

## **Jubilee Singing** By Lem Sheppard

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Jubilee Singing was a little like jazz in that as soon as a standard, a model and the repertoire had been established, everyone was doing it. The Fisk Jubilee Singers may have set the style and form for what was to become a new vocal style of music and its presentation. Although the ensemble of singers is always trained, they were rarely called a choir. The style sometimes resembled an operatic form of “call and response.” The repertoire was a few operatic pieces and almost exclusively songs collected from slaves during the Civil War. The ensemble was normally no larger than eight and was sometimes called a “Double Quartet” of four males and four females. Jubilee singing began to overtake the popularity of what was referred to as the “low comedy” of the burnt cork minstrel show. In 1875 the Atchison Daily Patriot made a point in reminding its readers that “the colored jubilee singers that are coming *are not* minstrels.”

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were regulars in Kansas performing many times over the years and in 1920 they performed at the Wheat show in Wichita. In 1880 the Fisk Jubilee Singers made a personal visit to President Garfield. He said to them, “*You are fighting for light and the freedom it brings, and in that contest I would rather be with you and defeated than against you and victorious.*” In 1882, the *Topeka Daily Capital* said the President, Mr. Arthur wept upon hearing the Fisk Jubilee Singers: “*At first he tried to hide his emotions with his hand then his handkerchief but finally was forced to give way to his emotions.*” It was common for the shows to be advertised as a group of “cultured and educated colored singers,” but conversely sometimes Jubilee Singers were advertised as “actual plantation slaves”

In 1872 it was widely reported in Kansas newspapers that the Fisk Singers had been denied accommodations in New York and again in 1881 in Canada. By 1892, the Fisk singers were beginning to be denied accommodations in Kansas too. In Topeka they were surprised because this was after they had spent over twenty years touring the state. They remarked that before in Kansas they were hardly ever denied accommodations and in some cities, they were always given first class accommodations. The reporter inquired about what they do in the south. One of the group’s members said they do not travel in the south. He went on to say they do not book “colored” companies in the south and even if they did, they would never find hotel accommodations.

One member of the Fisk Singers had an asthma attack while on tour in Kansas. He was apparently left behind to recover but never did. He died at the Grand Central Hotel in Salina weeks later.

It didn’t take long after the Original Fisk Jubilee singers made their first tours of Kansas in about 1873, that along with the coronet band, minstrel shows, and the string orchestra, African Americans in many Kansas towns would be experimenting with a new form of local ensemble and musical entertainment and that would be “Jubilee Singing.” It is no doubt that these educated, well-trained singers served to inspire communities all over Kansas to begin organizing their own local ensembles of Jubilee Singers: Western University in Quindaro had the Jackson Jubilee Singers; The Wyandotte Jubilee Singers were from Wyandotte (Kansas City, Kansas); Hutchinson had their Sunflower Glee Club; Parsons had the Harry Burleigh Singers; Emporia had the Emporia Jubilee Singers. In 1884 there was mention of an ensemble in Salina called T. L. Bond and his club of “trained negro singers” were gaining attention. Fort Scott had an ensemble named Col. McKinnie’s Jubilee Singers. Col McKinnie was superintendent of schools in Fort Scott at that time. He was regarded as “the best singer in the state.” Col McKinnie’s Jubilee Singers were touring the state at the same time the Fisk Singers were. November of 1875 Col. McKinnie’s group had to walk from Wyandotte back home to Fort Scott due to being “financially wrecked.” I don’t think it escaped

anyone in Kansas or professionally fielding these ensembles that in 1875 the proceeds from the Fisk Jubilee Singers helped build a college. In 1889 *The Daily Tribune* in Winfield reported that the Fisk Jubilee Singers made \$350.00 for three concerts and the management pocketed \$800.00.

Many of the traveling vaudeville shows and cornet bands added jubilee singers to their offerings. The term Jubilee Singers was used no differently than we would use the term jazz today. It was just announced that there would be a concert tonight of jubilee singers. They could be the local talent, a statewide touring group or one of the many professional groups. Between 1873 and 1920, there were at least 40 professional touring groups of Jubilee Singers that toured Kansas every year.

*This transcript of "Jubilee Singing" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*