

**Introduction of Sharon Sexton and
Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: The Forgotten Legacy
February 7, 2008**

“Capitalism generates economic inequality, and African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality.” This statement by Detroit-born historian Thomas J. Sugrue is repeated like a mantra in Marygrove’s interdisciplinary course on contemporary Detroit. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this statement is evident in the rapid development of Detroit’s downtown in the 1920s. During this time, most of the city’s amazing skyscrapers ascended into the sky above the river: the Dime Building, the Ford Building, the Whitney Building, the Book Tower, the Buhl, the David Stott, the Guardian, the Penobscot, the hotels—the Statler, the Book-Cadillac—the Free Press Building, and the Fisher and General Motors Buildings. --All signs of a prosperous, growing city, all thrust into the sky by capital generated by Detroit’s burgeoning industry.

And yet, within blocks—within the very shadow of most of these amazing buildings—even before the Great Depression would bring all of the development to a standstill—most of Detroit’s African American community lived in comparative poverty, in the city’s oldest housing stock, often crowded into small flats and apartments, people that Detroit’s great poet, Robert Hayden, described as “so harshened after each unrelenting day / that they were shouting angry.” Hayden’s Paradise Valley poems search for the sources of this anger as they tell of people who came to Detroit with great hopes only to learn that the hype about the city was another bad joke played on the poor: “Detroit’s a cold, cold place,” moaned blues singer Victoria Spivey in 1936, “and I ain’t got a dime to my name.”

Nevertheless, few people who lived in Black Bottom or Paradise Valley think of them only as impoverished, desperate places. In his memoirs and poems, Hayden recalls with appreciation the area’s “beauty,” “gentleness,” “vividness of life,” and “intensity of being.” He recalls the “people who retained . . . a sheltering spiritual beauty and dignity.” Another former resident of the area, one-time NAACP President Gloster Current, called Paradise Valley “a mixture of everything imaginable—including overcrowding, delinquency, and disease. It has [he said] glamour, action, religion, pathos. It has brains and organization and business.” This area developed a class of black entrepreneurs: drugstore owners, grocers, barbers, morticians, hoteliers, and bar and club owners, who prospered amid the excitement along Hastings, Brush, and St. Antoine. It was a place of deep contrasts: As Hayden writes, “Godfearing elders” shared the streets with “Godless grifters.” A former Marygrove student who grew up in the area once told me, “It was hard to be legal in Paradise Valley.”

I met Sharon Sexton this past summer and learned that she was producing a documentary about Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. I was deeply interested because, even though there have been a few attempts to collect the visual record of these areas, we Detroiters need to know more about this neglected part of our past. Ms. Sexton has worked long and hard to locate images that have rarely, if ever, been available to the general public, and she has consulted many people who can tell the little-known story of what occurred in the shadow of those glorious skyscrapers rising over our city. When she described her project to me, I immediately asked her if she would be willing to show her work at Marygrove. I am delighted that she agreed and that she is with us this evening.

Please welcome Sharon Sexton.

--Frank D. Rashid