

## ABSTRACT

### COOKSEYVILLE AND LANARE: TWO RURAL CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN TOWNSHIPS

This paper compares two twentieth century African American enclaves hidden in the agricultural landscape of California's Central Valley. These townships, like about a dozen other unique black communities, arose during the period of the Southern Exodus and are overlooked in the historical record.

Unlike planned colonies, such as Allensworth, townships, like Cookseyville and Lanare, grew organically outside existing towns. Although some of these communities are tied to California's Agribusiness empires, each community claims its own story, and a unique history.

Few researchers have ever studied these townships. Michael Eissinger is one of only two scholars to have written about this topic. Utilizing first person oral-history interviews, newspaper clippings, census records, and other primary sources, this paper begins to shed light on the lives of African Americans living in the rural landscape of the San Joaquin Valley and California's agricultural heritage.

## COOKSEYVILLE AND LANARE: TWO RURAL CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN TOWNSHIPS

The phrase “farm worker” in California’s great agricultural valleys seldom conjures images akin to familiar visions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century field hands in the American South. California’s agricultural workforce is generally perceived to be composed primarily of Hispanics rather than the descendants of former southern, black slaves. As recently as 1986, the late San Joaquin Valley geographer, and UC Berkeley professor, James Parsons commented that:

[African Americans are]... confined to the large valley cities. I know of *no black rural enclaves*, nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work. A small black colonization project in Kings County was organized in 1910, but it fell victim to bad water and alkali. The area is now a state park.<sup>1</sup>

However, Allensworth, the failed colony to which Dr. Parson refers, was not the only such African American community outside of California’s metropolitan regions. In truth, there have been more than a dozen historically all-black communities, usually just beyond the city limits of all-white or predominately-white agricultural towns scattered across the San Joaquin Valley. Most of these communities had larger populations, and survived longer than Allensworth (1908-1925). The bulk grew in locations where Southern blacks, recruited to work the cotton fields and fruit orchards of the San Joaquin Valley, between the 1980s and the 1960s, sought to establish new homes. Unlike the self-contained, planned community envisioned by the promoters of Allensworth, these *townships* grew organically with neither a plan nor lofty goals. Never intended to

---

<sup>1</sup> James J. Parsons, "A Geographer Looks at the San Joaquin Valley," *Geographical Review* 76, no. 4 (1986): 379. Emphasis added.

be self-sufficient, each of these rural settlements, usually consisting of homes and an occasional business or church, developed out of unique circumstances. Most townships arose because of exclusionary practices that barred them from living elsewhere. Restrictive housing covenants and *sundown town* practices forced blacks beyond the edge of town to dusty patches where they were often out of sight and out of mind. 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. Although restrictive covenants were determined by the United States Supreme Court to be unconstitutional in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, in 1948, California voters passed Proposition 14, in 1964, reinstating such practices. The California Supreme Court overturned the proposition, in 1966, ending the practice.

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.<sup>2</sup> Agricultural concerns recruited black individuals and families, especially from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Although Mexican migrants formed the largest single ethnic group

---

<sup>2</sup> 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. and Jack Temple Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): 585-600.

<sup>3</sup> Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," 589-91.

working in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley, by 1920, recruitment of blacks—especially for work in the cotton fields—continued through the 1940s.<sup>4</sup> The largest inward migration of African Americans occurred between 1930 and 1950 driven by the Dust Bowl, wartime manufacturing (and the subsequent loss of those jobs at war's end), and an increase in production of San Joaquin cotton.

Except for the Bowles Colony, near modern-day Fowler, established in the 1890s, all of these townships, developed during the first half of the twentieth century. Tens of thousands of southern blacks arrived in the valley during the years of the Dust Bowl and following World War II. The migration of these *Black Okies* is directly linked to the massive expansion of cotton culture in the San Joaquin Valley.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most important factors that drew significant migration of African Americans was the development of large-scale agriculture, or *agribusiness*, in the San Joaquin Valley. Valley farmers accumulated vast amounts of arable land into large, diversified holdings. Crops included grains, citrus, grapes, and vegetables. Vast expanses of rangeland supported massive cattle herds.<sup>6</sup>

One of the earliest crops grown in the valley, and one that would become extremely profitable, was cotton. Harvey Skiles, a former southerner, may have planted the earliest stand of cotton on Kern Island (site of the modern city of

---

<sup>4</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002, A25.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Glass Cleland, *From Wilderness to Empire: A History of California*, ed. John Russell McCarthy (Los Angeles: Powell Publishing Company, 1962), 178.

Bakersfield) as early as 1862.<sup>7</sup> In 1865, Solomon and Philo Jewett initiated one of the earliest commercial attempts to grow cotton in Kern County. Using seed imported from Tennessee and Mexico, the first crop was ginned on-site with the resulting cotton fibers sent to a mill in Oakland.<sup>8</sup> The initial labor force for the Jewett brothers consisted mainly of Chinese laborers who earned a monthly salary between twenty-two and thirty dollars. An “experienced superintendent from the South” supervised these Chinese farm laborers.<sup>9</sup> Although this early venture into cotton culture produced a commercial crop, the supply of cheap, efficient labor remained a problem. A Visalia newspaper reporter wrote that it was a “pity we do not have the labor and capital necessary to make this crop a success.”<sup>10</sup> In 1871, farmers planted a thousand acres of cotton in Kern County; however, the crop failed to yield a profit due to “high production costs and a labor shortage.”<sup>11</sup> The 1872 report of the California State Agriculture Society stated:

California was naturally a cotton-raising state. Indeed, if California had not been admitted to the Union as a free state, there can be no doubt that long ere now we would have had large numbers of cotton plantations, worked by slaves brought here from the Southern States by men who were able to discover the superior advantages of our soil and climate for cotton culture. The only question that remained in their minds was whether its culture would be profitable, considering the condition of our labor supply and the rate of wages.<sup>12</sup>

Over the course of the next few years, stands of cotton were planted in the counties of Kern, Tulare (including what is now Kings County), and Fresno;

---

<sup>7</sup> Annie R. Mitchell, *The Way It Was: The Colorful History of Tulare County* (Fresno, CA: Valley Publishers, 1976), 97.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> , *Visalia Weekly Delta*, June 1, 1867.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, *The Way It Was*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> "Transactions of the California State Agriculture Society," (1872), 249.

however, labor shortages continued to plague farmers who planted this labor-intensive crop.<sup>13</sup> By 1881, several planters experimented with cotton production in Kern County. Howell & Sons farms claimed that they were able to produce cotton comparable to any grown in Georgia with just one application of irrigation water.<sup>14</sup>

To address the labor problem, almost sixty black laborers from Memphis arrived on the train in Bakersfield in March 1884.<sup>15</sup> Their employer, one of the largest commercial agricultural concerns in Kern County, Haggin and Carr, had experimented with cotton for four or five years by this point.<sup>16</sup> A second trainload of approximately two hundred immigrants arrived in June.

By November, hundreds of southern African Americans worked Kern County cotton fields owned by Haggin and Carr.<sup>17</sup> F. W. Ownbey, on behalf of these Kern County planters, recruited additional southern blacks specifically to replace Chinese workers in the fields. By Thanksgiving of that year, at least two hundred and twenty-five African Americans had migrated from the South to work in Kern County.<sup>18</sup> An article in the *New York Times* stated that Haggin and Carr...

...have tried the plan of employing negroes on their farms instead of Chinamen. The Chinamen cost about \$25 a month, and the negroes are

---

<sup>13</sup> ———, *The Way It Was*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> "More Cotton Growers," *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881.

<sup>15</sup> , *Kern County Californian*, March 22, 1884.

<sup>16</sup> "Our Cotton Crop," *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell repeatedly refers to Ownbey's employers as Haggin and Carr, however, some newspaper articles, from the period, list them as Haggin and Tevis. J. B. Haggin and William B. Carr subdivided and sold large tracts of land in Kern County, in the 1890s. For more, see George Gilbert Lynch, "Rambling Rosedale," *Historic Kern: Quarterly Journal*, Fall 2006, 1.. Lloyd Tevis, a railroad grant trustee, sold Haggin and Carr large tracts of railroad land. Tevis was a partner in the Haggin and Carr enterprises. See Paul Wallace Gates, *Land and Law in California: Essays on Land Politics* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002), 277. The Carr-Haggin Land Company was later known as the Kern County Land Company. See Diane Ogden, "History of Blacks in Bakersfield," (Bakersfield, CA: California State College, 1973), 2.

<sup>18</sup> "The Colored Immigrants," *Kern County Californian*, November 22, 1884.

employed at \$12 a month and board, the women at \$8, and the boys at \$6... A lot of cotton was successfully raised the past year as an experiment. Mr. Ownbey says that since the success of the negro plan he expects a great many California planters to adopt it, and thus drive out the Chinamen, who cause more trouble than they are worth.<sup>19</sup>

In 1884, Ownbey transported up to eleven hundred black men, women, and children from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Kern County, while seeking up to ten thousand workers to pick cotton and fruit crops.<sup>20</sup> That same year, approximately four hundred African Americans left Columbia, South Carolina, en route to Fresno County.<sup>21</sup> Another seventy blacks left Charlotte, North Carolina, in January 1886, with a similar promise of a monthly salary of twelve dollars, in the fields, orchards, and vineyards outside of Fresno.<sup>22</sup>

In 1888, over four hundred black men, women, and children migrated to work on vineyards and orchards in the Fresno and Fowler areas. At least forty-five of these migrants went to work in the six-hundred-acre vineyard belonging to A. B. Butler near Fresno.<sup>23</sup> Like their Kern County counterparts, Fresno farmers hired African American laborers specifically to replace Chinese labor.

Many African Americans who arrived to work the fields and vineyards of Central California used that experience as a foundation upon which to build a new life. Those who found ways to exit the cycle of migratory, or seasonal, farm labor moved into the cities and towns of the valley. These workers brought trades or training with them beyond the skills needed to work in the fields where African

---

<sup>19</sup> "Negroes Replacing Chinamen," *New York Times*, November 14, 1884.

<sup>20</sup> "Colored Labor for California," *Cleveland Gazette*, November 29, 1884.

<sup>21</sup> "John Abernathy Interview with Vivian J. Jones," (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977). Abernathy indicated that his grandfather arrived from Biloxi Mississippi, in 1884, as a contract worker. His father joined his grandfather, in 1902. See also "Carloads of Negroes Emigrate," *New York Times*, December 4, 1884.

<sup>22</sup> "Negroes Going to California," *New York Times*, January 17, 1886.

<sup>23</sup> "Negro Labor," *Fresno Morning Republican*, July 20, 1888.

Americans often remained only as long as necessary before branching out into more lucrative and stable employment or business. Those without such skills followed the crops and relied on seasonal work in the fields, packing houses, and cotton gins throughout the region.

Between 1900 and 1920, the total African American population of the San Joaquin Valley doubled to over twenty-five hundred. Over the course of the next two decades, that number doubled every ten years to almost twelve thousand. By 1950, when cotton acreage accounted for large areas of Kern, Kings, and Tulare Counties, those figures doubled every five years, bringing the total number of African Americans in the valley to over forty thousand by the 1950 census. By mid-century, half of the African Americans in the eight counties of the Central San Joaquin Valley lived in either Fresno or Kern Counties, with, as Parson's suggested, the bulk of this population centered on the metro areas of Fresno and Bakersfield. However, some African Americans chose to live and work outside the cities, closer to the land. Many of these lived in segregated communities beyond the edge of town.<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, these 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. At least one township was little more than an extensive family compound. Cookseyville began as a small family farm outside of Atwater in Merced County. Over the course of a decade, beginning in the mid-1940s, family members

---

<sup>24</sup> Several sources demonstrate this preference, on the part of some African Americans who relocated to the San Joaquin Valley. See, for example, Arax, "Land of Hope" or "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."



migrated from Kansas to the property where they erected additional homes.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> Both Mozell C. Hill and Eleanor Mason Ramsey point out that, in most cases, “the societies were essentially extended families.”<sup>27</sup> As one person who grew up in a San Joaquin Valley township 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... 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.<sup>28</sup>

The church was and continues to be central to almost every black township in California. The rural areas of Kings and Tulare counties are home to over thirty-five separate African American churches that continue to serve the needs of rural blacks.<sup>29</sup> Lanare, South Dos Palos, and Fairmead all include a minimum of two African American churches.<sup>30</sup> Even in tiny Cookseyville, life centered on the

---

<sup>25</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007), 3.

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

<sup>27</sup> Eleanor Mason Ramsey, "Allensworth—a Study in Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977). See also Mozell C. Hill, "The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement, Part I," *Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 3 (1946).

<sup>28</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>29</sup> Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002, A25.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

church.<sup>31</sup> Today, that church continues to serve family members and a handful of both black and white neighbors. Similarly, the Shilo Church of God in 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.<sup>32</sup>

Unskilled workers, and the poor, competed with Mexican migrants and poor southern whites in the fields, while African Americans with resources and skills purchased rural land, settled in towns and cities, started businesses, or entered the workplace in a wide range of jobs. Life in the city, or even in the smaller towns, was not an option for some of these newly arrived African Americans. Following the Second World War, between thirty and forty thousand African Americans migrated to the San Joaquin Valley. Approximately seven thousand of them arrived in the Tulare Lake Basin (southern Kings County).

### Lanare

Large numbers of blacks eventually settled in Tulare, Kings, and Fresno Counties—many of whom settled in the Fresno County community of Lanare. Although, as recently as the 1970s, Lanare was predominately black, today it is losing its unique, African American make-up. Hispanics now make up the 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 unincorporated, dusty little collection of

---

<sup>31</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Arax, "Land of Hope."

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 total population. 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, Riverdale, incorporated in 1875, 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 buildings: 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

---

<sup>33</sup> Robert Powell, Personal Communication, June 23, 2008. 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.

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. Well into the 1960s, the Rodeo Café, a small diner and bar, which sat across the road east of Powell's, was 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.

Robert Powell, whose father owned the warehouse in Lanare, indicated that, in his opinion, the Civil Rights Movement did not necessarily bypass Lanare. However, these communities, made up of the poorest of the poor, were unable to participate directly or even knew how to have a voice in the movement.<sup>34</sup> Racism,

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid..

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. However, there were those who were uncomfortable with mixed school populations. The establishment of some of Riverdale's private Christian schools may have been a direct response to that situation.

In June 2007, the "staff and faculty of the tiny Riverdale Christian Academy... tried to spoof the experiences of slavery in this country, some going so far as to adorn themselves in blackface makeup..."<sup>35</sup> Photos of the graduation celebration were published on the Internet. Captions on the posted photos included "The slaves served lemonade – it was a hoot!"<sup>36</sup> Another photo showed the return of a "runaway slave" by a white man wearing a New York Yankees jersey. True to the nature of the Internet, even though the photos were removed from the original website, they were copied and are now preserved at other sites.<sup>37</sup> Although this represents just one recent incident, it suggests lingering racial attitudes in Riverdale. None of those attending appeared offended by the events staged at this graduation party, which was planned and executed by adults in charge of this small Christian school, including at least one pastor.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> "No Place for Blackface," *Fresno Bee*, June 13, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> "School's Portrayal of Blacks Protested," *Fresno Bee*, June 9, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Tate Hill, "Racism in Riverdale," <http://urbanknowledge.blogspot.com/2007/06/racism-in-riverdale.html>. See also Carmen Van Kerckhove, "Riverdale Christian Academy Celebrates Graduation with a Blackface Party Mocking Slavery," <http://www.racialicious.com/2007/06/11/riverdale-christian-academy-celebrates-graduation-with-a-blackface-party-mocking-slavery/>.

<sup>38</sup> "School's Portrayal of Blacks Protested."

### Cookseyville

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.<sup>39</sup> During a family drive down Highway 99, Sid purchased several acres of farmland, outside the Central Valley town of Atwater. Although the details of the transaction are sketchy, family members believe that Wilson, Sid, and Drew Cooksey paid cash for the original property, as it was difficult for an African American 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.<sup>40</sup>

At the close of the War in 1945, Sid, Olevia, and Timothy returned to the family farm outside Fordyce, Arkansas. Wilson and his wife, Edna (Cooksey) moved to the Atwater property where they began farming and raising their family. By this time, Sid Cooksey had acquired about one hundred and sixty acres in Arkansas. Within a year, Ku Klux Klan activities intensified in that state. A white neighbor offered to purchase the front eighty acres from the Cookseys, who continued to live and work the back eighty.<sup>41</sup> Shortly after that, in part to escape the increased presence of the Klan and to provide greater economic opportunities to their children and grandchildren, Sid and Olevia returned to the Atwater property. Timothy, the youngest son, his new wife Myrtle, and several other family members returned with Sid and his wife.<sup>42</sup> Timothy described the 1946 trip as akin to the opening of the 1960s television program the *Beverly Hillbillies*:

---

<sup>39</sup> Diana Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville," *Fresno Bee*, February 8, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>41</sup> Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville."

<sup>42</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

We were sort of like the Hillbillies. We had a truck. We had a car. We loaded all the stuff on the truck... most all they could get on it... some of it, they left. And we had the car and all of us made our arrival from Arkansas to Atwater, California. ...let's say ten people.<sup>43</sup>

The family proceeded to build additional homes on the property they purchased during the War.<sup>44</sup> Over the next decade, six of Sid and Olevia's seven children and their families moved to the family compound, which came to be known as Cookseyville by local residents. Sid died in 1950, at seventy-one years of age. One family member remembered Cookseyville as

Just the family, it was the whole community of family members and...there was no fear there. We all knew everybody; you could go to every door... we all knew we could go to any one of them for help... it was a family affair.<sup>45</sup>

The family built or moved in additional homes to accommodate the expanding population.<sup>46</sup> They dug several wells, soon after arriving in Atwater, initially hitting water at just sixty feet. As the population of the compound increased, the shallower wells began to dry up. Deeper wells, as deep as two hundred and forty-five feet, were sunk.<sup>47</sup> Initially, some of the homes utilized outdoor privies; however, over time, they converted all of them to septic tanks. The last tank was installed by 1959.<sup>48</sup> This basic infrastructure of wells and septic tanks accommodated the small community, which received electricity from the county grid.

---

<sup>43</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "Pearl Kemp Interview with Hector Hernandez," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>47</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>48</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

Ozie, Timothy, and Cornelius Cooksey brought skills important to the construction industry upon their arrival in California. This allowed them to find local employment away from the compound. Between construction jobs, most of the men also worked agricultural jobs to supplement their family's income. For example, Ozie's primary profession was laying large underground concrete pipes and other concrete work. Between construction jobs, he worked at a turkey ranch, a sweet potato farm, and other agriculturally based jobs. Many of the older men also hunted and fished together, with the product of their labors adding to the stores of meat and fish.<sup>49</sup>

About half of the Cooksey property remained agricultural. Sid and other family members raised hogs and occasionally, a few head of cattle.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> Cooksey children often went to a nearby thicket to pick wild blackberries.<sup>52</sup> At one point, in the 1960s, a nearby vineyard was removed to make way for expansion of the Atwater airport. The landowner allowed neighbors to remove the existing vines. Most of the Cooksey households added one or more grape vines to their gardens, providing fresh fruit and raisins for many years.<sup>53</sup> Although each household maintained their own house garden,

---

<sup>49</sup> "Pearl Kemp Interview with Hector Hernandez," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>51</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).



the families exchanged surpluses, and shared in activities such as operating smokehouses, butchering, and distributing shared pork and beef.<sup>54</sup>

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 from other family members, for many years.<sup>55</sup> 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:

[T]hat was the only store around in the long distance, so...in the middle of the night if you needed bread, you could go wake her up... have her open the store, and she'd give you a loaf of bread and milk... you didn't go and try to get a candy bar, or something like that... but if you needed... sandwich stuff or a loaf of bread... she would open the store to let you have something like that... But, it was pretty convenient, you know...<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup> However, in the early 1960s, Icy's health deteriorated, and the family closed the store, which after being torn down, left the corner vacant.<sup>58</sup>

In 1956, Ozie Cooksey and his children were the last to arrive from Arkansas. At that time, Cookseyville became home to around one hundred people

---

<sup>54</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>55</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>56</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

and included a country market and a nearby church.<sup>59</sup> By the mid-1960s, as many as ninety Cooksey grandchildren, and great grandchildren, lived within the confines of Cookseyville. Some of these lived with their parents, while a few who were older and married established their own households on the property.

Cooksey life revolved around church and family. Although there was no church within the confines of the Cookseyville compound, most of the family attended a small church up the road, founded by Elder Jeremy Jeffrey. The church served a larger African American population than just the Cooksey family. 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 house to Timothy, who carries on as pastor of the church.<sup>60</sup> Many of the third generation Cookseys—those who either arrived in Atwater as children or who were born on the Cookseyville compound—tell stories of walking the half mile to church every Sunday morning and the central role of the church in their individual and collective lives.<sup>61</sup>

Because Cookseyville was little more than a family compound, there was no need to establish any formal structure to the community. The heads of the households made large, community-wide decisions through consensus. Timothy remembered, “We all... was pretty close. We all got along good. Big decision—we all talked it over. Big decision—we all helped each other. Everything worked

---

<sup>59</sup> 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.

<sup>60</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>61</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson." See also "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

out fine.”<sup>62</sup> One of the younger Cookseys described how her uncles and aunts made decisions that impacted the entire group:

There was never a time of conflict. There may be a discussion, but there wasn't conflict. They always came together. They were in agreement and that's just how it was...<sup>63</sup>

Cousins played with each other, regularly visiting the homes of their aunts and uncles. Often, a child would be invited to stay for meals at a home where they were playing, or studying, with cousins. Discipline, to a certain degree, was shared across families, as were some chores:

[E]verybody had permission to give you a whoopin' so if you actly was at somebody else's house an' you acted up... the bad part was, you would get a whoopin' der... den, dey would call your mother and tell her, "We jes gave Allen a whippin' and he's on his way home, now." So, you would get another whippin' when you got home.<sup>64</sup>

The entire community often shared recreational activities. There were enough children to field two baseball teams that played each other for hours on the homemade diamond on the Cookseyville property.<sup>65</sup> Many vacations included more than one household. Often three or four families made trips to the beach or the Sierra Nevada in caravan-fashion, or large groups visited relatives in the Bay Area.<sup>66</sup> This included family outings to the local swimming hole, ice cream parties, and large 4<sup>th</sup> of July barbeques with fireworks.<sup>67</sup> The family even planned, as a group, trips to visit distant relations in Arkansas.<sup>68</sup> Large projects such as

---

<sup>62</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>63</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson."

<sup>64</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>65</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson."

<sup>66</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. See also Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville."

<sup>68</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson."

construction also involved every able-bodied person in the community. When the home movers delivered Ozie's house, which was relocated from another property, everyone helped build the foundation.<sup>69</sup>

Most of the young children during the 1960s were required to spend some time with "Mother 'Levia'" as they called the aging Olevia. By that time, she used a walker and needed daily exercise. Each child between the age of seven and nine took a turn. He, or she, went to the matriarch's home, daily, and helped her walk around the house to maintain strength and mobility in her legs.<sup>70</sup>

Education was important; however, unlike colonization efforts such as Allensworth that sought to build self-sufficient communities, the residents of Cookseyville took advantage of local schools in Atwater, just as many of the Lanare residents sent their children to schools in Riverdale. The majority of the third generation Cooksey children attended Schaefer Elementary, Mitchell Junior High, and Atwater High School throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>71</sup> Since Atwater was not that large, the Cooksey children made a physical impact on the school population. One third-generation Cooksey described going to school surrounded by family:

Tim had a daughter the same age as me... uncle Cornelius had a son same age as me... that's three of us that's the same age, in the same grade... from first grade, all the way through, you got two other cousins with you.<sup>72</sup>

Members of the Cooksey family downplay racism in Atwater—until pressed for details. Many members of the family claim little direct impact of racism. However, when questioned further, Timothy Cooksey admitted that he had

---

<sup>69</sup> "Pearl Kemp Interview with Hector Hernandez."

<sup>70</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

been unable to secure a loan from a local bank even though a white friend, in a similar situation, got his loan.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Allen Cooksey cited several examples, in high school, of male classmates threatening him to stay clear of their sisters. When asked if these threats were personal or racial, he affirmed his belief that they were the latter.<sup>74</sup>

By the middle of the 1960s, Atwater High School filled an entire bus with youth from Cookseyville, every morning and afternoon.<sup>75</sup> When asked about issues pertaining to race in the Atwater schools, Allen Cooksey, a third generation Cookseyville resident, described the situation:

There wasn't any necessarily issues. But, it was totally noticeable... You go to school and ...pretty much only your relatives look like you... There was other blacks in Atwater, but there weren't tons of 'em... we prolly had like... up to four black kids in a class... I didn't notice [racism]... until like high school. Coz, in high school, you're older... it was more noticeable because then you also got into the thing with girls... I remember two or three girls that they might come up, want to talk to you and the next thing you know, their brother's comin' up and sayin' "You can't talk to my sister!"... I took it as racially motivated... you really didn't have too many white friends.<sup>76</sup>

Early on, most of the other African Americans residing in, and near, Atwater lived close to the Cookseys. This included the area now covered by Highway 99. However, as more blacks associated with nearby Castle Air Force Base moved into Atwater during the Viet Nam conflict the population shifted.<sup>77</sup>

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

---

<sup>73</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>74</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>75</sup> Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville."

<sup>76</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>77</sup> "Pearl Kemp Interview with Hector Hernandez."

accommodate additional homes, so many moved into Atwater, or Merced, while a few traveled farther from Cookseyville.<sup>78</sup> 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. Eventually, members of the third generation began selling off the property.<sup>79</sup> By 2008, Timothy and Myrtle, along with their daughter-in-law Louise, are 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 leaving Cookseyville behind in the process.<sup>80</sup> In just a few generations, this small rural African American township took one family from slavery to the so-called “American Dream.”

### Other Townships

In addition to Lanare and Cookseyville, other unique African American townships developed around the valley. These include Fairmead, between Madera and Chowchilla; Home Garden, south of Hanford; Bowles, near Fowler; Teviston, near Pixley and Allensworth; Sunny Acres, on the edge of Corcoran; 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.

---

<sup>78</sup> "Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson." See also "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>79</sup> "Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

<sup>80</sup> "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger."

One of the keys to understanding the development of townships is to identify the reason, or reasons, why each developed. In every case, they grew near an existing town. Although this fact ultimately contributed to the overall success and longevity of the community, it raises additional questions. Looking at the racial makeup or attitudes of the nearby town may provide some answers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Fairmead developed because of overt racism and exclusionary housing practices in Chowchilla and other nearby towns.<sup>81</sup> Similar anecdotal evidence suggests that these conditions contributed to the growth of Lanare, outside Riverdale. Sunny Acres traces its origins directly to the racism that ran throughout Corcoran. As for other townships, additional research will determine if these also resulted from long-standing patterns of systemic racism.

Overt racism, exclusionary practices, and other vestiges of Jim Crow separated blacks from whites throughout the San Joaquin Valley, during the twentieth century. In larger cities, this resulted in segregated neighborhoods such as Bakersfield's Cottonwood or Fresno's Westside. Across the rural landscape, these practices created and maintained a collection of historically all-black townships.

---

<sup>81</sup> As of this writing, I am basing this strictly on the reports of several long-time residents of the valley, all of whom claimed personal knowledge of the all-black township of Fairmead. Additional research, including the recording of oral histories and archival research, is planned to verify and expand these stories.

## REFERENCES

- . *Visalia Weekly Delta*, June 1, 1867.
- . *Kern County Californian*, March 22, 1884, 3.
- . *Kern County Californian*, February 6, 1886.
- "Allen Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger." In *Cookseyville Oral History Project*. Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007.
- Arax, Mark. "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises." *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002.
- . "The Black Okies: Land of Hope Is Sown with Tragedy." *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2002.
- "At the Butler Vineyard." *Fresno Morning Republican*, July 20, 1888.
- "Carloads of Negroes Emigrate." *New York Times*, December 4, 1884.
- Cleland, Robert Glass. *From Wilderness to Empire: A History of California*. Edited by John Russell McCarthy. Los Angeles: Powell Publishing Company, 1962.
- "The Colored Immigrants." *Kern County Californian*, November 22, 1884.
- "Colored Labor for California." *Cleveland Gazette*, November 29, 1884.
- Gates, Paul Wallace. *Land and Law in California: Essays on Land Politics*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002.
- Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.



Hill, Mozell C. "The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement, Part I." *Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 3 (1946): 254-68.

Hill, Tate. "Racism in Riverdale."  
<http://urbanknowledge.blogspot.com/2007/06/racism-in-riverdale.html>.

Kerckhove, Carmen Van. "Riverdale Christian Academy Celebrates Graduation with a Blackface Party Mocking Slavery."  
<http://www.racialicious.com/2007/06/11/riverdale-christian-academy-celebrates-graduation-with-a-blackface-party-mocking-slavery/>.

Kirby, Jack Temple. "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians." *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): 585-600.

Lynch, George Gilbert. "Rambling Rosedale." *Historic Kern: Quarterly Journal*, Fall 2006, 1.

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

Mitchell, Annie R. *The Way It Was: The Colorful History of Tulare County*. Fresno, CA: Valley Publishers, 1976.

"More Cotton Growers." *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881.

"Negro Labor." *Fresno Morning Republican*, July 20, 1888.

"Negroes Going to California." *New York Times*, January 17, 1886.

"Negroes Replacing Chinamen." *New York Times*, November 14, 1884.

"No Place for Blackface." *Fresno Bee*, June 13, 2007.

Ogden, Diane. "History of Blacks in Bakersfield." Bakersfield, CA: California State College, 1973.

"Our Cotton Crop." *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881.

Parsons, James J. "A Geographer Looks at the San Joaquin Valley." *Geographical Review* 76, no. 4 (1986): 371-89.

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

Powell, Robert. Personal Communication, June 23, 2008.

"The Raisinmaker's Cry: The Vineyards of California Do Not Need Protection." *New York Times*, May 20, 1888.

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

"Renee Dunn Interview with Scott David Peterson." In *Cookseyville Oral History Project*. Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007.

"Samuel Hannibal and Carroll Watkins Interview with Vivian J. Jones." Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977.

Sánchez, George J. *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

"School's Portrayal of Blacks Protested." *Fresno Bee*, June 9, 2007.

"Timothy Cooksey Interview with Michael Eissinger." In *Cookseyville Oral History Project*. Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007.

Torres, Robert. "The 1933 San Joaquin Valley (California) Cotton Strike." MA thesis, California State University, Fresno, 1994.

"Transactions of the California State Agriculture Society." 1872.