

ALLENSWORTH: THE LEAST SUCCESSFUL ALL-BLACK RURAL COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

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By the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans were establishing themselves, at some level, in every one of the eight counties of the California's San Joaquin Valley. However, blacks in California often encountered familiar vestiges of racism in the form of Jim Crow, Sundown Towns, restrictive covenants, and the Ku Klux Klan.¹ As elsewhere, these and other factors contributed to the choices made by African Americans concerning where they lived and worked. In some cases, this choice included self-segregated communities. In addition to all-black neighborhoods in cities and towns, several all-black communities, what I describe as *colonies* and *townships* sprang up across the rural landscape.

By 1879, with the collapse of Reconstruction, many African Americans, known as Exodusters, began following leaders like Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, and others, into the West to establish new all-black communities.² Into the first two decades of the twentieth century, promoters blanketed the south with literature enticing blacks to "Go West!"³

¹ Jim Crow is a blanket term applied to various discriminatory practices, and policies, directed at African Americans such as segregated waiting rooms, drinking fountains, and restaurants. The name is often attributed to Tom T. Rice, a popular black-face minstrel artist who performed throughout the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century as Jim Crow. Sundown Towns, or Sundown Policies, are *de facto* or *de jure* restrictions on African Americans that required them to be out of a town's city limits by a specific time each day – usually sundown. A sign at the city limits or verbal threats by residents, or local law enforcement, often made these policies clear. Restrictive covenants include conditions in leases, rental agreements, or deeds that placed legal restrictions concerning who could, or could not, rent, or purchase, a property. These could be exclusionary or inclusionary.

² Walter L. Fleming, "Pap' Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus," *The American Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (1909): 63.

³ Eleanor Mason Ramsey, "Allensworth-a Study in Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977), 36.

Many African Americans who later arrived in California, especially during the Dust Bowl years, have connections to one or more of the earlier colonization efforts further east. For example, Willie Gene Johnson, who arrived in Kern County in 1934, lived in Boley, Oklahoma, as a child, and attended the University in Langston, Oklahoma.⁴

Race Men, following in the footsteps of Singleton and others, sought to develop new all-black communities in Central California. These *Colonies*, often referred to as *Race Towns*, were planned communities with expectations to develop businesses, industries, schools, and organizations free from outside influences and followed the model established by Singleton and Columbus M. Johnson.⁵ Such efforts were often highly organized by corporate entities that sought outside investment and attempted to oversee the promotion, construction, and development of these communities. Turn of the century boosterism, support by African American leaders and intellectuals, and the differing philosophies thinkers Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois contributed to these efforts.⁶ The goal of the promoters of these towns was to build self-sufficient communities.

There were several early attempts at black colonization in Central California. As early as 1859, a group of Stockton businessmen formed a Savings and Land Association

⁴ Clara L. Johnson, "Dust Bowl Diaries: Life Could Be Rough for Black Okies - Willie Gene Johnson," *Bakersfield Californian*, July 7, 2006. Clara L. Johnson, "Dust Bowl Diaries: Life Could Be Rough for Black Okies - Willie Gene Johnson " *Bakersfield Californian*, July 7, 2006.

⁵ For more about the African American townships developed by Benjamin Singleton, see Fleming and Roy Garvin, "Benjamin, or 'Pap,' Singleton and His Followers," *Journal of Negro History* 33, no. 1 (1948).

⁶ Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, Yale Western Americana Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 265. See also Lawrence B. de Graaf and others, *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), 156-157. It is important to note that both Washington and Du Bois promoted the idea of separatist communities for African Americans, however, each of them saw the purpose of these communities differently. Whereas Washington viewed them as a path toward assimilation, Du Bois saw them as an opportunity to develop a unique, separate culture.

and sold shares to collect one hundred thousand dollars with which to purchase land. African Americans from the valley, the Bay Area, and elsewhere invested.⁷ Similarly, thirty years later on December 15, 1891, a group of African American financiers from the Bay Area and Texas formed the Colored Colonization Association of Fresno County with the singular purpose of accumulating one hundred thousand dollars to invest in land for a black colony in that county.⁸ The Articles of Incorporation defined the group's purpose:

To form colonies of coloured people... and to subdivide parcels... into such tracts as may be suitable... Also to bring coloured people for Colonization purposes from other states.⁹

These two projects are the earliest known colonization projects in the valley. Although initial investors bought shares, it appears that little resulted from these early attempts to establish organized, all-black colonies in the valley.

In 1908, five African Americans in Los Angeles established the California Colony and Home Promotion Association to promote a race colony in southern Tulare County.¹⁰ Allensworth, as this community was to be known, was one of two neighboring communities initiated by the white developer, William O'Bryan, president of the Pacific Farming Company. Allensworth was situated on highly alkali soil. Although the original plan for the community called for both wells and a water system, neither was ever delivered to Allensworth by the developers.¹¹

⁷ Lapp..

⁸ *Articles of Incorporation of the Colored Colonization Association of Fresno County Filed in the Office of the County Clerk of Fresno County, December 15, 1891*, 1891. A photocopy of this document is available in the Special Collections of the Henry Madden Library, at California State University, Fresno.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1919), 154.

¹¹ Ramsey, 50-53.

The establishment of a *Race Town* was to provide a safe haven in which blacks could develop and exhibit skills needed to survive and succeed within the broader multi-ethnic society. Free from the restrictions of racism and Jim Crow, African Americans could demonstrate that they were capable of participation in the larger social, educational, economic, and political spheres.¹² The town of Allensworth, therefore, was, from the outset, a social experiment.

Several settlers who participated in the building of Allensworth had been involved with the Exoduster movement elsewhere, including Joshua Singleton, the son of “Pap” Singleton.¹³ Singleton arrived with his wife and eleven-year-old son, Henry, in 1912.¹⁴ James Alexander Hackett, who had taken a large group of African Americans from North Carolina to the San Francisco Bay Area, saw the potential of the new colony and built a house in Allensworth, in 1910. Upon his retirement in 1917, he moved with his family to the colony, where he remained until his death in 1932.¹⁵

The Pacific Farming Company subdivided Allensworth into approximately eleven hundred city lots and one-, five-, and ten-acre rural parcels. While the fertile land surrounding the nearby community of Alpaugh sold for thirty dollars per acre, the alkali soil in the Allensworth area was priced at one hundred and ten dollars an acre. By 1913, Pacific Farming, having earned a large return on its Allensworth investment, withdrew from the venture. Rather than provide the promised water systems, the principals simply assigned the (now worthless) stock in the two water companies to the residents of Allensworth and transferred the problem, and any associated debt, to the town.¹⁶ Joshua Singleton’s son, Henry, quotes him as saying:

¹² Ibid., 15.

¹³ de Graaf and others, 156.

¹⁴ Ramsey, 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82-83.

¹⁶ Ibid., 57-63.

The venture was a skin game, plain and simple—White men cheating Black men. Pacific Farming did not intend to honor the contract, and the Race could not command the political support to make it do so.¹⁷

By 1914, the public utility company still had not extended electricity to Allensworth, and used a recession as an excuse to further delay doing so.¹⁸ Within a year, the Santa Fe Railroad installed a spur line to Alpaugh and bypassed Allensworth.¹⁹ Six years after the creation of the colony, the town still had limited water, no power, and had lost rail service.²⁰

Population figures for Allensworth are difficult to ascertain. Records for both the 1910 and 1920 census do not appear reliable.²¹ Eleanor Ramsey compiled, from a variety of sources, estimates for the population of the colony. By late summer of the first year, according to her estimates, there were as many as thirty-five families in Allensworth. By the beginning of 1911, there were approximately eighty residents, with the count exceeding one hundred within a year. Ramsey concluded that the largest possible population, at any one time, was somewhere between one hundred and twenty and two hundred individuals. She claims that the population peaked during 1914 (at about one hundred and sixty). She pointed out that the population was in a constant state of flux, as people moved in and out of the colony. As of 1920, after almost ten years, the population of Allensworth probably never exceeded one hundred and fifty settlers.²² By 1930, the population of Allensworth dropped to just forty-four.²³ Students who wanted to further their education, and residents who sought gainful employment, found it necessary to

¹⁷ "Henry Singleton Interview with Eleanor Mason Ramsey," (1975). cited in Ramsey, 155-158.

¹⁸ Ramsey, 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

²² de Graaf and others, 156.

²³ *Ibid.*

relocate, temporarily or permanently, to other communities.²⁴ One early Allensworth pioneer described his job search:

Upon arrival in Allensworth I immediately started looking for a job. Alpaugh, Earlimart, Corcoran, Terra Bella, Porterville... wherever I went the reception was the same. Until this day the signs which almost seemed to come at me from the windows, business after business are still graphic and humiliating: *No negroes... Filipinos... Mexicans... Dogs*. After a few weeks of this I struck out... I headed south to Bakersfield.²⁵

A few Allensworth farmers were able to make a solid living from the land; however, most residents combined part-time or seasonal work with part-time farming.²⁶

Beyond sheer numbers, Allensworth sought to establish and maintain community. Considered by many to be even more important than the church, the school appears to be the central institutional factor in establishing the community of Allensworth.²⁷ The school unified the town and rural families. As the largest single structure, and not associated with other factors that could divide (such as religion), it functioned as neutral ground, socially and civically. Used for political and social gatherings, the school bound individuals to the community. The Farmer's Bureau, the Women's Progressive Improvement Association, and other groups, used the school facility to hold their meetings.

Another institute crucial in the minds of Allensworth residents was the local branch of the Tulare County Library. Like many of Allensworth's neighbors, the library started out as little more than a shelf in the school where the county library system rotated out a quarterly allotment of books. By 1913, Allensworth built and furnished a separate

²⁴ Ramsey, 138.

²⁵ "Norvin Powell Interview with Eleanor Mason Ramsey," (Tulare, CA: 1976). Cited in Ramsey, 155-158.

²⁶ Ramsey, 150.

²⁷ Ibid., 116.

reading room for its small library. Book donations came from as far away as North Dakota, the county provided tables, chairs, and oil lamps, and Ethel Hall became the first Allensworth librarian. Regular library service to Allensworth continued until late 1943.²⁸

With Col. Allensworth's ties to the Tuskegee Institute, it is not surprising that the town actively campaigned to establish a state industrial school within the colony. The establishment of such a school was considered a "critical stage in their community building process."²⁹ Besides the direct revenue from the state, the college would have provided training and employment to residents and been a magnet for colonization and commercial investment.³⁰ The bill to establish a polytechnic institute in Tulare County was introduced to the state legislature in 1915.³¹ The most visible opposition to an all-black institute of higher learning centered upon preventing a return of school segregation in California. Opponents painted the separatist nature of the school as a civil rights issue.³² The measure was defeated, and the school was never built.³³

By the time the California Department of Water Resources determined that Allensworth's water supply contained unacceptable levels of arsenic, in the early 1930s, just thirty-four families still lived within the colony.³⁴ Their departure marked the end. Allensworth was one of the last endeavors of the Exoduster movement. Based on a separatist philosophy that stressed the ideals of self-sufficiency, the importance of education, and a focus on community building, the goals of Allensworth were lofty. However, it was never possible to achieve most of those lofty goals. The town was

²⁸ Ibid., 125-128.

²⁹ Ibid., 170.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 175-178.

³² Ibid., 184.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 189.

plagued from the outset by neglect from the developer, which resulted in a domestic water supply that could never support the town. Alkali soil, the lack of access to agricultural water, and other local conditions made it difficult to support small-scale farming efforts. Racism and economic factors limited employment opportunities in neighboring communities. Economic conditions created by the loss of revenue when rail service was moved to Alpaugh limited economic progress within the community. The dream faded against economic reality. Never compatible with the economic realities encountered by the pioneers of Allensworth, the principles of self-sufficiency actually became another factor that contributed to the failure of the planned community. In fact, Allensworth's self-sufficiency is an oxymoron. Dependent upon developers, the railroad, state and county agencies, and outside employers from the outset, the pioneers had little, if any, control over their destiny. The model of a freestanding all-black community, in the San Joaquin Valley in the twentieth century may have failed because it tried to be, and do, too much.

Allensworth was not the only rural African American community in the state. Across the San Joaquin Valley, numerous enclaves of African Americans developed long-standing communities built upon far less lofty goals and expectations.

The second form of African American community that developed in the San Joaquin Valley is what I refer to as a *township*. Unlike the self-contained, planned communities envisioned by the promoters of Allensworth, *townships* grew organically. Never intended to be self-sufficient, each rural settlement, of homes, businesses and churches, developed out of unique circumstances. Many townships developed because exclusionary practices, such as restrictive housing covenants and sundown towns, forced blacks beyond the edge of town to dusty patches.

According to historian James N. Gregory, the largest migrations of African Americans into the Central Valley coincided with the Southern Exodus, which began in the 1910s and 1920s, and continued in successive waves through the 1960s.³⁵ Agricultural concerns recruited black individuals and families, especially from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, in the early decades of the twentieth century.³⁶ Most townships, established during the years of the Dust Bowl through World War II, can be linked directly to the expansion of Cotton Culture in the San Joaquin Valley.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, between 1900 and 1920, the total African American population of the San Joaquin Valley doubled. Over the course of the next two decades, that number doubled every ten years. By 1950, those figures doubled every five years. By mid-century, cotton acreage accounted for large areas of Kern, Kings, and Tulare Counties. Kings and Tulare Counties experienced an almost ten-fold increase in African American population between 1920 and 1950.

In some cases, townships developed primarily along stem family migration patterns, wherein early arrivals functioned as anchors and guides to family members, and occasionally neighbors and friends who came to the area later. With the loss of jobs in the wartime manufacturing centers in Southern California and the Bay Area, many Southern African Americans sought out family members who already lived in the San Joaquin Valley rather than return to the South.³⁷ Cookseyville, for example, began as a small family farm outside of Atwater. Over the course of a decade, family members migrated to

³⁵ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 11; Jack Temple Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): 585-600.

³⁶ Kirby: 589-591.

³⁷ Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: Land of Hope Is Sown with Tragedy," *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2002, A18.

the property where they erected additional homes.³⁸ As one person who grew up in one of the black townships of the San Joaquin Valley explained:

The rest of the family was all out here... so, they prolly told my dad they could find him something to do—find him work. Plus, at the time, his dad was providing him with a place to stay. So, now you have a place to stay while you find work... and so you ain't just totally coming out just totally blind. You got somewhere to go. You got a house to put your family up in... and then, you got relatives all up and down the street.³⁹

The earliest known black township in the San Joaquin Valley, the Bowles Colored Colony, sits four miles west of Fowler. Established around 1900, Bowles, which still stands amid the farmland of Fresno County, has sustained up to thirty African Americans.⁴⁰ W. W. Eason and his wife from Atlanta, Georgia money he earned as a ranch hand and she as a laundress, to purchase land in Bowles to raise peaches and grapes.

Wellington Pilkinton, Jr. from Richmond, Virginia, was the first African American in the region to market dried peaches and raisins and was an early member of the local raisin association. In 1903, his parents, both former slaves, purchased a small farm adjacent to their son's 100 acres at the Bowles Colony.⁴¹ The younger Pilkinton donated a parcel of land to the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.).⁴²

The church was central to almost every black township in California. Rural areas of Kings and Tulare counties boast over thirty-five African American churches that

³⁸ "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Esther Brooks Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977).

⁴¹ Ruth Lang, *Wellington Pilkinton* (Fresno, CA: Fresno City & County Historical Society Archives, 2005).

⁴² "Wellington Pilkinton Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977).

continue to serve the needs of rural blacks.⁴³ Lanare, South Dos Palos, and Fairmead all include within their communities a minimum of two African American churches.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Shilo Church of God and Christ in Pixley provides services for a tiny congregation of African Americans living in and around Pixley, Teviston, and Allensworth, while the Church of God in Christ maintains a congregation of over a hundred in Stratford, a small town of approximately thirteen hundred people, in Southern Kings County.⁴⁵

During the Depression, many of the black farmers in Bowles lost their land and subsequently moved into Fresno where they took jobs in construction, domestic service, and other more stable vocations.⁴⁶

Teviston's population resulted directly from the need for farm labor. Three contributors were Walter Irons, a white sheriff in Oklahoma; his younger brother Gus, who ran a labor camp in the Tulare Lake Basin; and a black bus driver named Robert "Boots" Parker. Gus Irons promised a steady stream of labor to the largest Central California landowners.⁴⁷ His brother, the sheriff of McCurtain County, Oklahoma, guaranteed safe passage to blacks from his county who wanted to get away from the never-ending debt of sharecropping. Thirty-five dollars was the fare to the San Joaquin

⁴³ Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002, A25.

⁴⁴ This count was determined by examining phone directories and on-line yellow and white page searches for churches in these communities. The majority of the African American churches include denominations of Baptists, Methodists, Churches of God in Christ, or Pentecostals. Several of these formerly all black communities now feature Spanish-language, non-Catholic churches, indicating shifts in population. See "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

⁴⁵ Arax, "Land of Hope."

⁴⁶ "Eva Bell Cowlings Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977).

⁴⁷ Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003). 258.

Valley. Thirty-two times, beginning in 1948, Parker, a former black bootlegger, picked up groups of African Americans on the steps of the county courthouse to begin the fifteen-hundred-mile trip. Under the cover of darkness, he picked up other escaping sharecroppers across Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma at secret rendezvous in fields, wooded areas or under bridges.⁴⁸ Other labor contractors like Mozell Stokes, Cowboy Williams, or Bubba Lee transported large numbers of African Americans to the San Joaquin Valley from Oklahoma on flatbed trucks.⁴⁹ Eventually, “Boots” Parker, like many of those he transported across the country, settled in a rundown shack in Teviston.⁵⁰

Near the end of 1959, Teviston finally installed a water pump atop a recently dug, deep-water well to provide, for the first time, water to the more than three hundred residents of the dusty village. Teviston residents had carried water from the nearby towns of Pixley and Earlimart, in milk cans, drums, and buckets.⁵¹ Today, a few of the African American settlers remain in Teviston. Hispanic farm workers have replaced blacks, both in the fields and as the majority population of their small community.⁵²

Labor contractors also brought many of the residents to another black township in Kings County.⁵³ Scores of the African American field hands who worked for J. G. Boswell and other large concerns originally lived in a labor camp at one end of Corcoran. White locals simply called the area “Nigger Town.”⁵⁴ Saloons and juke joints, illegal gambling, brothels, and a couple of churches were scattered among the tents and tarpaper shacks on that side of town. However, the camp did not provide the sort of life many of

⁴⁸ Arax, "A Lost Tribe's Journey," A24.

⁴⁹ Arax and Wartzman, *The King of California*.262.

⁵⁰ Arax, "A Lost Tribe's Journey," A24.

⁵¹ "The Gift," *Time*, December 28, 1959.

⁵² Arax, "Land of Hope."

⁵³ Arax and Wartzman, *The King of California*, 258.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

the Black Okies came to California for. Families who wanted a better life moved across town to form a new black township.

Initially dubbed Boot Hill by the residents of Corcoran, this township sprang up on forty acres just outside of Corcoran. Edwin Matheny, a travelling salesman from Tulare, sold the land to African American clients for a low cash down payment and reasonable financing terms. He moved in houses that were available that needed to be moved to clear the way for highway construction. Howard Toney purchased two such houses for his property.⁵⁵ However, the homes had no running water. As with other black townships, the residents of Boot Hill had to carry water in milk cans and buckets from a single spigot in Corcoran. A few homes did have some electrical wiring, mostly for a few lights, or to power a small well pump. Almost all of that wiring was the handiwork of Toney.

In the summer of 1964, Toney began the process of bringing running water to the homes of his neighbors. Federal assistance money, through the War on Poverty program, was available to help the nation's poorest populations, and the people of Boot Hill definitely qualified. Toney and his neighbors hoped to demonstrate local support for the project by enlisting the city of Corcoran. Hoping to get the city to install less than a mile of water mains from the edge of town to the black township, he and his supporters approached city officials. Corcoran was willing to allow the black enclave to connect to the municipal water system; however, the city was not disposed to provide any assistance to make it happen. Shortly after, Toney and his neighbors formed the Sunny Acres Water District, which received a forty-six thousand dollar federal loan to install municipal water to the black township—newly renamed Sunny Acres. The city of Corcoran eventually installed water mains halfway to the black community. Although Corcoran eventually annexed the Mexican American neighborhood on the outskirts of town, to this day, Sunny

⁵⁵ Ibid., 272.

Acres remains separate and apart from Corcoran.⁵⁶ Maybe, J. G. Boswell, whose agricultural empire is centered in Corcoran, was right when he said, in 1999, “Blacks? We don’t really have any blacks in this town.”⁵⁷

Just as with Teviston, Lanare is losing its unique, African American make-up. Hispanics now make up a majority of the population in this little hamlet, just four miles west of Riverdale. Littered along the edge of two miles of Mt. Whitney Avenue and partly up the side roads in southern Fresno County, this dusty little collection of homes, trailers, three churches, and a mini-mart was once home to a much larger population of African Americans. Today, over one hundred blacks make up almost 20 percent of Lanare’s residents. Whereas the community once featured juke joints and illegal games of poker and dice, today it is little more than a sleepy, dusty backwater for farm workers and the poorest of the rural poor. On one of the three north-south roads that cut across Lanare sits the small, aging, ramshackle Lanare community center, surrounded by a dirt yard and a chain link fence. In contrast, the predominately-white town of Riverdale sports a recently built, large, freshly painted community center, with trim lawns and weed-free flowerbeds. It is impossible to ignore the stark differences between the two communities.

Named after an early landowner, L. A. Nares, Lanare grew after the Second World War as labor contractors brought in African Americans, primarily from Arkansas and Oklahoma. As with communities in Kings, Tulare, and Kern Counties, these contractors initially focused on field hands to work cotton.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., 285.

⁵⁷ J. G. Boswell, quoted in Ibid., 19-20.

⁵⁸ , Personal Communication, by Robert Powell, June 23,, Personal Communication with Author. Fresno CA. Most of the details concerning Lanare are taken from a conversation with Dr. Powell. Powell’s grandparents moved to nearby Riverdale, in the 1870s. After returning to the area, following military service in World War II, his father purchased a business in Lanare that seasonally employed many African American residents. Dr. Powell, himself, worked for his father and grew up knowing many of the blacks from this township.

For decades, the bulk of the residents lived in converted busses, tarpaper lean-tos, and shacks, with no water, on the land on the north side of Mt. Whitney Avenue. Until the mid-1960s, most of the black children attended the small Binder Elementary School, west of Lanare. After it closed, the children began attending school in near-by Riverdale. Clustered among the homes were a few businesses: a bar, owned by a one-armed man named Jack; a welding shop; and a market run by Willie Brown. South of the road, on land with water, was the largest business—Powell's Warehouse. It had been a lumberyard before Dr. Robert Powell's father purchased it after World War II. Powell converted it into a grain warehouse. Many of the residents of Lanare found seasonal work in the warehouse or driving trucks during the two grain harvesting seasons. Across the road east of Powell's, sat the Rodeo Café, a small diner and bar frequented during the week by local farmers. In the evenings and weekends, local blacks cranked up the jukebox, and the Rodeo Café became the center of Lanare's nightlife. Illegal gambling, usually in the form of a long-standing crap game, flourished in the barn behind the Rodeo. Next door, the Lanare Café was known for some of the best Mexican food in the district.

Most of the African American residents of Lanare worked agricultural jobs close to home. This included picking tomatoes and other vegetables, chopping and picking cotton, or working for Powell's or at the nearby turkey farm. During agricultural seasons, these diverse activities provided reasonably steady employment for many Lanare residents. During the early 1970s, community development funds became available to some of the most impoverished areas of California, and Lanare residents built houses, or moved in mobile homes, drilled wells, dug septic tanks, and generally improved the quality of life. Prior to that time, like the residents of Teviston and other black townships, Lanare residents toted water across Mt. Whitney Avenue from Powell's Warehouse and

other businesses that allowed them access to a water spigot. Lanare remains poor to this day.

Racism, according to Powell, existed in Riverdale, the predominately-white town east of Lanare, but it was maintained at subtle levels. Throughout his school years, blacks and whites attended Riverdale High School without incident. When he ran for class president, in the mid-1970s, his campaign manager was a young black woman from Lanare.

In 1943, Sid and Olevia Cooksey, along with their adult son Timothy and their son-in-law "Doc" Wilson, arrived in California to work in the Bay Area shipyards. The family settled, temporarily, in Richmond.⁵⁹ During a family drive down Highway 99, Sid purchased several acres of farmland, outside the Central Valley town of Atwater. Family members believe that Wilson, Sid, and Drew Cooksey paid cash for the property, as it was difficult for African Americans to get credit in Atwater at the time. One family member indicated that in order for a black man to borrow as little as one hundred dollars, the local bank required a co-signer.⁶⁰

At the close of the War in 1945, Sid, Olevia, and Timothy returned to Fordyce, Arkansas. Wilson and his wife, Edna (Cooksey) moved to the Atwater property. Sid Cooksey was alarmed as Ku Klux Klan activities intensified in Arkansas.⁶¹ To escape the Klan and provide economic opportunities to their children and grandchildren, Sid and Olevia returned to the Atwater property along with Timothy, the youngest son, his new wife Myrtle, and several other family members.⁶²

⁵⁹ Diana Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville," *Fresno Bee*, February 8, 2007.

⁶⁰ "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁶¹ Marcum.

⁶² "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

Over the next decade, six of Sid and Olevia's seven children and their families moved to the family compound, which was called Cookseyville by local residents. In 1956, Ozie Cooksey and his children were the last to arrive from Arkansas. This brought the population of Cookseyville to around one hundred people, and the community included a nearby church and businesses.⁶³

Ozie, Timothy, and Cornelius Cooksey found local employment in the construction industry, away from the compound. Between construction jobs, many of the men worked agricultural jobs to supplement their family's income. The older men also hunted and fished together, with the product of their labors adding to the community's stores of meat and fish.⁶⁴

About half of the Cooksey property remained agricultural. Sid and other family members raised hogs and occasionally, a few head of cattle.⁶⁵ Each family grew a large garden, chickens, and several fruit trees that provided produce for the families. Some families also raised rabbits. Black-eyed peas, peanuts, corn and other staples were dried or canned.⁶⁶ Cooksey children often went to a nearby thicket to pick wild blackberries.⁶⁷ Individual families exchanged surpluses, and shared in activities such as operating smokehouses, butchering, and distributing shared pork and beef.⁶⁸

For a while, Icy Ford, one of Sid and Olevia's daughters, operated a country market at the intersection that marked the southeast corner of the Cookseyville compound. "Doc" Wilson built the building, and Icy operated it, with occasional help

⁶³ Timothy still serves as pastor of the church. Several family members remain in the congregation, even though they now live in Atwater or other nearby communities.

⁶⁴ "Pearl Kemp Interview with Hector Hernandez," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

⁶⁵ "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁶⁶ "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

from other family members, for many years.⁶⁹ In addition to selling dry and canned goods, candy, and other non-perishable items, the store provided an outlet for agricultural surpluses, such as eggs and garden produce. As the only market in the area, it served both the Cooksey compound and its rural neighbors.⁷⁰ Some third-generation Cookseys remember, as children, selling their aunt freshly picked blackberries to earn enough money to buy a cupcake and a Grape Nehi.⁷¹ In the early 1960s, Icy's health deteriorated, and the family closed the store.⁷²

Most of the Cooksey family attended a small church up the road, founded by Elder Jeremy Jeffrey. The church served a larger African American population, as other blacks from Atwater and Castle Air Force Base also attended services. As Jeffrey and his wife got older, Timothy and Myrtle Cooksey provided care and assistance. Upon his death, he deeded the church and adjacent house to Timothy, who carries on as pastor of the church.⁷³

By the 1970s members of the third generation left Cookseyville to go to college or pursue careers or vocations. The property was not large enough to accommodate additional homes, so many moved into Atwater, or Merced, while a few traveled farther from Cookseyville.⁷⁴ As the children of Sid and Olevia began to get older and die, the population of Cookseyville dwindled. Some of the second generation moved off the property to live in newer homes, with their children, or in nursing homes. As they left, they either sold their property to relatives or rented their homes to non-family members.

⁶⁹ "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁷⁰ "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007). See also "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

Eventually, members of the third generation began selling off the property.⁷⁵ By 2008, Timothy and Myrtle, along with their daughter-in-law Louise, were the last remaining Cookseys in Cookseyville.

Sid and Olevia, both children of slaves, married in 1903. Many third and fourth generation Cookseys, most of whom grew up in Cookseyville, have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and other professionals.⁷⁶ In just a few generations, this small rural African American township took one family from slavery to the so-called “American Dream.”

In addition to Bowles, Teviston, Sunny Acres, and Cookseyville, other unique African American townships developed around the valley. These include Fairmead, between Madera and Chowchilla; Home Garden, south of Hanford; and South Dos Palos. These townships also supported their own churches and small businesses. They all relied upon neighboring communities, to varying degrees, for basic amenities and services.

Mention all-black rural communities to anyone, and if that person knows anything, he will respond, “Allensworth.” However, the story of Central California’s rural African American communities neither begins, nor ends, with that failed colony. There is a rich history of vibrant black communities scattered across the landscape of California’s largest agricultural regions for more than a century. But, beyond history, remnants of these townships continue to live beyond the boundaries of most people’s understanding of life in the valley.

⁷⁵ "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

⁷⁶ "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

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