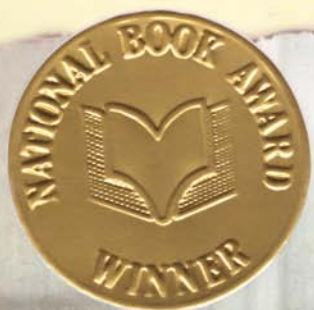


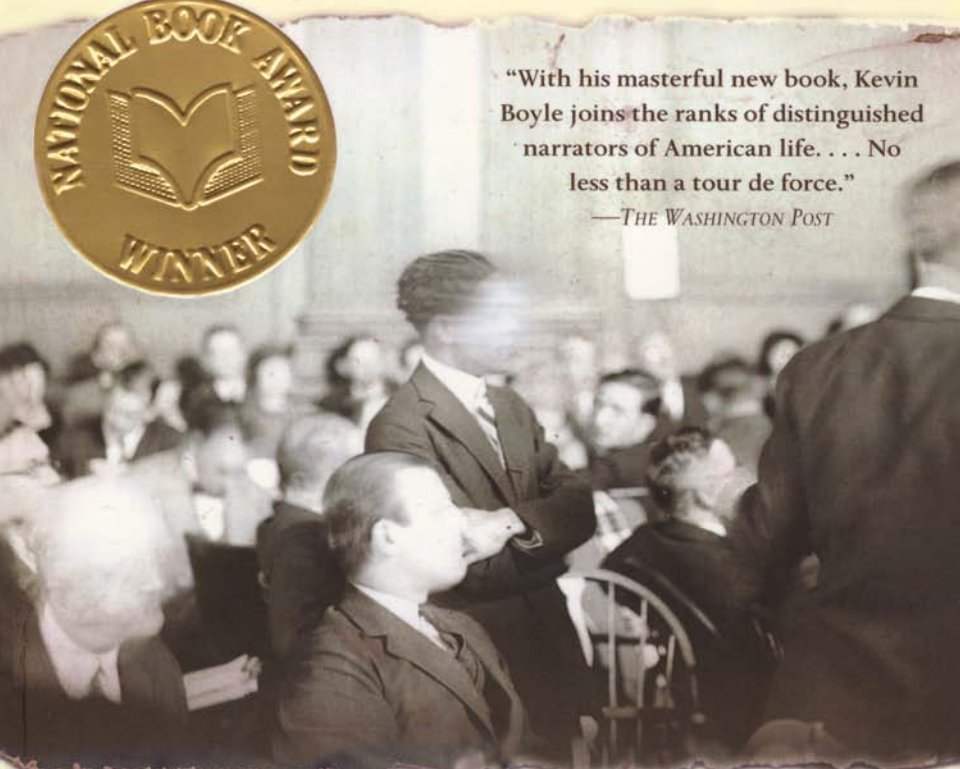
ARC OF JUSTICE

A SAGA OF RACE, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND
MURDER IN THE JAZZ AGE



"With his masterful new book, Kevin Boyle joins the ranks of distinguished narrators of American life. . . . No less than a tour de force."

—THE WASHINGTON POST



KEVIN BOYLE

**READER'S
GUIDE**



MICHIGAN HUMANITIES COUNCIL



What is the Great Michigan Read?

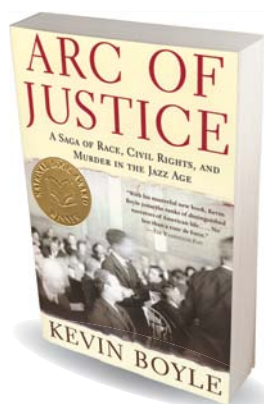
The Michigan Humanities Council's Great Michigan Read is a book club for the entire state. With a statewide focus on a single book—*Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* by Kevin Boyle—it encourages Michiganders to learn more about our state, our society and our history.

Why *Arc of Justice*?

Arc of Justice is a masterful recounting of a landmark historical event, culminating in an epic legal battle that helped lay the foundation of the civil rights movement.

In 1925, African American physician Ossian Sweet purchased a home in a white neighborhood in Detroit. Determined to protect his family and property, Sweet chose to defend himself from the mob organized to drive him out.

Arc of Justice provides essential historical background as Americans continue to confront issues of tolerance and equality.



How can I participate?

Pick up a copy of *Arc of Justice* and supporting materials at Meijer, your local library or your favorite bookseller—or download the e-book. Read the book, share and discuss it with your friends, and participate in Great Michigan Read activities in your community and online.

Register your library, school, church, company or other book group and receive additional copies of reader's guides, teacher's guides, bookmarks and other informational materials at no cost. Nonprofit organizations—including schools and libraries—qualify for discussion kits, which include free copies of *Arc of Justice*.

For more details—including a calendar of events, additional resources and to register your organization—visit www.michiganhumanities.org, join the Michigan Humanities Council Facebook group or follow @mihumanities (#greatMIread) on Twitter.

The Michigan Humanities Council is grateful to the following individuals for their assistance with the reader's guide:

Thomas Klug, Marygrove College

Paula Langley, Marygrove College

Juanita Moore, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History



www.michiganhumanities.org



Q & A with the Author

How did you find out about the story of Ossian Sweet?

Sweet's story is a part of Detroit lore. I'd heard about it growing up in the city—not everything, of course, but enough to pique my interest.

Why were you compelled to write *Arc of Justice*?

I really wanted to write about the struggle of civil rights. But I wanted to look at civil rights in a place and time that didn't fit the standard story of the movement, a story that took place in the North, not in the South, and in the 1920s, not the 1950s and 1960s. And I desperately wanted to write about Detroit.



Ossian Sweet,
circa 1950.

What is the story's most-compelling lesson for today?

Arc of Justice captures the moment when the Northern system of segregation was created, a system that divides the nation's great cities into different neighborhoods—separate and unequal. We still live with that system today. I like to think that Sweet's story makes us look around us—and wonder why we continue to accept such injustice.



AUTHOR

Kevin Boyle

Born in Detroit in 1960, Kevin Boyle earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Detroit Mercy and his doctorate from the University of Michigan. Currently, he is a professor of history at Ohio State University in Columbus.

Arc of Justice won the National Book Award in 2004 and was named a Michigan Notable Book in 2005. It was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Boyle has been awarded fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Fulbright Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has written or edited three other books and numerous articles.

FURTHER READING

Boyle, Kevin. *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. Henry Holt, 2004.

Boyle, Kevin and Victoria Getis. *Muddy Boots and Ragged Aprons: Images of Working-Class Detroit, 1900–1930*. Wayne State University Press, 1997.

Boyle, Kevin, ed. *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894–1994: The Labor-Liberal Alliance*. State University of New York Press, 1998.

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The Great Migration

Ossian Sweet was one of approximately 2 million African Americans who moved out of the South during the 1910s to 1930s in what is known as the Great Migration. Most were fleeing a social structure built upon the notion of white racial supremacy; at the same time, many were attracted to economic opportunities in cities in the North and West.

Sweet was born in 1895 in Bartow, Fla. His parents were hardworking, enterprising people, adherents to the African Methodist Episcopal value of racial uplift, and they strove to create a better life for their children. This meant sending Ossian away to receive an education that was nearly impossible for African Americans to find in the segregationist South at the turn of the 20th century.

When he was 13, Ossian arrived at Wilberforce University, near Dayton, Ohio, where he attended both high school and college. As an undergraduate, Sweet decided to study medicine. It was a daunting goal, but it would place him at the pinnacle of respectability and success among other African Americans. He spent his summers in Detroit, earning money to pay for his schooling.

His poor eyesight disqualified him from service in the First World War. In 1917 he was accepted into the prestigious medical school at Howard University in Washington, D.C. After earning his medical degree in 1921, Sweet decided to practice medicine in Detroit.

FURTHER READING

- Lehman, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America*. Vintage Books, 1991.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Random House, 2010.

DISCUSSION

How does Ossian Sweet's journey to the North differ from the hundreds of thousands of other African Americans who left the South during that time period?





Detroit: 20th-Century Boomtown

Ossian Sweet settled in Detroit in 1921. The city was an industrial boomtown. Jobs were plentiful, the population had exploded and housing was scarce. Detroit's growth followed a national trend—the 1920 census was the first showing that the majority of Americans lived in cities.

Detroit's economic expansion was largely fueled by the demand for automobiles. The city earned a reputation for decent pay for industrial jobs, but the conditions were often deplorable, with long hours, harsh environments and nonexistent safety standards. The most desirable jobs were reserved for whites. Many companies hired African American workers, but the shop floor was often as segregated as the city itself.

Despite these factors, there was money to be made in Detroit, and workers flocked to the city. Between 1910 and 1920, Detroit



experienced the fastest growth in black population of all major northern cities. The influx of African Americans exacerbated existing racial tensions and led many whites to respond with attitudes, practices and violence that echoed the South.

DISCUSSION

How did life for African Americans in northern cities compare with the conditions they faced in the South?

FURTHER READING

Babson, Steve et al. *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*.

Wayne State University Press, 1986.

Gavrilovich, Peter and Bill McGraw. *The Detroit Almanac*. Detroit Free Press, 2000.

Katzman, David M. *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century*.

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African Americans were often placed in the most undesirable factory jobs, like these foundry workers.



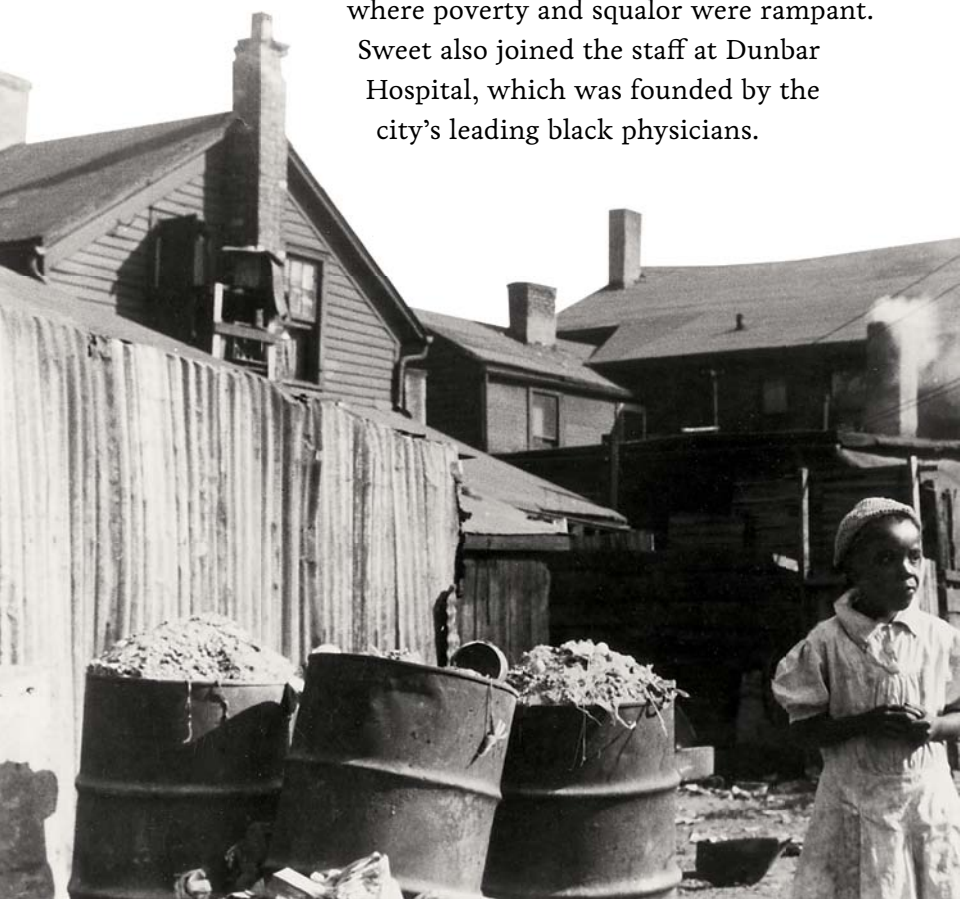
The corner of Michigan and Griswold, Detroit, circa 1920.

Life in Black Bottom

The Black Bottom district contained the city's worst housing stock and attracted the poorest of new arrivals to the city, including European immigrants in the 1800s. By the 1920s, the district was the center of Detroit's African American community. Scholars do not agree on the origin of the name "Black Bottom." Some claim that it stems from the supposedly dark color of the soil, and others link it to the skin color of the people who lived there.

As the city's African American population continued to grow, they were prevented from finding housing outside of Black Bottom by discriminatory business practices and grassroots opposition. Eventually, the district became an African American ghetto.

When Ossian Sweet settled in Detroit, he rented a room and an office in Black Bottom. Life was violent, disagreeable and unsafe in much of the city, but it was worse in Black Bottom, where poverty and squalor were rampant. Sweet also joined the staff at Dunbar Hospital, which was founded by the city's leading black physicians.



DISCUSSION

Before Black Bottom became known as a primarily African American district, it was home to many white immigrants. How and why do neighborhoods change composition over time?

Many upwardly mobile African Americans like Ossian Sweet attempted to leave Black Bottom, but it was home to many successful black professionals, entrepreneurs, artists, athletes and performers, including boxing great Joe Louis and poets Robert Hayden and Dudley Randall. Paradise Valley, an adjoining area, became popular as an entertainment district.

FURTHER READING

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Moon, Elaine Lutzman. *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community, 1918-1967*. Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Thomas, Richard. *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Williams, Jeremy. *Detroit: The Black Bottom Community*. Arcadia Publishing, 2009.

Wolcott, Virginia. *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000.



A girl stands in a Monroe Street alley, Detroit, circa 1930.

Housing in the City

The influx of blacks from the Great Migration exacerbated a housing shortage in Detroit, and whites became ever more determined to keep their neighborhoods white. This was accomplished by predatory pricing, racially restrictive property deeds, intimidation and outright mob violence. These tactics—“a host of individual actions arbitrarily imposed” (*Arc of Justice*, 108)—further segregated the city and effectively ghettoized African Americans.

Ossian Sweet confronted nearly all of these practices in his quest to find housing outside of Black Bottom.

Despite their increasing population, African Americans were hemmed into existing black enclaves until 1948, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that racially restrictive property deeds were unconstitutional. Only then was it impossible to stop the gradual expansion of blacks into traditionally white areas. In response, many whites began leaving the city.

Housing discrimination was officially outlawed in 1968 with the enactment of federal fair housing legislation. Today, many metropolitan areas remain segregated, with the Metro Detroit region near the top of the list.*

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- Darden, Joe T., Richard Child Hill, June Thomas and Richard Thomas. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. Temple University Press, 1987.
- Freund, David M. P. *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Sugrue, Thomas. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Thompson, Heather Ann. *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. Cornell University Press, 2004.

*The Metro Detroit area is the fourth most-segregated region in the country, according to a report from US2010, a Brown University and Russell Sage Foundation partnership that explores changes in American society using 2010 United States Census and other demographic data.

DISCUSSION

What are the consequences of the fact that many American cities continue to exhibit segregated housing patterns?



A family recently evicted from their home in the Black Bottom district, circa 1929.

Violence in the City

In northern states, segregation was less a legal phenomenon. Instead, it was “spread by quiet agreement,” coming in “fits and starts, imposed by random acts of cruelty” (*Arc of Justice*, 10, 106). The results were racial boundaries reinforced by the threat—real and perceived—of violence.

In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was a nationwide organization that included hundreds of thousands of members in northern cities. It was a highly organized group that advocated white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant superiority at the expense of African Americans, Jews, Catholics and other groups that did not conform to the Klan’s standards. Its tactics varied from place to place, ranging from intimidation to outright violence.

In Detroit, KKK membership was widespread (estimated at 35,000 in 1925) and maintained a powerful political



Ku Klux Klan rally at the Michigan State Fair Grounds in Detroit, 1920s.

DISCUSSION

Imagine living in 1920s Detroit. If you were committed to racial justice, how would you work to achieve this goal?

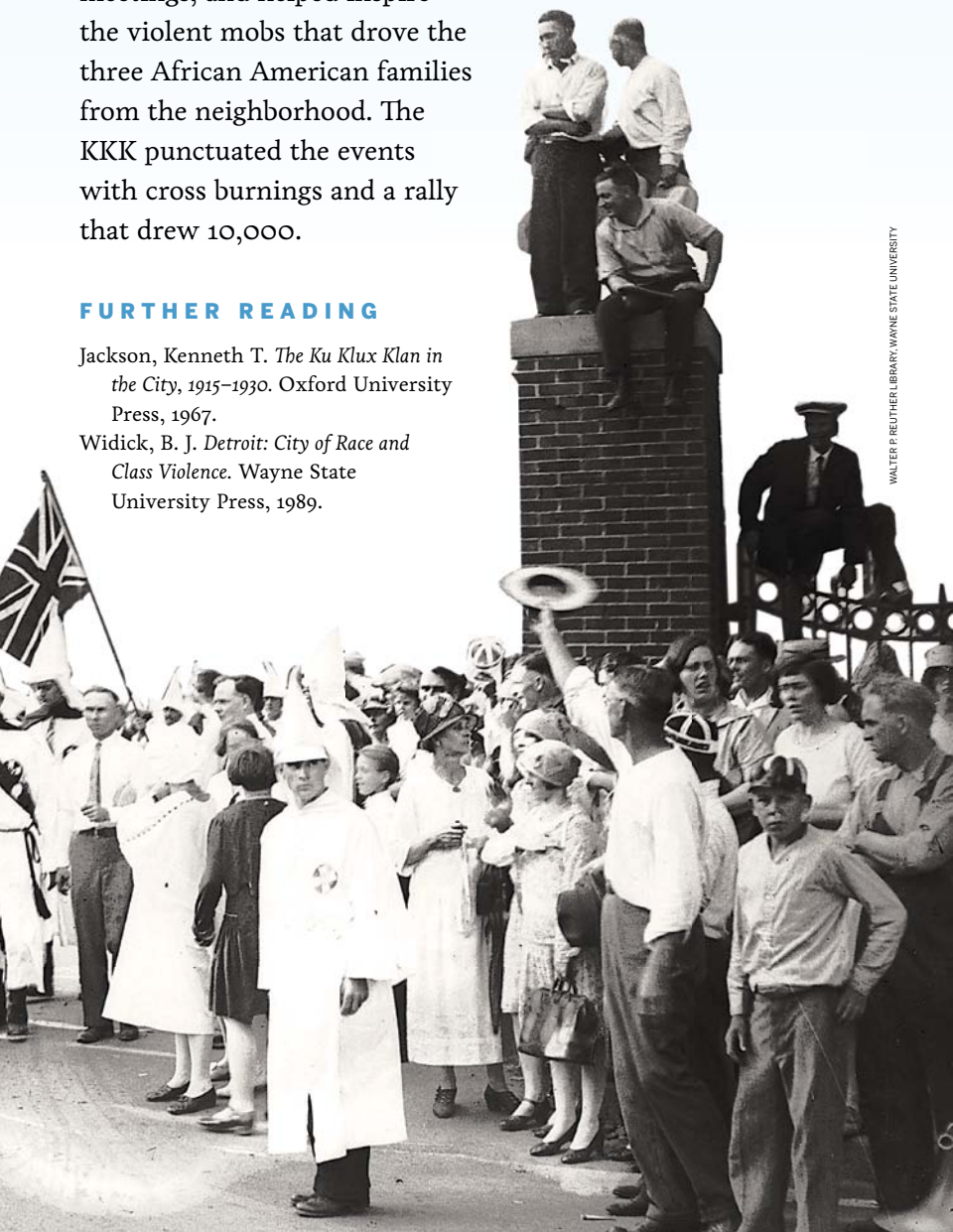
influence—a Klan-backed candidate nearly won the 1924 mayoral race.

A few months before Ossian Sweet would challenge Detroit's racial housing boundaries, three other African American families attempted to do the same on the city's West side. White residents opposing the moves formed grassroots organizations with thinly disguised "improvement" agendas. Their real intent was to keep their respective neighborhoods white. The Tireman Avenue Improvement Association attracted hundreds to its meetings, and helped inspire the violent mobs that drove the three African American families from the neighborhood. The KKK punctuated the events with cross burnings and a rally that drew 10,000.

FURTHER READING

Jackson, Kenneth T. *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930*. Oxford University Press, 1967.

Widick, B. J. *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence*. Wayne State University Press, 1989.

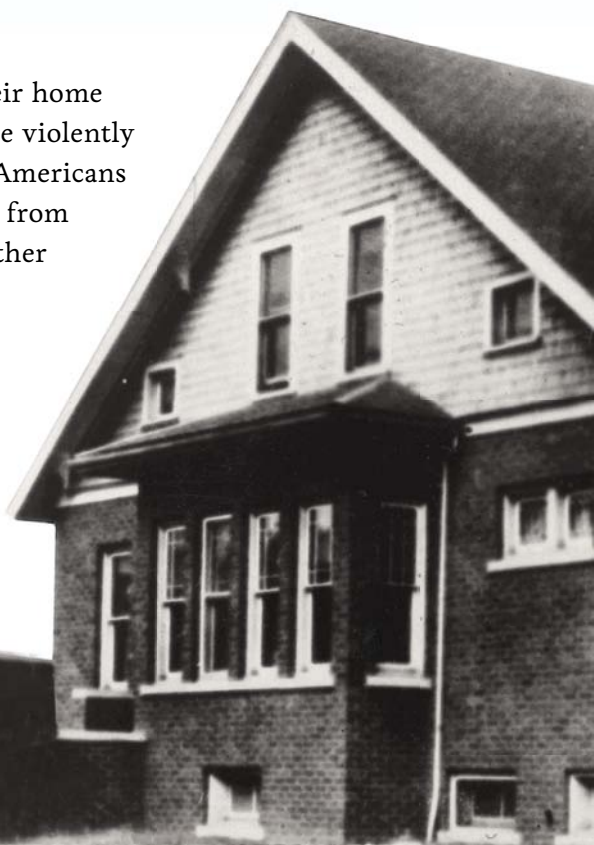


2905 Garland Street

In 1922, Ossian Sweet married Gladys Mitchell, and the couple moved in temporarily with her parents. The newlyweds departed for Europe on a study tour in 1923. In Vienna and Paris, the Sweets experienced a level of respect and equality not found in American society at the time. After giving birth to their daughter, Iva, in Paris, the Sweets returned to Detroit.

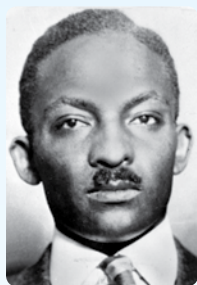
In 1924, the Sweets began looking for a house of their own. Their pride, financial success and desire to live in a better area meant that they would have to look in established white neighborhoods beyond Black Bottom. Banks, real estate agents, home sellers and neighborhood organizations all worked against them, but they finally found a willing seller. This came at a price—the Sweets paid a nearly 50 percent premium on the home, coupled with an 18 percent annual interest rate.

The Sweets bought their home while white mobs were violently driving away African Americans (including a colleague) from similar purchases in other white neighborhoods. They were aware that they might suffer the same fate at their new home, 2905 Garland Street, in Detroit's East side.



2905 Garland Street, at the corner of Charlevoix.

The Sweets had reason to fear: white residents in the neighborhood had recently formed the Waterworks Park Improvement Association to oppose their move.



Ossian Sweet, ca. 1925



Gladys Sweet, ca. 1920

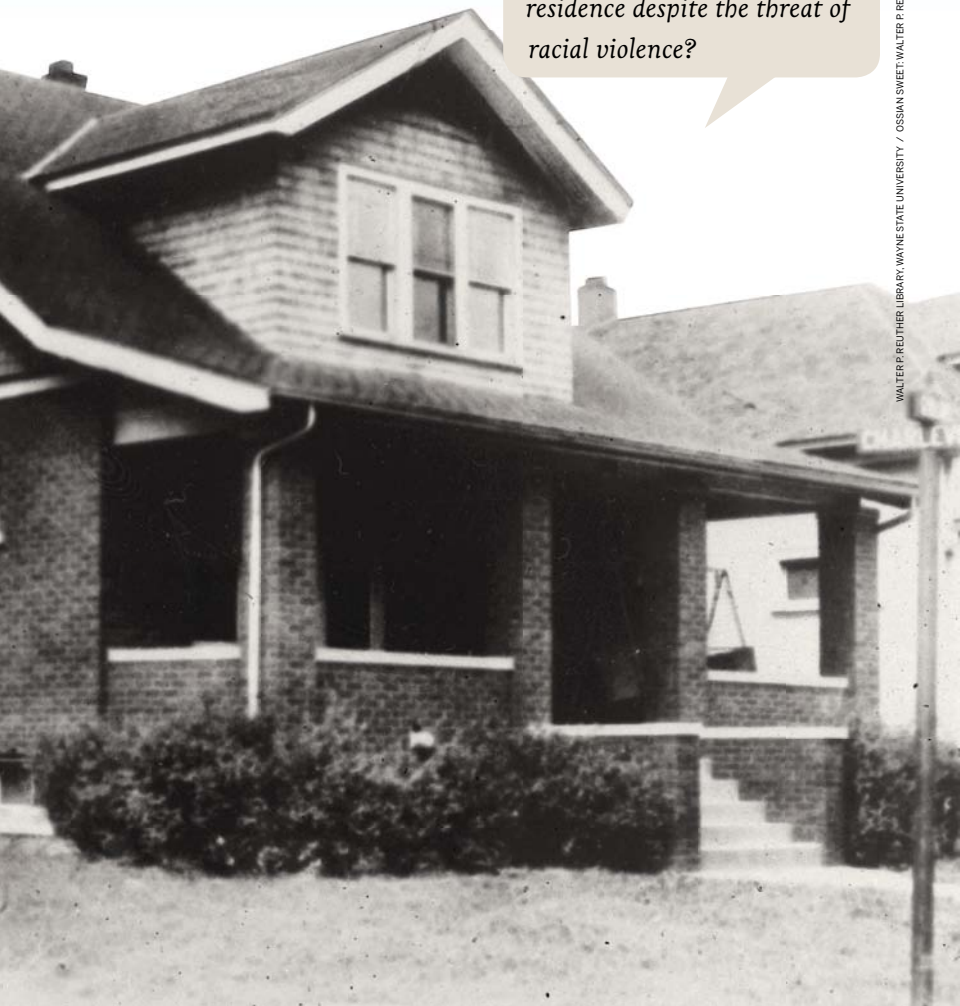
Ossian and Gladys Sweet were determined to face these challenges head-on, and prepared to do so. On Sept. 9, 1925, their worst fears became reality.

FURTHER READING

Levine, David Allan. *Internal Combustion: The Races in Detroit, 1915–1926*. Greenwood Press, 1976.

DISCUSSION

Why would the Sweets decide to move to the Garland Street residence despite the threat of racial violence?



Violence on Garland Street

Ossian Sweet recruited nine men and assembled a cache of weapons and ammunition to protect his family during the move to Garland Street. Despite a small but significant police presence, scores of people gathered around the house. They grew violent, peppering the residence with rocks. The Sweet party responded by firing two volleys of shots, which struck two white men on the street. One was injured, and another, Leon Breiner, died. All 11 occupants of the house were arrested and charged with murder.

Prior cases and hundreds of years of common law established the right to, when threatened, protect one's home with deadly force. The prosecution argued that there was no mob—and hence no threat—and that the codefendants had demonstrated an intent to use deadly force by arming themselves with a shotgun, a rifle, six pistols and 400 rounds of ammunition before occupying the house.

The Sweets had broken a racial barrier by purchasing a home in a white neighborhood, and they would face trial by jury in a legal system that was controlled by whites, many of whom were interested in preserving the status quo. Who would the all-white jury believe, the Sweets, or the white witnesses who were on Garland Street on Sept. 9?

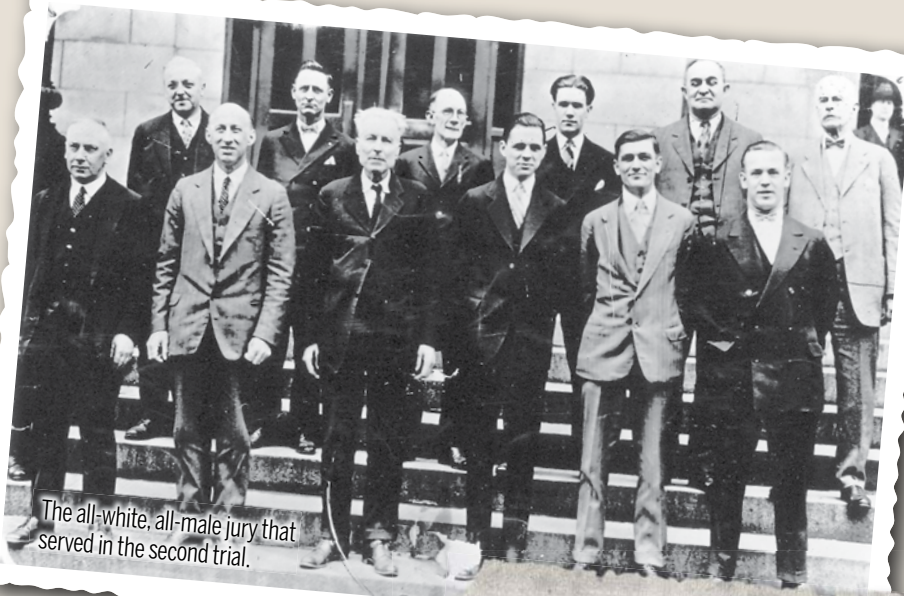
The defense team worked to find cracks in the testimony of prosecution witnesses and police officers who claimed there was no mob. In doing so, they expanded the scope of the case and took on broader issues of prejudice and inequality. The resulting trials galvanized the city and captivated African Americans across the country.

FURTHER READING

University of Minnesota Law Library. *The Clarence Darrow Digital Collection*.
darrow.law.umn.edu.

University of Missouri–Kansas City Law School. *Famous American Trials: The Sweet Trials, 1925 & 1926*. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/sweet/sweet.html>.





The all-white, all-male jury that served in the second trial.

DISCUSSION

When do you think it is appropriate to use force to defend one's property? If you were in the Sweets' place when their house was attacked, how would you have responded?



Collage of Detroit newspaper clippings covering the Sweet trials, 1925-1926.



The Legal Team

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) funded the defense of Ossian Sweet and his codefendants. The group was formed in 1909 by a coalition of white and black reformers to advocate for racial justice.

James Weldon Johnson, NAACP secretary, and his assistant, Walter White, coordinated the defense at the national level. They recruited Clarence Darrow, a legal superstar, to lead the team. Darrow had built his reputation as a champion of the underdog and participated in some of the most-spectacular trials of the era. This included the “Monkey Trial” defense of John T. Scopes, who was charged with teaching evolution in a Tennessee school in 1925.

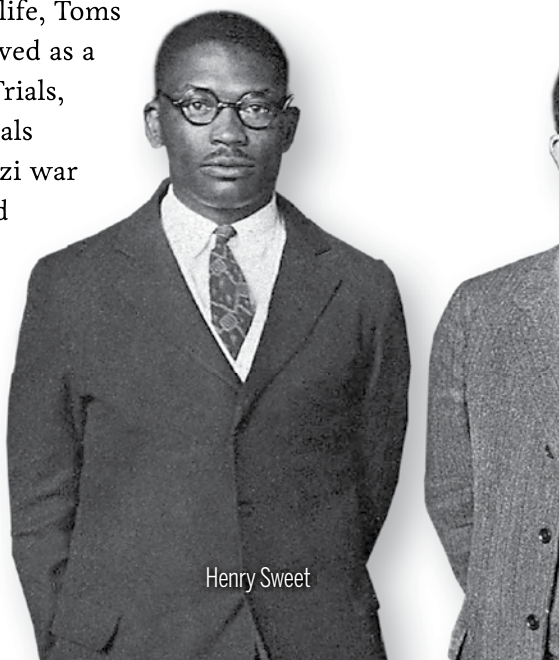
Judge Frank Murphy—a progressive Democrat in the early stages of a political career that included service as Mayor of Detroit, Governor of Michigan and United States Supreme

Court Associate Justice—presided over the Sweet trials. Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Toms, who harbored no sentiment for racial equality at the time, led the prosecution. Later in life, Toms joined the NAACP and served as a judge at the Nuremburg Trials, a series of military tribunals that sought justice for Nazi war criminals after the Second World War.

The NAACP used the Sweet trial as a springboard for establishing its legal

DISCUSSION

How did the defense team manage to turn the trial from a murder case to a broader consideration of race, prejudice and discrimination in 1920s America?

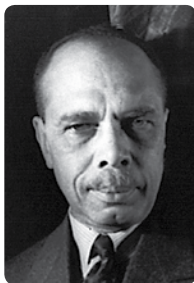




JUDGE
Frank Murphy



WAYNE CO. PROSECUTOR
Robert Toms



NAACP SECRETARY
James Weldon Johnson



NAACP ASS'T. SECRETARY
Walter White

defense fund, which played an essential role in legal decisions including *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), which undermined racially restrictive real estate covenants, and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine.

FURTHER READING

Sullivan, Patricia. *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. The New Press, 2010.

Vine, Phyllis. *One Man's Castle: Clarence Darrow in Defense of the American Dream*. New York, 2005.

INNOCENT or GUILTY?

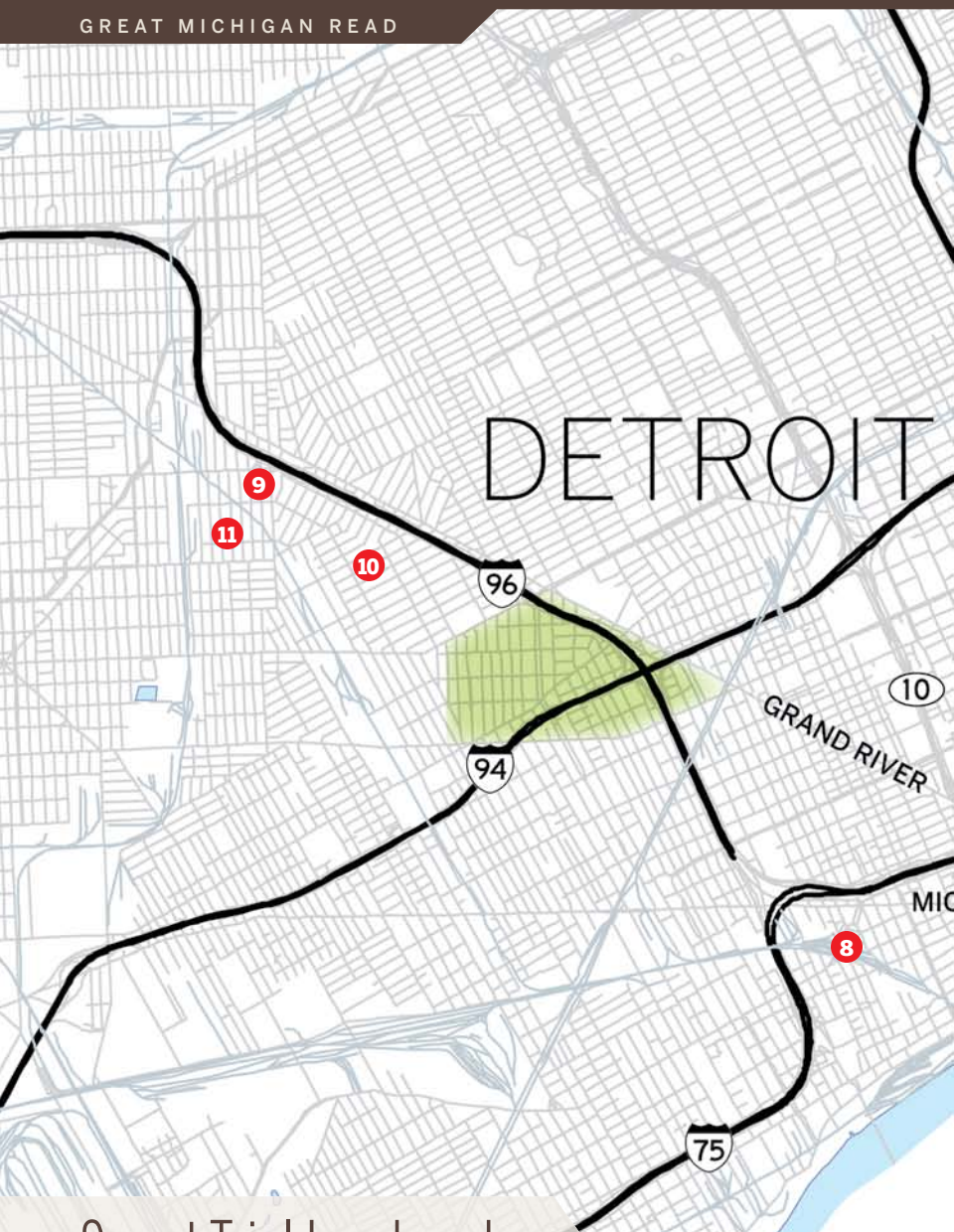
The Sweet trials are an incredible legal drama, and Arc of Justice provides a masterful account of the proceedings. Join the Great Michigan Read, pick up a copy of the book and find out what happened to the Sweets and their codefendants.



Julian Perry

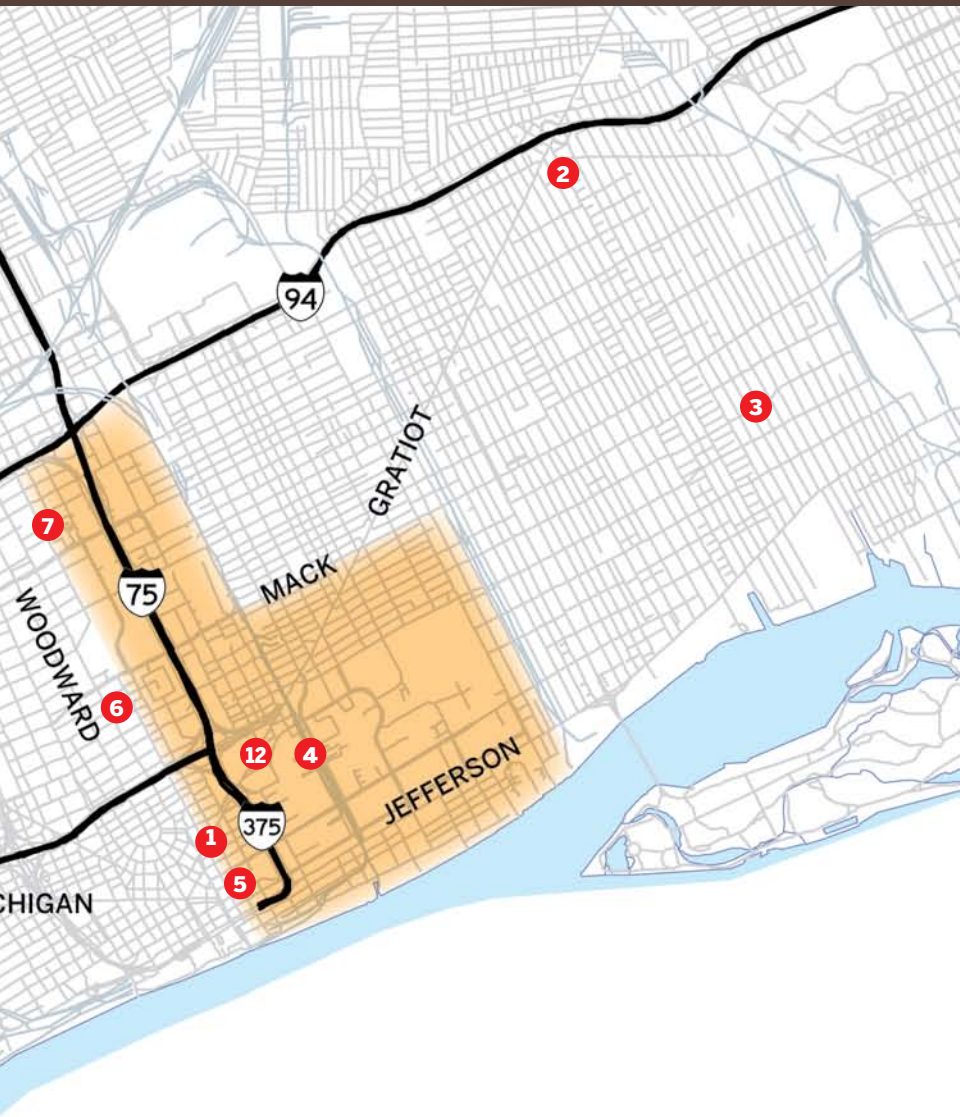
Thomas Chawke

Clarence Darrow



Sweet Trial Landmarks

- 1** Ossian Sweet's apartment (Clinton near Lafayette Park)
Ossian Sweet's first permanent Detroit residence, 1921–22.
- 2** Rosella & Benjamin Mitchell home (Cairney and McClelland Streets)
Ossian and Gladys Sweet lived here with Gladys' parents, 1922–25.
- 3** Ossian & Gladys Sweet home (2905 Garland)
Violent mobs confronted the Sweets when they moved into the residence in 1925.
- 4** Palace Drugs (1712 St. Aubin)
Location of Ossian Sweet's medical practice, 1921–1926.
- 5** Wayne County Courthouse (600 Randolph)
Venue for both Sweet trials.
- 6** Detroit Police Department (3000 Beaubien)
Ossian Sweet and the 10 codefendants were arraigned here after the Garland Street shooting.
- 7** Dunbar Hospital (580 Frederick)
Ossian Sweet joined the Dunbar medical staff in 1922.



- 8** Michigan Central Train Depot (2405 W. Vernor Hwy.)
Entry point for many African Americans who arrived in Detroit via rail during the Great Migration.
 - 9** John Fletcher home (9428 Stoepel)
 - 10** Alexander Turner home (Spokane between Ironwood and Northfield)
 - 11** Bristol Vollington home (American between Westfield and Dover)
Months before the Sweets moved into their Garland Street home, violent mobs drove African American families from these three residences, all located in white neighborhoods. Alexander Turner was a colleague of Ossian Sweet.
 - 12** NAACP Detroit headquarters (2231 Orleans)
Local branch of the national organization.
- Black Bottom District**
This enclave housed two-thirds of the city's African Americans.
- Warren-Tireman District**
Detroit's second-largest African American district.



Michigan Humanities Council

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The Michigan Humanities Council connects people and communities by supporting quality cultural programs. It is Michigan's nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1974, the Michigan Humanities Council has supported communities through family literacy programs, special cultural and historical exhibits, book discussions, author tours, scholarly lectures and mentors, films, cultural celebrations, and school programs and performances that have reached millions of Michiganians.

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With nearly 200 stores throughout five states, Meijer continues to run its stores based on the simple philosophy that led Hendrik Meijer, its founder, to start the business in the first place: "... take care of your customers, team members, and community, and they will take care of you." Family-owned for more than 75 years, Meijer has long been a leader in supporting the communities where its customers and team members work and live. Meijer has supported the Great Michigan Read since the program's inception in 2007, demonstrating its longstanding commitment to fostering strong communities throughout the state of Michigan.