup>45</sup>

Strangely, the popular Hall of Negro Life was quickly demolished following the Texas Centennial Exposition. It was the only Centennial building destroyed in this manner, many of the other buildings were used the following year in the 1937 Greater Texas & Pan-American Exposition (which was originally meant to include the African American Hall). It appears that due to a withdrawal of federal funding at the urging of local politicians, the hall was quietly torn down and forgotten. The same white politicians who initially refused to fund the Hall of Negro Life in the lead up to the Centennial seized their first opportunity to be rid of the hall.<sup>46</sup> In a particularly bitter conclusion following the Texas Centennial, the Fair Park lot on which the hall had sat was replaced with a segregated, all-whites swimming pool.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the Hall of Negro Life marked the end of a period of African American cultural achievement in Dallas. Like all attempts during this period, the hall was ultimately unable to overcome the existent biases that separated races within Dallas.

The harsh policies of segregation created a backdrop that characterized the lives of black Dallasites living in Jim Crow's South. Ironically, it was the overtly racist and often violent hostility that led black Dallasites to form independent African American havens, which, in turn, served as launching points for a separate black cultural identity. The most visible sign of this emergence could be seen in Deep Ellum's theatre row, which brightly lit the street of Deep Ellum nightly. Contact between the two communities did periodically occur; however, these meetings rarely affected real change or positive effects due to discriminatory politics and attitudes. Attempts to cross the color line were fraught with risks and controversies, and the two halves developed their own unique cultures. For all practical purposes, Dallas remained two separate cities. This sharply divided society set the stage for Dallas's Civil Rights battle in the 50s and 60s, wherein black Dallasites would push for equality and inclusion with Dallas as a whole.

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas, 97-103.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, 117-125.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Wilonsky, "Fair Park hasn't always been fair to everyone, and it's time Dallas finally tells that story." *The Dallas Morning News*, April 19, 2019.