

**Legend: "The Blue Devils" (History and Roots of
the Kansas City Kansas Community College Mascot)**
by
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Abstract

In a time of intense racial segregation, it seems implausible that a group of white journalism students and athletes at Kansas City Kansas Junior College changed their mascot name from "Blue Birds" to "Blue Devils" based on an extraordinarily popular African American jazz band in the late 1920's. In the absence of documented evidence it has been suggested that the Duke University Blue Devils, who founded their mascot in 1923, were a more probable source. A thorough examination of the white Kansas City Kansas Junior College student newspaper, *The Jayhawk*, from the years 1926 and 1927, reveals the reason for changing the mascot. The extraordinary social conditions surrounding the decision and a more detailed version of the events and people are revisited and analyzed in this speculative account.

A remarkable legend, passed down as oral history at our community college, is the story of how the Blue Devils mascot was selected by a group of white students in 1926 based on their affections for a popular Negro blues/jazz group. The legend comes from very credible sources. J. Paul Jewell, (d. 1999) an economics professor at the college from 1947-1988, and local historian, told the story to Marlin Cooper, professor of music from 1972-1999. Jewell wrote *The History of Kansas City Kansas Community College* in 1996 and was a noted authority on this subject. However, Jewell either did not research the oral account or could not properly document the legend, and therefore makes no mention of it in his book. Jewell only says,

The first officially adopted mascot of the College was the Bluebird. This was changed in 1928 to the Blue Devils. Through the years there have been other attempts to change the mascot, but all have been unsuccessful.¹

At first it seems implausible that a group of journalism students and athletes would change their mascot name from "Blue Birds" to "Blue Devils" in an era of intense racial school segregation. However, the fact that such an unusual story would have been passed down suggests some kernel of truth may exist. In the absence of documented evidence, it has been suggested the Duke University Blue Devils, who founded their mascot in 1923, were a more probable source. A thorough examination of the white Kansas City Kansas Junior College student newspaper, *The Jayhawk*, from the years 1926 and 1927, reveals the motive for changing the mascot, the extraordinary social conditions surrounding the decision, and a more detailed version of the events and people forwarded in this speculative account.

In 1926, junior college classes were being held for 64 Negro students at Sumner High School located at 9th and Washington, while 284 White junior college students attended only three blocks away at Central High School at 9th and Minnesota.² The education system in Wyandotte County had been segregated since 1905, and this split carried over into the junior college when it was established in 1923.³ Segregated students were not allowed to collaborate in extra curricular school activities. The prejudicial tenor of strict racial divide was punctuated by two prominent Ku Klux Klan induction ceremonies at Klamm Park in the fall of 1927.⁴ In this setting the first use of the mascot name "Blue Devils" appears in the white junior college student newspaper, *The Jayhawk* on the December 3, 1926. The article was titled "College Gridsters Fight Through Season Scoreless."⁵ The anonymous sports reporter provides a summary of the college's second dismal football season. For the rest of the fall 1926 and the spring 1927 academic year, *The Jayhawk* sports reporters and their editors refer to the men's athletic teams as Blue Devils.

In the first issue of the fall semester on September 23, 1927, the "Blue Birds" mascot mistakenly reappears in the sports section. In the next issue, on October 7, 1927, an unknown sports reporter for *The Jayhawk* posted, "Humble Apologies, Devils."

"Blue Devils" strike not our sweating brows. In ignorance we addressed you as "Blue Birds" and humbly, we beseech you to forgive us this act. We agree with you that the name "Blue Birds" is too effeminate for a bunch of huskies like you But please "Blue Devils" grant us this wish; at least if you object to the name "Blue Birds," bring us happiness that for which the Blue Bird is a symbol, by defeating some of our worthy opponents and bring the state championship banner to the college that we may hoist it up on high and prove our athletic ability. And now, oh noted athletes, come to our rescue and describe for us this monster after which you are named, for we thought that since prohibition went into effect all of these so called "Blue Devils" had been deported. Drawings and cartoons will gladly be accepted in *The Jayhawk* office. Again "Blue Devils," we beg of you to please pardon us this error and to bear mercifully with us if we make mistakes in the future.⁶

Now everyone was on the same page and forever after used the Blue Devils to refer to all athletic teams. While the source of the name Blue Devils is speculative, the motive for changing the name of the mascot is certain. Once again in the October 7, 1927, issue of *The Jayhawk*, "Adding Insult to Injury," We've heard of football players wearing silk pants. We've heard of them drinking tea, but now we hear of them being affectionate in a game. Yes! It's the truth. Several of our boys were accused of being affectionate and even tried to "neck" at the game. Just imagine a big, brawny brute necking! It is said some of the boys were caught "necking" Rockhurst fellows last Friday. Don't misunderstand this. Some of the fellows were tackling around the neck and some remarked that our boys were certainly affectionate and looked as though they wanted to neck. Blue Devils get hot!⁷

It is apparent that some of the journalism students, athletes, and others wanted to purge the school of an effeminate mascot in hopes of inspiring a terrible football team to improved performance. Losing 76-0 against Rockhurst College was evidence for poor tackling. Adopting the Blue Devils mascot was a perfect metaphor for eliciting "the heat" necessary for heightened sports performance.

The students bolstered their choice for a new mascot in the November 2, 1927 issue of *The Jayhawk* with a competition for the best artistic rendition of a Blue Devil. The contest winners involved a collaborative effort between Dorothy Stebbins, and Maurice Harmon. The latter played tight end on the football team. The sketch "Presenting Mr. B Devil," was accompanied by the following caption, Well, folks, here he is - a "Blue Devil." Now we have heard of "Red Devils," but "blue" is beyond us. So after many attempts to capture this monster and after persuading him to realize who was master we finally got this photo. And, say, here's a tip. Cut this out for your memory book, for our college possesses the only "Blue Devil[s]" in captivity, and we might not be able to persuade him to "sit" for his picture again, for you know he has a peculiar characteristic in not liking to have his picture appear in public. You know, we are very sorry, but we found out that our supply of blue ink is exhausted, and so this "Blue Devil" must appear black, but if you use your imagination and look carefully you will observe that he looks familiar. We haven't decided which of our "Blue Devils" were captured by our photographer in order to have this photo taken. The horns and tail make one think it is Captain "Mac," but then if you notice the face, it is too peaceful to belong to this gridiron warrior. The face appears almost angelic, in fact, and we can think of no "Blue Devil," with just that expression of innocence on his countenance unless it is Maurice Harmon, Jack Edwards, or David Waldman. Well, what's the matter with you folks? I've introduced you. How about a "How do you do"? Oh, you can't say it to a paper picture. Well, who asked you to? How about saying it at the game Friday?⁸

If the imperative for changing to a new mascot comes from poor play on the part of the football team, coupled with an effeminate Blue Birds mascot, then how is it that a group of white students decided to invoke the name of a Negro blues/jazz band out of Oklahoma City in a time of intense school segregation? The social conditions surrounding the junior college in that particular year, 1926, were atypical, and provide the best argument as to why the Blue Devils band was the source of the mascot name. It was the first year of the so-called "boss Tom era" in Kansas City, Missouri.⁹ There were many kinds of entertainment, short theatrical skits and comedy troupes, but most widely appreciated was live dance music. The atmosphere in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, beginning in 1926 suddenly transformed into something like an early Las Vegas crossed with perpetual New Orleans Mardi Gras. Most pertinent to this story is that during the fall of 1926, the Paul Banks Orchestra breached the Jim Crow line with a series of midnight "ramble shows" at the Newman Theater.¹⁰ The illustrious hey-day of Kansas City was fanned by

illegal activities rooted in a wide-open acceptance by local power brokers for bootleg alcohol during prohibition.

The Blue Devils band often broadcast live from KVVO in Oklahoma City where they were based in 1925 and 1926.¹¹ In the spring and fall they traveled band routes from Oklahoma City to Tulsa, Omaha, Emporia, Kansas City, St. Joseph, Joplin, Hot Springs, Little Rock and then down through Texas before swinging back up to Oklahoma.¹² They performed for all types of dance audience's and eventually cast their spell in the Southwestern United States.¹³ A highly touted rival bandleader in Kansas City, Jesse Stone of the Blues Serenaders, said the Blue Devils were "sharper, cleaner, more powerful, and with more material" than any of the hundreds of bands "barnstorming" during that era.¹⁴ Jazz historians, Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix emphasize how fans in Kansas City "liked their music hot, preferring stomps, breakdowns, gut bucket blues, and torrid jazz."¹⁵

Some of the junior college students perhaps first heard the Blue Devils band live after establishing themselves in Kansas City in 1928 with their new pianist, Mr. William "Count" Basic.¹⁶ Spectacular "battle of the bands" offered a highly competitive musical spirit where the Blue Devils reigned supreme. The first decade of our college, 1923-1933, corresponds precisely with the musical zenith of the Blue Devils band.¹⁷ On the dance floor, Ernie Williams, lead singer, drummer, and M.C. for the Blue Devils, was also known as "the Charleston King in the Southwest."¹⁸ On stage the band generated tremendous excitement for dance crazes such as the Peabody and the Charleston performed by women called "flappers." Students were ecstatic to be attending college and enjoying rarified music venues only a few years after dodging a terrible influenza epidemic and World War I.

The journalism students developed creativity in their writing, biting sarcasm, and actively marketed school spirit. Miss Eleanor Baptist,¹⁹ faculty advisor and instructor for the 1926 fall semester journalism class, placed the college newspaper and its staff consisting of twenty-five students under her curricular control. Several journalism students stood out during this period: Chief Editor of *The Jayhawk*, Justine Toler, in the fall semester of 1926, and Paul Goodwin, in the spring semester of 1927. The two students also served as founders and organizers of a short-lived college magazine, *The Scrawl*.²⁰ Sports Editor, Arnold Isenburg, who likely facilitated changing the mascot name, also wrote in the humor sections of *The Jayhawk*, and the Kansas City Kansas Junior College yearbook, *The Owaissa* (Native word for Blue Bird). Isenburg's dream of being a comedy writer was roasted by a colleague in a page devoted to mock career advertisements. "Isenburg's Book of Pedigreed Bunk"

A book of stale humor. A rare-collection of antiques. This book of jokes, including myself, guaranteed to make you groan. Send two bits in postage stamps for YOUR copy. Published Daily.²¹

The students' pointed sarcasm was often directed at each other.

In the fall of 1927, *The Jayhawk* became the first junior college student newspaper in Kansas not to be inserted into the high school paper.²² The staff was especially committed to quality and expanded the paper to a five-column bi-weekly publication. They entered the paper into a tri-state regional contest for community college newspapers for the first time and received a first class rating by the Central Interscholastic Press Association. "The College Writer" offered the best short essays from English composition classes. Controversial topics ranged from carefully worded essays on the theory of evolution to an obtuse entry on social justice. A poetry section called "Point of View" offered pertinent insight into the minds of the students in the "Roaring Twenties." Gene Julin, music and theater editor, entered the following on October 21, 1927:

A student came out of his home one day
With a worried frown on his face,
He muttered, "This college is all the bunk!"
"I wish I was through with this place"
"From eight in the morning till late at night
I worry about what I must do"
"I never have time to do my work."
"I worry the whole night through."
"I start to work algebra, science and all

But radio suits my moods."
"I can't keep track of X's and bugs
when my mind is on baseball and Blues."
"So now I must go to school each day
with lessons unlearned and new."
"It's not my fault, I worry enough."
"I have too many to do."²³

The best evidence blues and jazz was significant to the white junior college students is found in an article from the December 2, 1927, "Jazz Holds Sway in Program at College Club Assembly:" Entertainment of a lighter nature was offered the College at the College Club convention held Tuesday, November 22, during the home room period. The customary formality of the assembling opening was foregone and the strains of music, issuing forth from the instrument of the **"the first jazz orchestra ever found in captivity in Junior College"** was the greeting students met. Under the direction of Ray Schurkins, sophomore, this innovation to the College entertainment providers rendered the following tuneful numbers: "What Do You Do on a Dew-Dew-Dewey Day?" "Under the Moon," "Just Once Again," "Russian Lullaby," and "Rolling Along."²⁴

The Jayhawk always contained a humor department with at least two specially appointed writers. There was, of course, one obvious subject missing from the articles in the student newspapers: toleration on the part of the college for any writing about Negroes. Two rare paragraphs are found in *The Jayhawk* on December 17, 1926, informing how enrollment at the "Negro branch of the Junior College" at Sumner High School had increased thirty percent.²⁵ The short article specified how most junior college students at the white Central High School "are not even aware the Negro branch of the college exists."

The Sumner High School yearbook, *The Sumnerian*, published photographs of the Negro junior college students in the 1925 and 1927 issues. School clubs and extracurricular activities were a cooperative extension of the high school with exception of an autonomous basketball team.²⁶ In these years the basketball sports mascot at the Sumner branch junior college was the same as for Sumner High School, The Huskies.²⁷ Sumner High School was already building a reputation for strong academics and some decided to take classes at the junior college in order to become teachers. As an adjunct to the high school program, students held a keen interest in French language and culture with an active club, *La Société Française*, producing plays and skits.²⁸ The Journalism Club wrote articles for Sumner High School's *Sumner Courier*, *The Kansas City Call*, and *The Kansan*.

One of the advertising sponsors in the 1927 *Sumnerian* was a silent movie and night club in Kansas City, Missouri, The Eblon Theater. The ad said,

"When You Are Tired and Blue, Visit The Eblon - Where the Music Is Worth While - Price 10 Cents Always - 1822 Vine Street."²⁹

What was the connection between movies and music on 18th and Vine and students at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas? Did any of the students or faculty work part time at The Eblon or perhaps sit in at jam sessions?

One notable link between the Negro junior college and Kansas City Missouri jazz was a graduate of Sumner High School in 1925 named Ronald Brooks "Jack" Washington (July 17, 1907- November 18, 1964).³⁰ Washington was a brilliant young talent who, as early as *13 years of age*, was invited to play soprano saxophone in jazz bands in the Kansas City area.³¹ Slight in stature but big in sound, Washington sometimes sat in with the Paul Banks Orchestra, and Jesse Stone and his Blues Serenaders in the early 1920's.³² His early private training came from William Levi Dawson (1899-1990) a pioneer music teacher in Kansas City who later gained fame as director of the Tuskegee Institute Choir and Band.³³ After Washington graduated from Sumner High School in 1925, he studied music at the University of Kansas for two years before setting out on a professional music career.³⁴ In 1927 Jack Washington was swept up by Bennie Moten to play the baritone sax in the top band in Kansas City, the Bennie Moten Orchestra.³⁵ Washington played with Moten until the bandleader's death in 1935 and then became a mainstay of the Count Basie Orchestra until 1950.³⁶ After winning many top saxophone honors from Down Beat magazine, "Little Jack" and his wife, Maphelle Brazelton of Oklahoma City, settled in her home town.³⁷ There he gigged for the remainder of his life in a small combo. Washington is widely considered one of the one of the finest baritonists of his generation.

Three years before the students changed their mascot name at the white Kansas City Kansas Junior College, a different intercultural story was being played out in North Carolina. The origin of the Blue Devil mascot at Duke was a decision made after a publicized democratic process for name selection had been inconclusive. The editors of the Duke paper and other student publications agreed the newspaper staff should start using the name Blue Devils for their mascot in 1923. The freshmen class at Duke in 1923 was full of returning veterans who wanted to acknowledge a group of well-known French Soldiers during World War I called the *Chasseurs Alpins*, and nicknamed *les Diables Bleus*.³⁸ The "French Blue Devils" first gained attention when their unique training and alpine knowledge was counted upon to break the stalemate of trench warfare in their native region of the French Alps. The French Blue Devils won accolades for their courage and distinctive blue uniforms with "flowing cape and jaunty beret." Their efforts captured public imagination. When the United States entered the war in 1918, units of the French Blue Devils toured the country helping raise money in the war effort.

The popularity of the French language and culture was in full bloom in the 1920's at Kansas City Kansas Junior College. There was a chapter for all students who had one semester of French. It was the most popular foreign language and the club, *Le Cercle Français*, was one of the largest at the college with nearly thirty students in 1927.³⁹ The group presented a one-act play, *Les Trois Souhails*, a comedy understandable to anyone whether they spoke French or not. The play was so popular that several organizations in the city invited students to present their show outside the college. Their act was also entered into a contest at Baker University and took second prize.

While grounded in a series of speculations, the Duke mascot could have been used to augment the case brought forth by those students inspired by the Blue Devils band who were "about town journalism students," musicians, "theater goers," and athletes at Kansas City Kansas Junior College. The French were held in high esteem in the United States in the 1920's for their cultural sophistication and military valor in World War I, but usurpation of the Duke mascot would have been devoid of originality, local flare, and stirring of competitive juices like the "battling Blue Devils band." By 1926, when white students decided to change their mascot from "Blue Birds" to "Blue Devils," the mood of the country was much different than in 1923. In 1926 people wanted to escape thoughts of dreadful war and had turned to enjoying life to the fullest.

In light of the cultural paradigm in Kansas City, Missouri, it does not seem to be a stretch to consider interracial discussions and observations touting the Blue Devils, being made by otherwise segregated college students in 1926. Evidence for the musical presence of Jack Washington in the Kansas City, Missouri, entertainment district illustrates Negro high school students from Kansas City, Kansas, being heard by white people in Kansas City, Missouri. Washington played in bands with leaders who recognized the reigning battle of bands champions, the "mighty" Blue Devils. Taken altogether, the creative imagination of these young college students, their special pleasure for listening and dancing to blues and jazz bands, and the timing of their decision in this particularly fanciful year, make a good case for the Blue Devils band as the original source for our present day college mascot.

The most logical explanation as to why no written evidence exists in *The Jayhawk* describing the band as the inspiration for the Blue Devils mascot is because the college students were prohibited from writing about the reason for their selection. The lack of evidence, in this case, paradoxically supports derivation from a Negro blues/jazz band. The openly reported decision-making at Duke University is in stark contrast to Kansas City Kansas Junior College. At Duke University, the source name, *les Diables Bleus*, was non-controversial. Toleration by faculty and administration for the sardonic wit of the junior college students would have worked to diffuse the tension of being unable to acknowledge racial segregation.

Students at the white Kansas City Kansas Junior College demonstrated admirable cultural awareness. In 1925 they named their college annual, *The Owaisa*, in honor of the Native Peoples of Kansas. They also placed profound emphasis on French culture and language in their clubs and programs. Finally, it does seem probable these junior college students chose a new mascot in 1926 based on their unique appreciation for the best early Negro blues/jazz band in the Midwest during that era. The problem was that skin color separated two groups of college students with similar intellectual curiosities in an urban Kansas

community. For the earliest students at our divided junior college, the devil was in the color, but the blues bridged the gap.

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- ²*The Jayhawk*, August 28, 1926, p. 1.
- ³See J. Paul Jewell p. 20. HB 890 did not specify segregating public junior colleges only elementary and high schools. Segregation of the two junior colleges stopped in the fall of 1951.
- ⁴*The Kansas City Kansan*, September 11 and October 8, 1927.
- ⁵*The Jayhawk*, December 3, 1926, p. 4.
- ⁶*The Jayhawk*, October 7, 1927, p. 4.
- ⁷*Jayhawk*, p. 4.
- ⁸*The Jayhawk*, November 2, 1927, p. 4.
- ⁹Nathan W. Pearson Jr. *Goin' to Kansas City*, 1986, p. 85.
- ¹⁰Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz, From Ragtime to Bebop - A History*. 2005, p. 53.
- ¹¹Pearson, p. 65.
- ¹²Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 1971, p. 78.
- ¹³See film produced and directed by Bruce Ricker, *The Last of the Blue Devils: The Movie About Kansas City Jazz*, Rhapsody Films, 1986.
- ¹⁴Driggs and Haddix, p. 63.
- ¹⁵Driggs
- ¹⁶Driggs, p. 78.
- ¹⁷Only two recordings remain of the Blue Devils: Historical HLP-216-26 "Blue Devil Blues" and "Squabblin" from 1929, which can be heard at the permanent exhibition of the Kansas City Jazz Museum.
- ¹⁸Douglas Henry Daniels. *One O' Clock Jump: The Unforgettable History of the Oklahoma City Blue Devils*, 2006, p. 29.
- ¹⁹See Jewell, p. 40-41. Married women could not teach at the college until the late 1920's
- ²⁰*The Jayhawk*, November 5, 1926.
- ²¹*The Owaissa*, Kansas City Kansas Junior College Yearbook, 1927.
- ²²*Owaissa*, Caption under photo of *The Jayhawk* staff, 1927.
- ²³*The Jayhawk*, October 21, 1927, p. 2.
- ²⁴*The Jayhawk*, December 2, 1927, p. 1.
- ²⁵*The Jayhawk*, December 17, 1926, p. 4.
- ²⁶Jewell, pgs. 38-42
- ²⁷Communication with local historian, Mr. Chester Owens.
- ²⁸Jewell, p. 41.
- ²⁹*The Sumnerian*, 1927, p. 89.
- ³⁰Stewart, Jimmy, *The Black Dispatch*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Friday December 4, 1964, p. 6.
- ³¹Yanow, Scott. *All Music Guide* <<http://www.answers.com/topic/jack-washington?cat=entertainment>>
- ³²See photo of Jack Washington with Bennie Moten Orchestra 1931 in Driggs - photo section I.
- ³³Dawson taught at Lincoln High School in Kansas City Missouri from 1922-1926.
<<http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/Dawson.html>>
- ³⁴*The Black Dispatch*, December 4, 1964, p. 6.
- ³⁵Frank Driggs, and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop - A History*. 2005, p. 55.
- ³⁶See Ross Russell, p. 136. "Jack Washington had the fourth reed part and he wanted me to write his down because it was hard to hear the harmony. That was the first writing of the tune" [One O' Clock Jump]. See Driggs and Haddix, p. 134. Count Basie entrusted Washington to be secretary and treasurer for the band.
- ³⁷*The Black Dispatch*, December 4, 1964, p. 6.
- ³⁸<http://library.duke.edu/uarchives/history/histnotes/why_blue_devil.html>
- ³⁹*The Owaissa*, Kansas City Kansas Junior College, 1927.

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