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'WE HAD A PLACE WE ALL LOVED' DESOTO BASS

PUBLICATION: Dayton Daily News (OH)

SECTION: NEWS

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DATE: February 9, 2004

EDITION: CITY

Page: A1

DAYTON - Twelve-year-old George Sherer Jr. sat in the front yard of his grandfather's house at 1847 Germantown St. and wondered what was going on across the street.

That May of 1939, construction crews tore down the billboard at Danner Avenue and Germantown Street, the one that advertised Chevrolets for \$600. Then they jacked up a two-story farmhouse and moved it to Lakeview Avenue on a trailer.

"The next thing you know, there's all this building material laying over there," Sherer said.

By February 1940, the farmland was gone and the 200-unit **DeSoto Bass** Courts stood in its place, Dayton's first public housing development. The community of apartments was named for the Rev. **DeSoto Bass**, minister of the Wesleyan Methodist Church at Scott and Bruen streets from 1895 to 1928.

"Those were some nice places over there, brick buildings, basements and yards. . . . We wondered how in the world you would get into them, because we figured you would have to have a lot of money," Sherer, 77, said. "Everybody was trying to pull strings to get in there."

At a time when few Dayton landlords would rent to black tenants, young married couples usually moved in with family until they saved the down payment required to build or buy a home. Until **DeSoto Bass Courts**, a project of the Dayton Metropolitan Housing Authority, they had no place else to go. Though other public housing projects opened in Dayton including Parkside Homes, **DeSoto Bass** and its annex Homeview Courts were the only two that accepted black tenants into the late 1950s.

"Back then, public housing was segregated. Our people, African Americans, could only live in certain areas," said Hughbert D. Poore Sr., project manager at **DeSoto Bass** from 1945 to 1971 and director of the housing authority from 1971 to 1977. "I didn't feel good about segregation. I knew there were openings at other projects."

Hubert Hayden lived on Gordon Avenue in 1939 and was active in Boy Scout Troop 30, based at the YMCA on West Fifth Street. His parents were thrilled to make the move into **DeSoto Bass Courts**, but the 13-year-old didn't want to leave his old neighborhood.

"**DeSoto Bass**, to me, was a place I didn't want to go. I was having too much fun where I was," Hayden, 78, said. "After a week or two and seeing such a beautiful place that they had put up - my parents were very happy and so was I."

William M. Gillespie, the first manager of **DeSoto Bass**, had a lot to do with Hayden's turnabout.

"Now the manager, everyone loved him. . . . He would walk through the complex and greet everybody. He got people together," Hayden said. "We built a baseball field up near the office and we played just about every day."

On warm summer evenings, hundreds would gather to watch the games.

"You didn't have to worry about anyone bothering you. Kids had a curfew. No one would be sitting out on the benches at night after 11 p.m.," Hayden said.

Tenants kept their grass cut, bushes trimmed and apartments clean.

"This you had to do," Hayden said. "You'd never find bottles, cans, papers thrown all over the parking lots, streets, or yards. We had a place we all loved."

Early project managers had strict rules, and they could evict tenants quickly. Part landlord, social worker, teacher and friend, they counseled families, taught tenants to care for their homes, inspected apartments routinely and ousted anyone suspected of low morals or drug use - something that didn't happen often, said Poore, who is 98.

"People in the community would say that all the people who lived there were on welfare. We had people in all types of work - judges, attorneys, morticians, and some got pretty high in the

(military) service," Poore said. "People who were opposed to public housing said (our tenants) would not take care of them, but they did."

Dayton Contemporary Dance Company founder Jeraldine Kilborn Blunden and Maj. Gen. Frederick Leigh were notable former residents, according to Dayton's African American Heritage by Margaret E. Peters.

The Hayes family moved from Olive Street to **DeSoto Bass** around 1941. Lee Hayes was 12 years old.

"We had a refrigerator, which was the first time we had one; we always had iceboxes," Hayes said. "I had my own bedroom. On Olive Street, Mom and Daddy had a bedroom and I slept out on the (pullout) couch. I thought I was out on Sugar Hill living in **DeSoto Bass,**' Hayes said. The Sherer family moved in around 1942.

"I came from Western Avenue. We didn't have anything," Sherer said. "We had a No. 2 tub. That's a tub that everybody had to take a bath in. You had . . . a 50-pound lard can, that you put water in, put it on the stove so the water would get hot. When we moved into **DeSoto Bass** and walked in there and saw that bathtub, wow, and a bathroom."

During World War II, Congress appropriated millions of dollars to house essential workers who manufactured war equipment and supplies. As a result, **DeSoto Bass** grew by an additional 200 units in 1943; 340 in 1944 and 150 in 1945. In 1947 and 1948, 55 more units were constructed to provide housing for veterans, bringing the total number of units to 1,005.

"Everybody wanted in. It seemed like we had 100 applicants for every opening," Poore said.

The Great Miami River was used as dividing line for segregation with applications from people residing west of the river being processed for referral at **DeSoto Bass** and those living east of the river were processed at the housing authority's central office in downtown Dayton.

"(Housing authority) Director Charlton D. Putnam called me to the office one day said he wanted me to help him integrate the projects. It was something they just had to do," Poore said.

DeSoto Bass Courts still dominates the corner of Germantown and Danner, but the housing development has been reduced to 366 apartments. About 95 percent of the tenants are black, said Danny Mac, site manager.

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