

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Eddie "The Sheik" Gardner (December 1887 - August 1966)

"Iconic Black Ultramarathoner and Running Legend"

Eddie "The Sheik" Gardner was born in Birmingham, Alabama in December of 1887. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Seattle, Washington. Eddie's mother died of tuberculosis in 1911, when he was 22 years old.

In 1914, Eddie returned to Alabama to attend Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), a technical school for blacks founded by Booker T. Washington, where he learned how to repair steam boilers. He joined the track team and became a star athlete. After graduation, Eddie returned to Seattle and began repairing steam boilers at the Puget Sound and Light Company. Eddie continued running and entered many local races, including the Washington State Ten-Mile Championship, held each year in Seattle. By 1927 Eddie had won the ten-mile championship three times, setting a state record for that distance. He beat some of the best college and independent athletes of the region, many who were younger than Eddie.

In the Summer of 1927, a race director named Charles C. Pyle advertised for the "First Annual International-Trans Continental Foot Race". The foot race would cross the United States, leaving Los Angeles and ending in New York City, covering 3,400 miles. The prizes were astonishing for the time: \$25,000 for 1st place, \$10,000 for 2nd place, \$5,000 for 3rd place, and \$2,500 for 4th place. The 5th through 10th place finishers would each earn a \$1,000 prize. The entry fee of \$125.00 covered the runner's food, housing (tents that would travel with the runner), shoe repair, and minor medical care that the runners needed along the grueling race. Race staff followed the runners, driving up and down the day's route, carrying coffee, food, and water. Over 200 men applied to participate in the race, with only 5 being black. The most notable runner was Eddie Gardner.

Eddie trained intensely for months, running through the streets of Seattle wearing what would become his trademark uniform - a white towel or t-shirt tied around his head, a white sleeveless shirt, and white shorts. Onlookers dubbed Eddie "The Sheik" after the popular 1921 Rudolph Valentino movie of the same name.

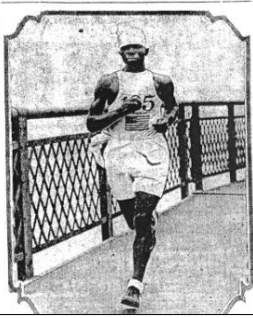
The race, coined "The Bunion Derby", left Los Angeles on March 4, 1928, with 199 runners. For two and a half months, runners traveled a designated route each day, stopping each night and starting together again the next day. Each runner's arrival time was recorded on a cumulative log. The fastest cumulative time would determine the winners and their place. The grueling course led runners across the mostly unpaved Route 66, through the muddy Texas panhandle, into the rolling hills of Oklahoma and through the Ozark mountains of Missouri. The runners didn't reach paved roads until they arrived in Illinois. Each day or "stage" of the race averaged about 40 miles. Eddie ran impressive times each day.

But he, along with the other four black runners, faced not only the physical challenge of the punishing race, but also the Jim Crow south. Word spread to white southerners that Eddie was not only competing in the race, but that he was also outpacing many of the elite white runners. In one case a white farmer followed Eddie on horseback with a rifle aimed at his back, daring him to pass another white man. On another day, a white mob surrounded Eddie's trainer's car and threatened to burn it. Many angry onlookers hurled racial slurs and threats at Eddie and the other black runners. Their threats, however, did not outweigh the support Eddie received from the black communities cheering him along the way. Eddie was a symbol of hope and black pride. Of the five black runners, only three finished the race. One black runner was hit by a car, and a second was physically unable to continue. Eddie "The Sheik" Gardner finished 8th out of 55 finishers of the race, earning the \$1,000 prize.

The 2nd Annual "Bunion Derby" was March 31, 1929. This time, the course started in New York and ended in Los Angeles. Eddie "The Sheik" covered 22 miles in less than 3 hours and was leading the overall race when he crossed the Free Bridge over the Mississippi River that separated Illinois from Missouri. He was wearing his signature outfit, displaying the race number of 165. Unfortunately, Eddie would not finish the 2nd Trans-America race. Just after Eddie crossed into Oklahoma, he pulled a hamstring muscle. Although he was in pain, he attempted to continue the race. He later told reporters that he wanted to win the race, for his people.

When the Great Depression hit, Eddie remained in Seattle and returned to work as a steam boiler repairman before eventually becoming a steel worker. After 1929, C.C. Pyle never hosted another Trans-American Footrace, and the time of the Bunion Derby came to end. In 1938, Eddie won a 52-mile-long walking competition called "the Lake Hike" around Lake Washington, beating the course's previous record. However, it was the last endurance competition he won. Eddie's wife died in 1960. Eddie worked as a school janitor in North Seattle until he died of a stroke in August 1966, at age 79.

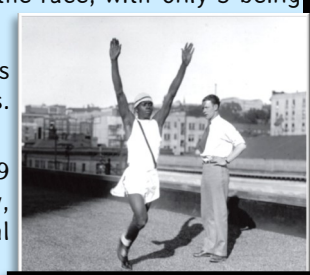
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
First Into St. Louis in Cross-Country Race



Eddie Gardner Crossing the Mississippi River at St. Louis, 1929.



Eddie "The Sheik" Gardner at the start of the race.



Seattle Scene:
Sheik Gardner And The Great Bunion Derby

By Frank Lynch
"The Sheik" Gardner, a black ultramarathoner, led the Bunion Derby, a grueling 3,400-mile race across the United States, from Los Angeles to New York City, in 1928. Gardner, wearing his signature white outfit, crossed the Free Bridge over the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Mo., on March 31, 1929. Gardner finished 8th out of 55 finishers of the race, earning the \$1,000 prize.



Eddie Gardner during Bunion Derby, Oklahoma, 1928

