

The Early Life of Josephine Baker

Josephine Baker, the iconic American-born French entertainer, had a remarkable and tumultuous early life. She was born on June 3, 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri, as Freda Josephine McDonald. Her early years were marked by poverty, discrimination, and a challenging upbringing. Ms. Baker started dancing early in her life as she needed to help support her family after they were abandoned by her father. In fact, it is said that between the ages of 8 and 10 Ms. Baker was no longer in school as she was dancing to help support her family.

Josephine Baker was born into poverty to a struggling African American family. Her parents, Carrie McDonald and Eddie Carson, were a washerwoman and a vaudeville drummer, respectively, which meant that the family had limited financial resources. In fact, she was often hungry growing up and lived without indoor plumbing. In regard to her parentage, there was much discussion as to whether Eddie Carson was in fact her biological father, but she certainly seemed to inherit a love of performance from him.

In addition to being impoverished, Josephine had early exposure to discrimination. Growing up in St. Louis, young Josephine experienced racial discrimination and segregation firsthand. She often witnessed racial violence and racial tension in the United States during the early 20th century. There is no question that this turn of events played a role in her life and decisions, such as her refusal to perform at segregated audiences, her support of the Civil Rights Movement, and work with the NAACP. In fact, in 1963 she spoke alongside Rev. Martin Luther King at the March on Washington.

Josephine's early life was marked by her fascination with dancing and performing. Her earliest dance performances took place on the streets of St. Louis at a very young age. She danced

to earn money for her family. Her talent and passion for dance quickly became evident, and it became a catalyst to her performance success.

Josephine's early life was marked by a series of marriages at a very young and impressionable age. She married for the first time at the age of 13 to Willie Wells, which ended in divorce. Her second marriage in 1921 to William Howard Baker at the age of 15 was also short-lived. Josephine Baker ultimately had four husbands during her lifetime, declaring herself a French Nationalist after her marriage in 1937 to Jean Lion and renouncing her United States Citizenship.

In or about 1921, between the ages of 13- 15, Ms. Baker moved to New York City, where she performed in various clubs and became a chorus girl in Broadway productions. This was a significant turning point in her life, as it allowed her to pursue her dream of becoming a professional dancer and entertainer. She was the first African American to star in a motion picture, to perform with an integrated cast at the American concert hall, and one of the first American entertainers who achieved acclaim both in movies and in the stage.

Her successful New York performance career segued to her rise to fame in Paris: In 1925, at the young age of 19, Josephine Baker moved to Paris, France, where she experienced a meteoric rise to stardom. She became a sensation in the Parisian entertainment scene, primarily due to her groundbreaking performances at the Folies Bergère. Her exotic and provocative dancing style, along with her captivating charisma, set her apart from other entertainers. She is remembered for her iconic short skirt made of artificial bananas and her beaded necklace and the effect she had during the Jazz Age.

There is no question that Josephine Baker's early life was marked by struggle, but her incredible talent and determination eventually propelled her to international fame and made her a

symbol of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties. She would go on to become a celebrated dancer, singer, and Civil Rights activist, best known for her contributions to both entertainment and the fight against racial discrimination. This even included working with the French Military Agency during World War II, providing information she was able to receive during her travel as an entertainer, playing to various audiences. Josephine is a performance icon who broke the boundaries of racism. She symbolizes the beauty and vitality of Black American culture, and her life choices and ambitions are most memorable.

Reference

“Josephine Baker’s Early Life” prompt. *ChatGPT*, OpenAI, 24 Oct 2023, chat.openai.com.

Josephine Baker and “The Rainbow Tribe”

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Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1906, Josephine Baker was raised by her single African-American mother in the absence of her white father. She witnessed race riots and murder in the south and was first married at the age of 13. She joined a vaudeville troupe at age 14 and married her second husband at 15. She eventually danced on Broadway and was destined to become a star. Baker committed to her work, and later moved to France, where legal segregation did not exist. She continued her life there as a performer in the roaring 20's.

Baker became an international singing and dancing star who loved to shock the public with her sex appeal. She gained international acclaim in 1926 when she danced at the Folies Bergere in Paris wearing nothing but a skirt of bananas. She became one of the most photographed women in the world; she made movies and recordings. Despite her fame and riches, Baker identified a new passion during World War II and became a highly decorated, uniformed member of the French Resistance movement as a spy. She could fly a plane and was also an Air Force pilot.

After the war, Baker was in her 40's and no longer a sex symbol, though she continued to perform. In 1947, Baker reinvented herself and married French orchestra leader, Jo Bouillon. They purchased a Renaissance castle with more than 30 rooms and 1,000 acres of land. Childless and in her forties, she embraced child advocacy and her desire to combat racism. In early 1954, she gave a speech in Copenhagen where she described her intent to create a family of children of all skin colors to be raised in brotherhood and universalism. That year, she travelled to Japan and returned to France with two sons, Akio and Teruya. She then adopted Jari from Finland and Luis from Columbia. Baker and Bouillon adopted two children from the French welfare system, Jean-Claude and Moise. She called her family the “Rainbow Tribe” and made front page news. In 1956, though Bouillon felt their family was “complete,” the couple adopted two more children from Alergia—Brahim and Marianne, the couple's first daughter.

At the time Baker and Bouillon grew their family, “inter-country” adoption was not regulated. Baker wanted to raise her family in the public eye to demonstrate that racial discrimination and hatred is not natural and would not occur when she raised her children together.

“There was no point in adopting children of every colour to be kept away from everyone else! They must be made visible so that people can see that it is in fact possible; that children from different races, raised together as siblings, have no animosity; that racial hate is not natural. It’s an invention by mankind.”

In order to demonstrate the sociological example to the world, Baker and Bouillon transformed their Chateau de Milandes Estate into a tourist center, where people could visit their family and celebrate brotherhood. By the late 1950’s, they attracted 300,000 visitors annually. Still, Baker resisted offers to create a film about her “tribe” and the family struggled financially to manage their significant estate. Baker denied film opportunities because, while she championed her family in the public eye, she did not want to treat them as “performing monkeys.” Though she was not shy about placing her family on public display. They often travelled the world with her where they met the Pope and vacationed with Fidel Castro.

Baker hired numerous nannies and continued to tour the world while Bouillon remained at the Chateau to care for the children and manage the family finances. In 1957, Baker toured West Africa and returned to France with Koffi, a baby from the Ivory coast. In 1959, Mara from Venezuela joined the tribe, as did Noel, a baby found abandoned in a garbage can on a Paris street at Christmas. The cost of raising the family prompted Baker to perform more frequently and she continued to travel the world. Her career and family became increasingly more connected, such that she eventually authored a popular song entitled “Dans mon village” (“In My Village”) that revered her “little ones,” international peace and brotherhood. She also authored the children’s book “The Rainbow Tribe” in 1957 that promoted tolerance, diversity and acceptance. In her many public appearances and press opportunities, Baker consistently discussed her family and her commitment to international peace.

By 1963, Baker and Bouillon were at odds over the finances and disagreement over raising the children. That year he left the Chateau and moved to Buenos Aires. Without him and his financial acumen,

the financial future of the estate and the family was in peril. Still, Baker did not relent. She was a pioneer of the civil rights movement and the only woman to speak at Martin Luther King's March on Washington on August 28, 1963, where she said:

"You know, friends, that I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents, and much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad. And when I get mad, you know that I open my big mouth. And then look out, 'cause when Josephine opens her mouth, they hear it all over the world."

In 1964, her second daughter and 12th child in Baker's "Rainbow Tribe," Stellina, joined the family after a Moroccan friend of Baker abandoned her birth. By that time, Baker struggled to maintain her finances. In 1969, Brigitte Bardot, a famous French activist, singer and model, made a public plea to support Baker and her tribe. While the French middle class responded favorably and many politicians, intellectuals and artists attempted to help, the effort failed and Baker and her family left the Les Milandes estate that year. Princess Grace, Princess of Monaco, eventually intervened and settled the Rainbow Tribe into a French Riviera villa. Baker passed away in 1975 when most of her children were in their 20's.

While Baker's dream of sparking a trend of people around the world to form their own "rainbow tribes" did not come to fruition on a significant level, the volume of international adoptions in France did witness a considerable increase in the 1960's. While we've witnessed other stars such as Madonna, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie create "rainbow tribes" of their own, only approximately 20,000 children are brought to the United States from foreign countries for adoption each year. Still, the Rainbow Tribe accomplished Baker's goal to demonstrate, on an international level, that children of different races, religions and skin color can be raised together in harmony sans segregation, hatred and racism. Josephine Baker is triumphed in history for her legacy of courage, civil rights activism, military honor and motherhood. She was the first black woman and first American-born person to be inducted into the French Pantheon Mausoleum on November 20, 2021, more than 45 years after her death.

Josephine Baker and the Embracing of her Bisexuality

By Alison C. Leslie, Esq.

Although born in the United States, Josephine Baker was most at home in Paris. Known for her open and unconventional approach to relationships and sexuality, Josephine Baker and her partners were often fellow artists or individuals connected to the entertainment world. Her relationships reflected the liberal and bohemian atmosphere of the Jazz Age in which she thrived, and her romantic relationships were an integral part of her complex and fascinating life. Paris provided Josephine Baker with the ideal backdrop for her rise to fame. The city offered her a more accepting and racially tolerant environment than America. The city of lights provided her with a vibrant cultural scene and endless opportunities to showcase her extraordinary talents. Her success in Paris during this period would ultimately catapult her to international stardom and establish her as a symbol of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties.

Josephine Baker had several notable female lovers throughout her life. It's important to note that Baker was known for her fluid sexuality, and her relationships were often characterized by love, passion, and artistic collaborations. Some of her known female lovers include Frida Kahlo, Princess Natalia Paley, and Ada "Bricktop" Smith. Paley, was a Russian émigré, member of the Romanov family and a sought-after model who worked with renowned photographers and designers. Paley's striking beauty and fashion sense made her a style icon of the time. Their interracial relationship was known for its glamour and extravagance throughout the Parisian Bohemian Scene. Ada "Bricktop" Smith was an American cabaret singer, muse of Cole Porter, and owner of the popular nightclub Chez Bricktop in Paris. Baker and Bricktop were romantically involved, as well as friends and collaborators.

To comprehend why Josephine Baker would leave the United States to France, as a bisexual woman, a quick review of the comparison of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States in 1920 and today is warranted. Here's an overview of the key differences and developments during this period:

1. Legal Recognition and Decriminalization:

- 1920: In 1920, homosexuality was illegal across the United States. Same-sex sexual activity was criminalized in most states, and people were arrested and prosecuted for engaging in such relationships.
- 2023: By September 2023, consensual same-sex sexual activity had been decriminalized nationwide due to the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003. This decision invalidated anti-sodomy laws in 14 states and established a precedent for LGBTQ+ rights.

2. Marriage Equality:

- 1920: In 1920, same-sex marriage was not legally recognized anywhere in the United States. Marriage was only defined as a union between a man and a woman.
- 2023: Marriage equality became the controlling law in the United States following the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. This decision legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states, ensuring that LGBTQ+ couples had equal access to legal marriage rights and benefits.

3. Employment and Anti-Discrimination Laws:

- 1920: There were no federal or state-level laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from employment discrimination. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people was pervasive, and they often faced discrimination, frequently culminating in physical and/or sexual violence in the workplace.
- 2023: By September 2023, many states have enacted laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The federal government also provided protections under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through the Supreme Court's *Bostock v. Clayton County* decision in 2020, which affirmed that LGBTQ+ individuals were protected from workplace discrimination.

4. Adoption and Parenting:

- 1920: LGBTQ+ individuals and couples faced significant obstacles when it came to adopting children or obtaining custody rights. Many states explicitly banned LGBTQ+ people from adopting or fostering children.
- 2023: Over the years, adoption and parenting rights for LGBTQ+ individuals and couples expanded. By September 2023, many states allowed LGBTQ+ individuals and couples to adopt or foster children. The legal recognition of LGBTQ+ families and parental rights improved significantly.

5. Public Accommodations and Hate Crime Protections:

- 1920: In 1920, there were no specific laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in public accommodations, and hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people often went unaddressed or were not classified as hate crimes.
- 2023: Over time, many states implemented laws that protected LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in public accommodations, including businesses and housing. Additionally, hate crime laws were expanded to include protections for LGBTQ+ people, recognizing crimes motivated by bias against sexual orientation or gender identity as hate crimes.

6. Healthcare and Gender Identity:

- 1920: Access to gender-affirming healthcare was extremely limited, and transgender individuals faced significant barriers to obtaining necessary medical care.
- 2023: Advances in healthcare and increased awareness led to improved access to gender-affirming care and greater recognition of transgender rights. Many states implemented policies to ensure transgender individuals' access to healthcare and allow for gender marker changes on official documents. Unfortunately, many states have also restricted and prohibited transgender rights and care.

This comparison of yesterday and today, illustrates significant progress and change in societal attitudes, legal recognition, and rights protection for the LGBTQ+ community in the United States. Legal recognition, protections against discrimination, marriage equality, and societal acceptance have evolved

significantly, challenges and disparities persist, and the status of LGBTQ+ rights varies from state to state. The fight for full equality and inclusion continues to be a central issue for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies.

France both in 1923 as well as in 2023, remains far more evolved with LGBTQ+ rights than the United States. The French Revolution was marked by a spirit of liberation and equality, which extended to various aspects of society, including issues related to sexuality. In 1789, the National Constituent Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which stated that all individuals were entitled to the same rights and freedoms. While this declaration did not specifically address LGBTQ+ rights, it laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and equal legal framework. While the decriminalization of homosexuality was primarily a legal change, it also reflected evolving societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals. The decriminalization of homosexuality in France occurred on March 6, 1791, with the adoption of the Penal Code. Article 330 of this code explicitly repealed laws that had criminalized homosexual acts. The wording of Article 330 stated that "No one shall be prosecuted or persecuted for their opinions or beliefs; everything that is not forbidden by law is allowed, and no one can be constrained to do what it does not ordain." This legal change effectively ended the criminalization of same-sex sexual activity in France.

In France, LGBTQ+ rights have continued to evolve since then.

1. **Marriage Equality:** Same-sex couples have the same rights and legal recognition as opposite-sex couples in terms of marriage.

2. **Anti-Discrimination Laws:** France has implemented various anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBTQ individuals from discrimination in employment, housing, and public services. Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is prohibited.

3. **Adoption and Parenting:** Same-sex couples in France have the right to adopt children and access fertility treatments, making it possible for them to build families legally and with government support.

4. **Gender Identity:** France has made progress in recognizing and protecting the rights of transgender individuals. Laws have been enacted to make it easier for transgender people to change their gender designation on official documents.

5. **Education and Awareness:** France has implemented education programs and awareness campaigns to combat homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and promote LGBTQ acceptance and inclusion in schools and society.

6. **Access to Healthcare:** LGBTQ individuals in France have improved access to healthcare services, including gender-affirming care for transgender individuals.

7. **Hate Crime Protections:** Hate crime laws in France cover crimes motivated by bias against sexual orientation and gender identity, offering legal protection to LGBTQ individuals.

Paris in 1923 was a transformative and pivotal time for Josephine Baker. Here's a glimpse into what Paris was like for Josephine Baker in 1923: Josephine Baker had faced racial discrimination, persecution for her sexuality, and segregation in the United States. In Paris she found a tolerant and accepting environment. Paris was a thriving center for arts and culture. The city attracted artists,

writers, musicians, and performers from around the world, making it an ideal destination for a woman looking for a platform to showcase her talent. Without limitation, this iconic entertainer who would go on to achieve international fame and become a symbol of the Jazz Age.

At the famous Parisian cabarets and nightclubs, including the Folies Bergère, Baker embraced her sexuality, color and normalized both. These venues were known for their extravagant and avant-garde shows, and they provided Baker with the opportunity to develop her unique performance style. Her performances often featured exotic and provocative elements that resonated with the fascination for all things exotic that was prevalent in Paris at the time. Her dance routines, adorned with elaborate costumes and sometimes little more than a banana skirt, captivated audiences. Her performances were celebrated for their uniqueness, and she became a beloved figure in French society, achieving the ultimate honor within the Pantheon.

ENTERTAINMENT AND CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM

From the Vault: The Josephine Baker Story¹

The intersection of entertainment and civil rights law exists in different forms. Many decades ago, as African Americans were struggling to free themselves of Jim Crow policies, many migrated to different lines of trade and work in an attempt to achieve their full civil rights as Americans. The shackles of slavery and segregation forced many to the backrooms of society; there they find solace in music and entertainment. Entertainment called too many African Americans as a means to enjoy more of the fruits of the “American Dream” because the guardrails of racism, discrimination, and segregation limited their abilities across the United States. One of the more gifted entertainers who had the courage to stand up for herself and other African Americans was Josephine Baker.

Baker became an international star during the early 1950s who lived in a castle in France, wore Dior gowns in concerts, and, to her disappointment, became an unsupported threat to national security in the United States and, in particular, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). How did such a talented American become such a threat to the United States Government? Turning back the pages of history reveals some insight into the depths that African Americans continued to show their resolve to overcome petty, yet chronic racism in the United States, so,

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that equality could be enjoyed by all Americans. Baker stands out as one of the pillars of the civil rights movement in both France and the United States.

The early years

Born Freda Josephine McDonald (b. June 3, 1906 - St Louis, Missouri) who would professionally become known as Josephine Baker (per marriage), was the daughter of two entertainers, whose careers stalled in the segregated Midwest of the United States. Between the ages of 8 and 10, she was out of school, helping to support her family taking on odd jobs. As a child Baker developed a taste for flamboyant outfits and a style to make her famous. As an adolescent she became a dancer, touring at 16 with a dance troupe from Philadelphia. In 1923, with a love of dancing in her soul, she joined the chorus in a road company performing the musical comedy *Shuffle Along* and then moved to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance, where she advanced steadily through the show *Chocolate Dandies* on Broadway and the floor show of the Plantation Club. She married during that time touring, deciding to take her husband's last name. The legend of "Josephine Baker" was born.

During the Harlem Renaissance, Baker enjoined celebrating black life and art in Harlem. She became popular and a household name in the theater, which highlighted her distinct dancing style, lavish unique costumes, and the ability to keep an audience thrilled. The Harlem Renaissance was a great platform for Baker who used African themes and style for her performances, which pleased the mostly white audience. Life was thriving for Baker, as she showcased her talents, singing, dancing and even appearing in motion pictures released in Europe.

In 1925, Baker went to Paris to dance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in *La Revue Nègre* and introduced her dance style to France. She went on to become one of the most popular music-hall entertainers in France and achieved star billing at the Folies-Bergère, where she created a sensation by dancing seminude in a G-string

ornamented with bananas. Baker became a French citizen in 1937. She sang professionally for the first time in 1930, made her screen debut as a singer four years later in *Zouzou*, and made several more films before World War II curtailed her career.

When Adolf Hitler and the German Army invaded France during World War II, Baker took a stance. The days of basking in entertainment and dance were replaced by joining the fight against the Nazi regime which changed the landscape of France. Using her celebrity status, Baker aided French military officers by passing secrets she heard while performing in front of the Nazis, often transporting confidential information by writing in invisible ink on music sheets. During the German occupation of France, Baker worked with the Red Cross and the Résistance, and as a member of the Free French forces she entertained troops in Africa and the Middle East. She was later awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honour with the rosette of the Résistance.

After the war, much of Baker's energy was devoted to Les Milandes, her estate in southwestern France, from which she began in 1950 to adopt babies of all nationalities in the cause of what she defined as “an experiment in brotherhood” and her “rainbow tribe.” She adopted a total of 12 children.²

Returning to the United States

Baker voiced dreams of equality and acted against discrimination throughout her career. In 1951, Baker, having recently completed her work in the French Underground of World War II, decided to tour the United States. In 1952 she came to the Last Frontier Hotel located in Las Vegas, Nevada.

² Source “Josephine Baker, The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023



Though unknown at the time, Baker's appearance showcased the intersection of the financial profits, racism, world class entertainment, and desegregation movements embedded within the city's socio-political structure. Baker was well-aware of Las Vegas racism, as noted by the "clause" in her contract that stipulated certain

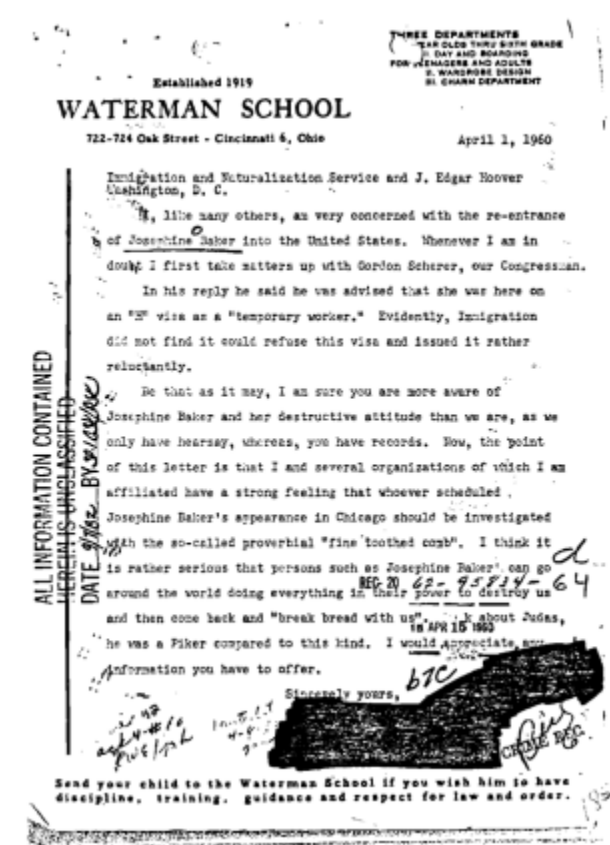
liberties not often given to Black Americans in the city. The entertainment industry in Las Vegas was just starting to grow with the city, yet Black celebrities faced discrimination within the same venues that they performed. Baker challenged these segregationist policies by demanding tables for her guests, be they white or Black, and by staying in a cottage on the premises of the hotel casino, a practice that was taboo within the city's tradition. Baker's challenge to racism in Las Vegas is known by those who have studied her history.³

The Federal Bureau of Investigation

Taking a stand against racism can attract supports and detractors. Having views of equality and fighting for the end of segregation, Baker was seen as a threat in the minds of the FBI. Files from the FBI that were released confirmed that she was under heavy investigation by the FBI. Baker's FBI File Number is 62-95834. Documents released revealed that Baker became much the center of tension from both white and Black Americans. She was criticized for standing up to make sure that African American entertainers were treated fairly and on equal terms as white entertainers. Her detractors were from both shades of the community. Attending

³ "How Josephine Banker Challenged Las Vegas Racism", Claytee White, May 3, 2022.

and performing in the United States, an African American wrote that it appeared to him that Baker's chief ambition in life was to make fabulous salaries, wear priceless gowns, marry European counts, and have Americans (Texans) arrested for calling her the N-word. She was further chided in a writing for daring to have African Americans treated fairly, yet in the view of others running to Paris to be treated like a human being without keeping the fight in the United States. Whites and Blacks wanted her to keep her place and, in the view of an African American writer, to copy other entertainers, such as Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and others to stay within their lane in the United States. The author wanted her to fight in a view that was acceptable as opposed to the way Baker wanted.



One individual who wrote to the FBI took exception to Baker's appearance and said that, "I and several organizations of which I am affiliated have strong feelings that whoever scheduled Josephine Baker's appearance in Chicago be investigated with the so-called proverbial "fine toothed comb". The writer added, "I think it is rather serious that persons such as Josephine Baker can go around the world using everything in their power to destroy us and then come back and "break bread with us".⁴

Another writer on December 19, 1951, wrote to J. Edgar Hoover about one of

⁴ FBI Vault: Letter dated April 1, 1960 written to J. Edgar Hoover, Washington, D.C.

Baker's return to the United States. The writer wrote: "When Josephine Baker came over on her last trip, she was delayed for many hours because she was trying to bring in a Russian maid. She was not permitted to do this. How do you like that? She won't even employ a Negro maid."

The sting of rejection by her home Country was traumatic, but it caused Baker to fight even harder. She never wavered in her fight for social justice and equality in the United States. Any suggestion of cowardice by Baker for living in Paris and occasionally returning to the United States was intellectually dishonest, factual wrong, and petty.

The March on Washington

In 1963, at the age of 57, Baker flew in from France, her adopted homeland, to appear before the largest audience in her career, the 250,000 gathered at the March on Washington.



Her speech detailed her life as a Black woman in the United States and abroad. She spoke just before Dr. Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" oration. Excerpts of her speech are set forth below, which revealed her thoughts, history and passions

for civil rights:

"Friends and family... you know I have lived a long time and I have come a long way. And you must know now that what I did, I did originally for myself. Then later, as these things began happening to me, I wondered if they were happening to you, and then I knew they must be. And I knew that you had no way to defend yourselves, as I had.

And as I continued to do the things I did, and to say the things I said, they began to beat me. Not beat me, mind you, with a club — but you

know, I have seen that done too – but they beat me with their pens, with their writings. And friends, that is much worse.

When I was a child and they burned me out of my home, I was frightened and I ran away. Eventually I ran far away. It was to a place called France. Many of you have been there, and many have not. But I must tell you, ladies and gentlemen, in that country I never feared. It was like a fairyland place.

And I need not tell you that wonderful things happened to me there. Now I know that all you children don't know who Josephine Baker is, but you ask Grandma and Grandpa and they will tell you. You know what they will say. "Why, she was a devil." And you know something...why, they are right. I was too. I was a devil in other countries, and I was a little devil in America too.

But I must tell you, when I was young in Paris, strange things happened to me. And these things had never happened to me before. When I left St. Louis a long time ago, the conductor directed me to the last car. And you all know what that means.

But when I ran away, yes, when I ran away to another country, I didn't have to do that. I could go into any restaurant I wanted to, and I could drink water anyplace I wanted to, and I didn't have to go to a colored toilet either, and I have to tell you it was nice, and I got used to it, and I liked it, and I wasn't afraid anymore that someone would shout at me and say, "Nigger, go to the end of the line." But you know, I rarely ever used that word. You also know that it has been shouted at me many times. . .

* * * *

And when I got to New York way back then, I had other blows – when they would not let me check into the good hotels because I was colored, or eat in certain restaurants. And then I went to Atlanta, and it was a horror to me. And I said to myself, My God, I am Josephine, and if they do this to me, what do they do to the other people in America?

You know, friends, that I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of

presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad. And when I get mad, you know that I open my big mouth. And then look out, 'cause when Josephine opens her mouth, they hear it all over the world.

So I did open my mouth, and you know I did scream, and when I demanded what I was supposed to have and what I was entitled to, they still would not give it to me.

So then they thought they could smear me, and the best way to do that was to call me a communist. And you know, too, what that meant. Those were dreaded words in those days, and I want to tell you also that I was hounded by the government agencies in America, and there was never one ounce of proof that I was a communist. But they were mad. They were mad because I told the truth. And the truth was that all I wanted was a cup of coffee. But I wanted that cup of coffee where I wanted to drink it, and I had the money to pay for it, so why shouldn't I have it where I wanted it?

* * * *

But you young people must do one thing, and I know you have heard this story a thousand times from your mothers and fathers, like I did from my mama. I didn't take her advice. But I accomplished the same in another fashion. You must get an education. You must go to school, and you must learn to protect yourself. And you must learn to protect yourself with the pen, and not the gun. Then you can answer them, and I can tell you—and I don't want to sound corny—but friends, the pen really is mightier than the sword.

I am not a young woman now, friends. My life is behind me. There is not too much fire burning inside me. And before it goes out, I want you to use what is left to light that fire in you. So that you can carry on, and so that you can do those things that I have done. Then, when my fires have burned out, and I go where we all go someday, I can be happy.

You know I have always taken the rocky path. I never took the easy one, but as I get older, and as I knew I had the power and the strength, I took that rocky path, and I tried to smooth it out a little. I wanted to make it easier for you. I want you to have a chance at what I had. But

I do not want you to have to run away to get it. And mothers and fathers, if it is too late for you, think of your children. Make it safe here so they do not have to run away, for I want for you and your children what I had.

Ladies and gentlemen, my friends and family, I have just been handed a little note, as you probably say. It is an invitation to visit the President of the United States in his home, the White House.

I am greatly honored. But I must tell you that a colored woman – or, as you say it here in America, a black woman – is not going there. It is a woman. It is Josephine Baker.

This is a great honor for me. Someday I want you children out there to have that great honor too. And we know that that time is not someday. We know that that time is now.

I thank you, and may god bless you. And may He continue to bless you long after I am gone.

Closing statement

Josephine Baker continued to fight racial injustices into the 1970s. God Bless Josephine Baker - an Entertainer and Civil Rights Activist. She did it all - her way!