

# LANGSTON HUGHES' LAWRENCE



An act of racial discrimination at an amusement park five blocks east of this spot found its way into a novel and a poem by Langston Hughes

In the weeks leading up to August 19, 1910, all of the children in Lawrence were aglow with excitement and energy. To honor the birthday of editor J. Leeford Brady, the *Lawrence Daily Journal* set about 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 "invitees." 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 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 US Supreme Court in the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896). The law of the land now defined "social" to mean "forced or unwanted relations." As protection against undesired interracial interaction, the court endorsed the concept of "separate but equal." Unfortunately, as black children in Lawrence and everywhere learned, this legal interpretation granted society permission to practice racial separation without racial equality.

Hughes recreates this incident in *Not without Laughter*. He deftly enters into the black children's high expectations, which rise to a crescendo of excitement, only to be crushed when 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 capture his feeling of emotional confusion in his poem "Merry-Go-Round." The speaker in the poem, a little black girl who had moved from the South to the North, sought to ride the merry-go-round at a carnival. Not knowing if she would be allowed to mount a horse at all, she attempts to find the back of the ride. Bewildered, she asks: "Where is the Jim Crow section / On this merry-go-round / . . . Where is the horse / For a kid that's black?"

Persistent racism dogged young Langston Hughes throughout his formative years in Lawrence. To his credit, he never allowed bitterness and hatred to jade his vision of humankind. Instead of blaming all whites for preserving the racial status quo, he learned that "most people are generally good." This quality, no doubt, inspired the city of Lawrence to begin embracing him as one of its own shining lights.



**Destination Denied.** Woodland Park was located east of Haskell Avenue and north of Oak Hill Cemetery in East Lawrence. It operated from about 1909 to sometime in the 1920s. The Daisy Dozer, a roller coaster, was a popular ride, as were the merry-go-round and Ferris wheel. While Hughes (right) does not write about Woodland Park in his autobiographies, we are assured that he was denied entry to the amusement park in 1910. The incident dramatized in *Not without Laughter* is drawn with such fidelity to the actual event that it seems inspired by, if not recollected from, that infamous Children's Day party.



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]



**Resisting Jesus.** This photo is of St. Luke AME Church, located at 9th and New York. When Langston Hughes goes to live with "Auntie" and "Uncle" Reed, he finds himself being taken to church every Sunday by the devout Auntie Reed. He confesses the importance of the church in his own decision about religion. During a revival, he is the last child to "see the face of Jesus," a signal that he has been "saved." That night, he cries audibly in his bed, which Auntie Reed interprets to mean that Langston is still immersed in the Holy Spirit that has reclaimed his life from sin. But Langston's tears come about because he is sorry that he has lied to a woman who has been so generous in taking care of him.



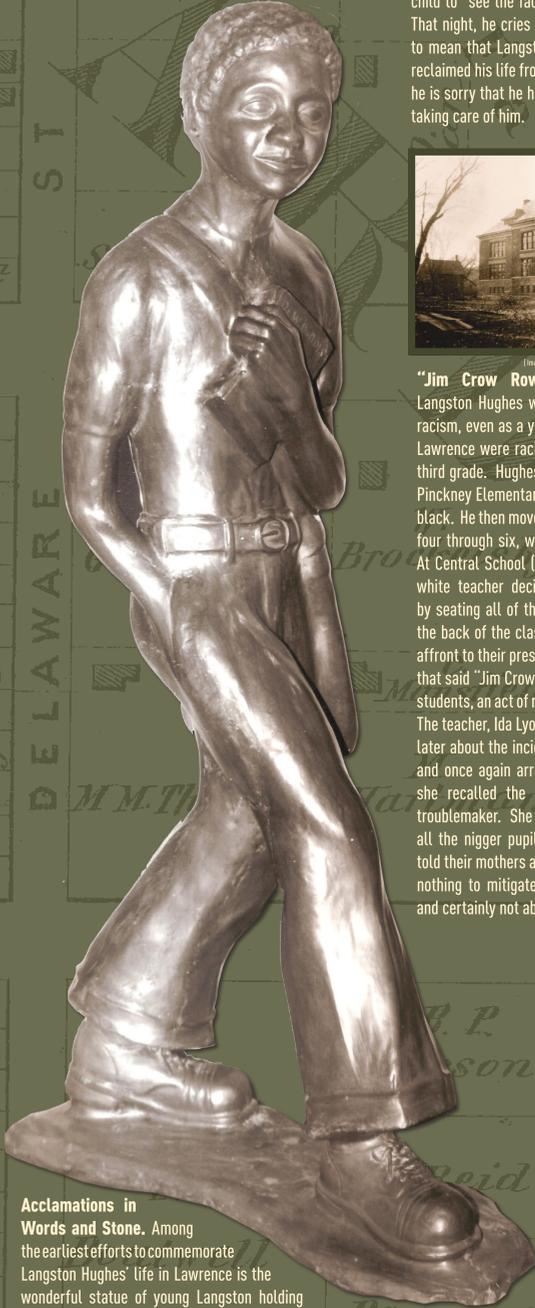
[Image Credit: Bettencourt Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University]

**Mother and Son.** This photo of mother Carrie Hughes and infant son Langston was probably taken shortly after she moved with Langston back to Lawrence in 1903. The tenacity of racism forced his father, James Nathaniel Hughes, to abandon his family and country for Cuba before heading to Mexico to begin an entrepreneurial life. Carrie embarked upon a peripatetic life, in which she alternately abandoned her son and returned to reclaim him. Although Langston loved Carrie despite her wandering lifestyle, he expressed begrudging appreciation for his father because James did stay put in one location. The lack of family cohesion haunted Langston Hughes forever and made him seek familial love from other sources, especially from black folk.



[Image Credit: Bettencourt Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University]

**Steadfast but Stern.** After the death of her second husband, Charles Langston, the widow Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston found herself impoverished and responsible for her daughter Carrie. These two did not enjoy a warm, supportive relationship; instead, contentious best describes their interactions. Carrie leaves Lawrence, only to return a very few years later as a single-parent with an infant son. Mary Langston was the most steadfast person in young Langston's life; however, poverty and familial pride made their lives complicated. Well into her seventies, she was emotionally distant but passionate about imparting the rich family legacy to her grandson. To recreate her as a character in *Not without Laughter*, he had to divest Mary Langston of her abolitionist political engagement, her middle-classness, her refusal to take in laundry, and her "perfect" English, with no trace of dialect, as well as her emotional distance and stern demeanor.



[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

**Acclamations in Words and Stone.** Among the earliest efforts to commemorate Langston Hughes' life in Lawrence is the wonderful statue of young Langston holding what appears to be a copy of a book written by W.E.B. Du Bois. James Patti was commissioned to create this art piece, which coincided with the nation's bicentennial of 1976. It is on display at the Watkins Community Museum of History, located at 10th and Massachusetts. This acknowledgement was followed in 1987 by a rare gesture of the Kansas State Senate. In recognition of the 85th anniversary of Hughes' birth, the Senate issued Resolution No. 1814, honoring him for claiming Kansas as his home.



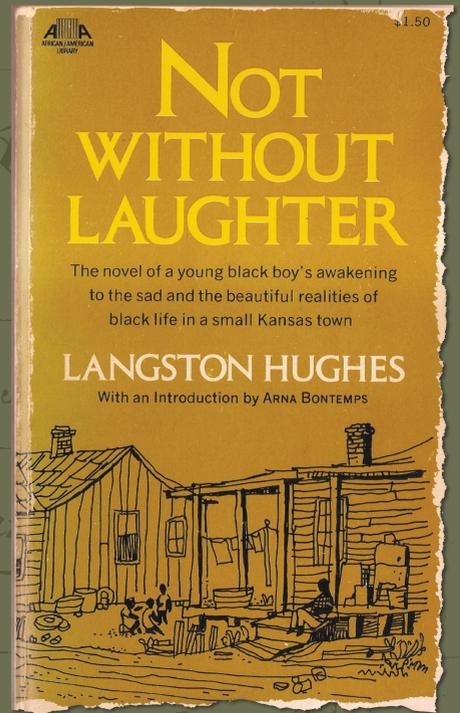
[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

**"Jim Crow Row."** The apparently reticent Langston Hughes was well-known for confronting racism, even as a youngster. The public schools in Lawrence were racially segregated up through the third grade. Hughes spent grades two and three at Pinckney Elementary, where the students were all-black. He then moved to New York School for grades four through six, where integration was practiced. At Central School (above) for his seventh grade, a white teacher decided to reinstitute segregation by seating all of the black students in one row at the back of the class. In protest of this egregious affront to their presence, Hughes placed little signs that said "Jim Crow Row" on the desks of the black students, an act of resistance that got him expelled. The teacher, Ida Lyons, was interviewed many years later about the incident. Even though she relented and once again arranged the class alphabetically, she recalled the incident as the product of a troublemaker. She stated that the protest "stirred all the nigger pupils up and they went home and told their mothers about it." The passing of time did nothing to mitigate her own attitudes about race and certainly not about Hughes.



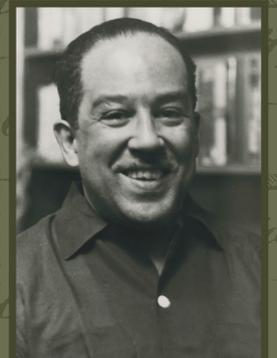
[Image Credit: Douglas County Historical Society, Watkins Museum of History]

**"Books began to happen to me."** Carnegie Library, located at 9th and Vermont, became young Langston Hughes' refuge from an outer world that seemingly pushed him into shyness, introspection, and loneliness. His discovery of books opened in him a world of imagination to the point that books became more real to him than life itself. Buoyed by books, his precocious nature was fed by a world of infinite possibility in words until he was able to embark upon his travels around the world, where a rich variety of people became his reality. As he wrote in *The Big Sea*, an autobiography: "[B]ooks began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas."



[Image Credit: J. Edgar Tolson]

**From Fact to Fiction.** *Not without Laughter*, Langston Hughes' first novel, is based in part on actual events from his life. As he explained in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, he wanted "to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. But mine was not a typical Negro family." Hughes had to reinvent or reimagine his own family to get to the characters he nicely created in the novel. Unlike his actual family, his fictive characters were not distinguished descendants of abolitionists, well-educated, or holders of prominent political positions. Aunt Hager, the novel's grandmother, was a washer woman, who toiled week in and week out to make a living for her family. Her seemingly indefatigable strength was sustained by her devout Christian faith. She was the matriarch and principal source of values for her grandson Sandy Rodgers, whose "coming of age" we trace from his ninth to his sixteenth birthdays.



[Image Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries]