The Burroughs Creek Trail Project is being developed by Sunflower Republic, LLC, under the auspices of the Lawrence National Heritage Area, with in-kind assistance from the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas.

In the weeks leading up to August 19, 1910, all of the children’s summer days were filled with the excitement and energy to honor the birthday of editor J. L. Woodard, the Lawrence Daily Journal. First on the agenda was hosting a Children’s Day party at Woodland Park in East Lawrence. For young Langston Hughes and the other children of color, anticipation turned into anxiety and disappointment when the Daily Journal clarified the meaning of “social.” In response to the question about black children attending, a front-page article confidently asserted, “The Journal knows the colored children have no desire to attend a social event of this kind and that they will not want to go. This is a purely a social affair and of course everyone in town knows what that means.”

How could the black children not want to go? The amusement park would have special vaudeville and picture shows, bands would entertain, a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round would provide free rides, and such favorites as lemonade and popcorn would be available too. But the black children ran up against the prohibition made legal by the U.S. Supreme Court in the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896). The law of the land now defined “social” to mean “separate but equal.” Unlike other colored children in Lawrence and everywhere learned, this legal interpretation codified society’s practice and policy to perpetuate racial separation without racial equality.

Hughes recurys this incident in "Not without Laughter." He freely enters into the black children’s high expectations, which rise to a crescendo of excitement, only to be crushed where the gate attendant refuses to accept the coupons that would admit them to the amusement park’s free rides, entertainment, and food. Later, he would explore this feeling of emotional confusion with the poem “Merry-Go-Round.”

Not without Laughter...

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