

Jack Sullivan

St. Louis Connection Project

Integration at SLUH

When I began this project, I was expecting to unearth information that no one had ever seen. I was expecting at every turn to learn something incredibly new that would propel me to learn something else incredibly new. While I did learn a lot undertaking this project, it did not happen in that sort of way.

The project started out as the idea to learn more about the first African American to graduate from St. Louis University High School. I was very excited to find out about him and to hopefully get a glimpse at what SLUH was like during that time. I was overwhelmed with internal questions: Was he well accepted? Was he treated fairly? Did he truly enjoy his time at SLUH? I soon learned that the first African American student to graduate from SLUH was Alphonse (or “Al” as he was called by most) G. Thomas in 1950. We learned in class that Cardinal Ritter integrated archdiocesan Catholic schools at the beginning of the 1947 school year, and if Thomas graduated in the spring of 1950, he would have begun SLUH in the fall of 1946. Knowing this really made me happy that SLUH began integrating before Cardinal Ritter’s decision to integrate the schools and much before the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, I confess that I did still feel a little disappointed that in a school that prides itself in fostering forward thinking students that it took so long to realize how wrong segregation was. Saint Louis University admitted five African American students in the fall of 1944, so why couldn’t we have more quickly followed their lead?

I began this project only knowing that the probable first African American SLUH graduate was named A. Thomas and graduated in 1950. In order to confirm this, I checked with Thomas Hogan whose work grant job is to watch all of the obituaries and keep record of when a SLUH alum or one of their immediate family members dies, so he has a list of all of the alums and their graduation years. Thomas informed me that A. Thomas was Al G. Thomas and he was in fact the first African American to graduate SLUH. Thomas pointed me in the direction of Fr. Houlihan, and when I contacted Fr. Houlihan he said that he spoke with Mr. Patke, who did not have any information on Thomas, but he also told me that he thought Dr. Bannister had done some research on Al G. Thomas. So far, everything seemed to be going great. Every path I took had opened to several other outlets for me to find information. I was really optimistic about the project, and honestly, I was hopeful that if I did a diligent job of researching, my findings would be a great contribution to SLUH. It was also satisfying knowing that I wasn't doing some research project for a history class on a topic that students have researched in classrooms all across the country for years, but I was researching something that was important to me and that to my knowledge had not yet been fully investigated.

I contacted Dr. Bannister, and while he said that he had not done research on Al Thomas, he did believe that the Prep News had written an article five or so years ago on the first African American at SLUH. He also checked the Alumni directory for me and gave me the information to contact one of the graduates of the class of 1950, Jack Bruemmer, who was still alive. I had not done many interviews before, so I was a quite nervous about making sure I asked effective questions to ensure I got all of the information from him that I needed. Bruemmer said that Al Thomas was a classmate of his, but "he was not however in my immediate class, so I didn't

know him that well personally, but he said ‘hello’ – a nice guy, had a smile on his face all the time, and that’s about as much as I knew of him.” I was very confused by what he meant about being in the same graduating class yet not being in the same class until I looked at several very old SLUH yearbooks and saw that each of the four classes of the school were further divided into classes. Each of the yearbooks had a section for the freshman with a picture of each of the class groups in the freshman class, a section for sophomores organized in the same way, and the same for juniors and seniors. I then checked with people in the Prep News, and after searching through previous volumes we found that they had not ever written an article on the matter.

While I understood that SLUH integrated early compared to other St. Louis catholic schools and that gave me a hint of pride in our school, I was very wary of that pride especially because I had no idea how the African American students were treated and what SLUH’s attitude was toward integration. I was worried, hoping that I would not find deeply racist traces in SLUH’s past. In this class, we have been learning about the racism that St. Louis fostered. The Fairground Park riot that I think made all of us cringe as we read about the capabilities of St. Louisans to execute such brutal acts of racial violence took place during the summer before Al Thomas’s senior year and only about five miles from SLUH. This really made me wonder if SLUH was a place that harbored that racism prevalent in our city and was just another place where Al Thomas would have to endure racism and discrimination because of the color of his skin, or if SLUH provided a sort of haven for him where he didn’t face that racism that existed in his life. I am interested to know what the African American students at SLUH today think about SLUH in that regard. Is SLUH a place where they feel freer from the discrimination that they face outside of SLUH? Or is SLUH yet another place where they are faced with injustice?

I was also able to interview Tom Engelhardt from the class of 1949. Between Engelhardt and Bruemmer, I was able to figure out that while Al Thomas was the first African American to graduate from SLUH, he was not the first African American to attend SLUH. Robert Carter transferred into the SLUH class of 1949 as a sophomore, but he did not graduate from SLUH. However, I am now realizing that even though both of the gentleman I interviewed along with Mr. Patke said that Carter was the first African American to attend SLUH, if he was a year older than Al Thomas and transferred in as a sophomore, I believe that they would have both started out at SLUH at the same time – in the fall of 1946. One of the difficulties of this project, was that as Bruemmer said, of all of the people who had first-hand experience and interactions with Carter or Thomas at SLUH, “probably half of them are dead by now,” and since their experiences with Carter and Thomas were so long ago, many of their memories were fuzzy. Bruemmer and Engelhardt both recalled Thomas in conflicting ways: Bruemmer said that he remembered that Al “was not an athlete, which was expected of him at that time. They all said ‘oh Al’s going to be a greate athlete’, but he was not that. He did go out for football in his last year at school. His family owned a grocery store and his father was ill, and before they ever got around to getting the season he had to quit,” while Englehardt said that “Al Thomas was a football player... a more outgoing type guy.” While their accounts differed on trivial matters, like if Al Thomas played a sport, they both had vivid recollections of how Carter and Thomas were received by the SLUH community. Bruemmer said that while they were both in the same graduating class, they were in different classes within that class, so he did not have many classes with Thomas but remembered that “he was a very pleasant guy that we saw around school.” In regard to how the school accepted Al, Bruemmer said, “I never heard anyone complain about it

or say anything about it or say names that might be negative.” This reminds me of in “I’m Not Racist, Am I?” when they talked about how just because you don’t make racist comments doesn’t mean you aren’t racist, and just because we were a school that didn’t complain about the integration of our school, doesn’t mean we weren’t (and couldn’t still be) racist.

Tom Engelhardt said that Robert Carter entering SLUH “made the front page of the Globe-Democrat, which was a morning newspaper in town at that time because CBC turned down Robert Carter. St. Louis U. High and the Jesuits took him in.” Engelhardt was very proud of our school for being “somewhat ahead of time” compared with the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, he did express some areas that were disappointing in the integration of St. Louis U. High. He added, “Just as an aside, a few years later, I thought that the Jesuits and faculty should have told us kids what to do about this new young African American, which in those days we all referred to as ‘negroes,’ came in. They didn’t give us any kind of hints about, you know, how to welcome this guy in and include him in your activities or stuff like that. They didn’t say a word to all of us white guys. And he never really took part in any activities that I saw or that I was involved with.” It seems like SLUH took a major first step in integrating, but may have fallen a little short after taking such measures. To hear that Thomas and Carter didn’t say a word to the white guys is actually quite upsetting because with only two African Americans in the school at that time, and not talking to the white students, that would mean plenty of time alone. My favorite part about SLUH is the SLUH community, so knowing that Carter and Thomas may not have gotten to experience that because the student body was not ready to reach out to them is saddening. We can’t be sure if trying to prepare the students for how to welcome Carter and Thomas would have made a difference, nor can we be sure if Carter

and Thomas missed out on opportunities or friendships because SLUH didn't prepare, but I do think something more should have been done.

What really struck me was the difficulty that both Thomas and Carter faced during their time at SLUH. Not only did they have to face the fact that they were the only African American students in each of their classes, but they also had to face immense struggles outside of school. They both had their own painful experiences, Al Thomas had to help his family not only with their grocery store but with an ailing father, and Robert Carter was denied admittance to a high school because of the color of his skin. I am sure that because of the time, both faced racial discrimination throughout their lives in St. Louis, and I think it would be naive of me to think that the racism did not penetrate the walls of St. Louis University High School because racism still penetrates the walls today, more than 50 years later. I wonder how their experience at SLUH compares to the experiences of current African American students. I know that racism continues to exist in SLUH, but I hope that we as a school have improved ourselves and have tried to eliminate discrimination.

After hearing about the article on Robert Carter in the "St. Louis Globe-Democrat," I went to the library and searched through microfilm of the newspaper. I spent three hours watching newspaper pages whiz by, yet none of them happened to be the article Engelhardt mentioned. I had never looked at microfilm of an old newspaper before and was fascinated by figuring out what people in St. Louis were concerned about 60 plus years ago. While I did not find the article I was looking for, I found plenty of articles on Harry S. Truman and the Red Scare. I also came across several articles that talked about race in St. Louis and around the nation. From articles on Cardinal Ritter integrating the St. Louis parochial schools to an

investigative piece about a man who disguised himself as an African American and lived with African Americans in the South for a month to see a glimpse of some of the discrimination they suffered on a daily basis.

It was after the time spent with the microfilm that I became discouraged. I was unable to find the article on Robert Carter being denied admission to CBC. I learned that Al Thomas died almost twenty years ago and SLUH had no information on Robert Carter, so there was no chance that I would be able to interview either of them. I was hopeful that I could find an obituary for either of them, which would give me names of their relatives, who I could interview, but that search also turned out to be futile. Additionally, I was unable to locate any other alumni who had more direct contact with Carter or Thomas.

The last thing I could think of doing was looking through old yearbooks to at least find pictures of Thomas and Carter. After hearing about them and really trying to visualize what their experience at SLUH was like, it was very helpful to not only see the what they looked like, but to see their class picture with their fellow SLUH students. Through the pictures, I also saw that neither Thomas nor Carter were in any of the sport's team pictures, so they likely did not play any sports. In the yearbook for Thomas's senior year, I learned that his favorite subject was English and that he also held the position of Fr. Kelley's Assistant for Intramurals. Additionally, I learned that another African American student, with the last name of Morgan, was at SLUH at the same time as Carter and Thomas but he was a freshman when they were a junior and sophomore, respectively.

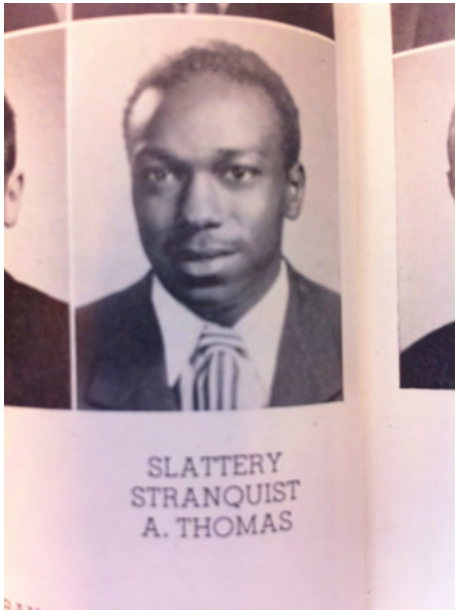
While this project did not turn out how I was hoping too (I came out of it with a lot less information that I thought I would acquire), I would still consider it a success. I learned much

about SLUH at that time and even a bit about how a white high schooler in Missouri dealt with race at that time. Engelhardt mentioned that, “I think it was my junior year, the faculty put on a retreat on a Saturday for I guess our junior class and they included some black students, and I don’t know what school those kids came from...later in the afternoon, there was a kind of social hour with refreshments and they had some recorded music for dancing and stuff like that.

Doggone, wouldn’t you know it, all the white guys stayed on one side of they gym, and all of the black people, girls and boys, stayed on the other side. There was one nice looking black gal, who I thought, ‘boy, I’d like to ask her to dance,’ but I didn’t have the guts to do it. I’ve kicked myself ever since.” I recognize this sort of standoffishness between African Americans and white people today, while it may be to a lesser degree today, I think that people initially just go to where they are comfortable. I hope that Robert Carter and Al Thomas, not having other African American students who could understand what they were going through at a basically all-white school, felt comfortable and that this same standoffishness didn’t take place within SLUH.

While I always think of SLUH as the only school that truly gets everything right and that it surpasses all other schools in every regard, through this project I had to acknowledge that it lacked and still does in some ways today. Back then, the students didn’t know how to welcome African Americans, and as a result, Carter and Thomas mostly kept to themselves. When we had the prayer service for Ferguson, I encountered many students who were simply not willing to listen to any others ideas or to be open to other peoples ideas. I think that we can take a lesson from the past and know that we need to keep extending ourselves to others. The distance placed between the two races at the dance is somewhat similar to the distance between Ferguson in particular but also other majority black cities and the majority white cities. At the dance

Engelhardt spoke of, there was no one to bridge the gap, but in the situation in Ferguson, there are many people in majority white communities who aren't willing to listen at all, and we need to bridge the gap between the two communities to show them the truth and to grow as a greater community.



Al Thomas



Morgan's Class Picture



Robert Carter's Class Picture



Al Thomas's Class Picture