

## ABSTRACT

### GROWING ALONG THE SIDE OF THE ROAD: RURAL AFRICAN AMERICAN SETTLEMENTS IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

This paper explores some of the twentieth century African American enclaves hidden in the agricultural landscape of California's Central Valley. These settlements, overlooked in the historical record, are among more than a dozen rural historically all-black San Joaquin Valley communities. Due to a variety of factors, including restrictive covenants and sundown policies the majority of these communities grew just beyond the boundaries of neighboring all-white or predominantly white towns.

Unlike the planned communities of Allensworth, these historically black settlements, like Teviston, South Dos Palos, Lanare, and Fairmead, grew organically. Typically each settlement included churches and businesses that served the residents and their rural neighbors. Although tied to California Agriculture, each community claims its own unique history.

Utilizing first person oral-history interviews, newspaper clippings, census records, and other primary sources, this paper begins to shed light on this aspect of the lives of African Americans on the rural landscape of the San Joaquin Valley.

## GROWING ALONG THE SIDE OF THE ROAD: RURAL AFRICAN AMERICAN SETTLEMENTS IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

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An 1893 description of Central California claimed that:

Fresno, Tulare and Kern Counties are as good for a poor man as there is in the Union. Why? Simply because these counties have the advantages that nature gives them for being the best watered portion of this continent. There you have 300 days of sunshine and as far as frost is concerned it is of brief duration coming generally after daylight and rarely continuing long enough to affect the orange and lemon blossoms... Nine out of ten make a success in California. Why? Because they are not speculators, they go there on the information of a reliable party who takes a pleasure in representing the country just as they will find it when they reach there. A California Colony in Fresno county would remind one of living in some Chicago suburb. The reader should remember that on his little farm in California, with the help of a few chickens, a cow and a few acres of alfalfa and a half acre of garden, he can make a living independent of all trades, corporations, and strikes.<sup>1</sup>

California has always been a destination—a fulfillment. Whether discussing Westward Expansion, the Second Great Migration, the Southern Diaspora, the Okies of the Dust Bowl, or the rise of the Sun Belt, for a great many people, the terminus of that journey is California. Although most people think of the Golden State as some cross between San Francisco Bay, Disneyland, Santa Monica Beach, and Beverly Hills, the reality is that the bulk of the state, and one of its most significant economic engines of is the vast agricultural region known as California's Central Valley. Within the framework of all of all of these migration narratives, Central California—the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, which in reality are one vast valley separated by nothing more than an imaginary line—has played a significant role in the inward immigration of various populations into California.

By the 1850s, several towns—primarily Stockton, Sacramento, Visalia, and Bakersfield—were established running through the heart of the Central Valley to support the

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Carlin, "Good for Poor Men: The San Joaquin Valley and Its Advantages," *Daily Californian*, September 7, 1893 1893.

agricultural and extraction interests of some of San Francisco's elite, including Henry Miller, Charles Lux, Leland Stanford, Charles and Edwin Crocker, Lloyd Tevis, and James Haggin. In the second half of that century, the Valley was considered little more than a source resources to be extracted and exploited. However, as the end of the nineteenth century approached, many of the large landowners sought to realize profits from selling, rather than maintaining and exploiting, the land. A system that would come to be known as the California Colonization Program prompted an influx of inward migration into this former frontier territory. The Colonization efforts throughout Central California continued, in earnest well into the 1920s as evidenced by the number of small towns throughout the region who recently celebrated, or will soon, celebrate, their centenary. These colonization efforts intensified, to a certain degree, after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Some of the proceeds generated by the sale of land owned by Bay Area moneyed interests were used to rebuild much of the City on the Bay.

The so-called colonization model began to take its best-known form, outside of Fresno in 1875, just three years after the Southern Pacific established the Fresno station causing the new city to spring up in the center of the Valley. Local Fresno County landowner, William S. Chapman contracted with Bernard Marks of San Francisco to develop one hundred and ninety-two twenty-acre farmsites. Water rights were purchased from the Fresno Canal and Irrigation Company and three branch canals were developed over the next two years to provide water to the colony.<sup>2</sup> In 1891, C. O. Ziegenfuss described the resultant colony:

[T]he entire colony is under cultivation now, and the settlers are without exception in the enjoyment of the highest prosperity. The avenues that were laid out on section lines are broad and well shaded, while the homes of the colonists are both handsome and comfortable. It is to-day a smiling beauty spot on the arid plain. It has served as a pattern and encouragement to other colonies... It is a type of all of them. Its good example is constantly exerting a beneficial influence on

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<sup>2</sup> C. O. Ziegenfuss, "The Colony System: Its Development and Steady Growth About Fresno " in *Atlas of Fresno County California with Illustrations*(Fresno: Thos. H. Thompson, 1891), 13-14.

the material affairs of of the county... The colony system has also spread... and is in successful operation in almost every section where water is obtainable... from the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas to the Fresno slough.<sup>3</sup>

Following this model, development companies—occasionally the large landowners like Miller & Lux, but more commonly speculators who purchased large tracts of land who then subdivided it into agricultural parcels of five, ten, twenty, and forty acres. These parcels were grouped together into larger collections called colonies, and each development could consist of up to fifteen or more individual colonies. These efforts to divide large land holdings up into smaller, family farms were marketed throughout the state, across the nation, and around the world. Many early colonies centered on existing towns and cities, like Fresno or Merced. Elsewhere, developers often built—and marketed—a town at the center of the agricultural colonies. Unlike modern developers, these promoters seldom built homes or commercial buildings beyond a local sales and management office. However, they often laid out streets, installed water systems, and ran electricity to the parcels in the hope that the new town would grow into a market center for agricultural expansion and spur interest in the sale of the surrounding lands. Although the pattern varied from community to community, this basic structure created many of the small agricultural town of the San Joaquin Valley.

However, not every colony was a success. A 1916 report entitled “Colonization in California” and published in the Pacific Rural Press, painted a darker picture of colonization efforts:

Unfortunately, these conditions also made the State an attractive field for land speculators...A great business developed in the purchase, subdivision, and colonization of farm lands. Real estate operators and land salesmen... flocked here, not to develop agriculture, but to exploit it. Land to them was merchandise, to be bought at the lowest possible price and sold at all the colonists could be induced to pay. Land purchased at \$10 to \$40 an acre was after subdivision raised to \$75 and \$150 an acre. In one Instance a tract of land bought originally at \$5 an

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

acre was sold for \$15 an acre, then subdivided and sold to colonists at \$125 an acre... The real farmer who came here from other sections of the country looking for a home, who had no intention of speculating and could not afford to do so, found himself in an atmosphere which often swept him off his feet.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the colonization process ultimately created one of the most ethnically diverse rural regions, in the country, which often featured concentrations of various ethnic groups seeking to carve out a place in the California sun. University of California Berkeley Geographer James J. Parsons, who wrote extensively about the geographic, ethnic, and cultural landscape of the San Joaquin Valley described the human diversity of the region:

[The] Chinese...were available to provide... seasonal labor... when railroad construction was on the wane... The Japanese came next... Armenian immigrants... began arriving in the Fresno area... Hanford, Newman, and Gustine have large Azorean minorities... There are now more Azoreans in California than in the Azores... European ethnic groups... include Swedes at Turlock and Kingsburg, Yugoslavs at Delano, Dutch at Ripon, Germans at Reedley and Lodi, and Basques at Bakersfield. Italians and Italian-Swiss are concentrated in the wine industry... Filipinos... [l]ike the Sikhs... [have their] base... in Stockgon... Russians in Kerman, Assyrians in Modesto and Turlock...<sup>5</sup>

However, Parsons inaccurately observed that...

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>6</sup>

Of course, the colonization project to which Parsons referred was the town of Allensworth, which was actually established in Tulare County, in 1908. Even a starker misrepresentation, however, is that although he wrote this in the late 1980s, Parsons makes the claim that there was only one rural black enclave in a region. Since the 1890s, the San Joaquin Valley has hosted well over a dozen such communities, most of which, at the time Parsons wrote, were still populated by majority African American populations.

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<sup>4</sup> Elwood Mead, "Colonization in California," *Pacific Rural Press*, November 18, 1916 1916.

<sup>5</sup> James J. Parsons, "A Geographer Looks at the San Joaquin Valley," *Geographical Review* 76, no. 4 (1986): 378.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 379. Emphasis added.

These rural historically African American settlements across the San Joaquin Valley include Cookseyville, outside of Atwater; Fairmead, between Chowchilla and Madera; South Dos Palos and Midway, outside of Dos Palos; Bowles, near Fowler; Lanare, west of Riverdale; Home Garden, south of Hanford; the Matheny Tract, outside of Tulare; Boot Hill, later called Sunny Acres, outside of Corcoran; Teviston, near Pixley and Allensworth, and the Sunset and Mayflower districts, near Bakersfield. Additionally, there is a significant collection of black-owned farms outside of Raisin City, in Fresno County; and it appears that the community of Centerville, between Squaw Valley and Fresno may have started out as an all-black settlement in the late 1900s. For the last five or six years, I have been studying these historically black rural settlements hoping to capture their unique narrative before it is further obscured by the mists of time. And, Parsons' assertion that blacks seldom engaged in agricultural labor is contradicted by the fact that as early as the 1880s, southern blacks were actively recruited to replace Chinese labor in Kern and Fresno Counties. By the mid-twentieth century there were well over forty-thousand African Americans living and working in the Tulare Lake Basin picking Cotton and other crops with many more blacks working fields throughout the Valley, seasonally migrating as far north as Oregon, to pick vegetables.<sup>7</sup> However, Parsons is not alone in this misconception, Devra Weber, in her otherwise excellent book on the history of agricultural labor in the cotton fields of California, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*, presents that illusion as fact.<sup>8</sup> Not once does she refer to African American labor in relation

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

to this important crop, even though the historical record and first-hand accounts demonstrate their consistent involvement from the 1880s through the mid-1960s.<sup>9</sup>

My interest in these communities—besides simply trying to preserve a rapidly disappearing aspect of our historical narrative—has been to examine those factors that created these all-black settlements and that, for better or worse, sustained them through difficult social, economic, and cultural times. Allensworth, for example, was the intersection of the colonization projects that built many Valley communities and the Exoduster movement that created all-black communities as diverse as Nicodemus, Kansas and Langston, Oklahoma.<sup>10</sup> Sunny Acres and Home Garden extended or replaced black agricultural labor camps in Corcoran and Hanford, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Lanare, Fairmead, and South Dos Palos grew as a response to exclusionary practices of near-by all, or predominately-white communities.

There were several early attempts at black colonization in Central California. As early as 1859, almost twenty years before the colonization model was fully developed, a group of black Stockton businessmen formed the *Savings and Land Association* offering four hundred shares, at \$25 each, to collect \$100,000 with which to purchase land. African Americans from the valley, the Bay Area, and elsewhere invested.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, thirty years later on December 15, 1891, a group of African American financiers from the Bay Area and Texas formed the *Colored*

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<sup>9</sup> The Bakersfield Californian, "Kern County among First in State to Commence Cotton Growing," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, September 25, 1919 1919; New York Times, "Negroes Replacing Chinamen," *New York Times*, November 14, 1884 1884.

<sup>10</sup> 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); Eleanor Mason Ramsey, "Allensworth-a Study in Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977); Chleyon Decatur Thomas, "Boley: An All-Black Pioneer Town and the Education of Its Children" (Ph.D. diss., University of Akron, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, Yale Western Americana Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

*Colonization Association of Fresno County* with the singular purpose of accumulating \$100,000 to invest in land for a black colony in that county.<sup>13</sup> The Articles of Incorporation defined the group's purpose:

To purchase and acquire lands... and subdivide and sell same. To lay out town sites thereon and sell the same and the lots thereof. To form colonies of coloured people on said lands and to subdivide parcels of said lands into such tracts as may be suitable for such purposes... to bring coloured people for Colonization purposes from other states of the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The original board of directors included several prominent black businessmen, including A. F. Holland and Frank A. Alexander from the Bay Area, J. Sanford and E. H. Brown from Fresno, and A. J. Wallace, Anthony Lilly, and S. Williams from Waco, Texas. The Articles of Incorporation also included a list of initial investors, each of whom purchased up to ten shares at ten dollars a share. The director, A. J. Wallace, held the majority of the initial shares with ten. The bulk of the investors were from either Fresno or the San Francisco Bay area. These two projects are the earliest known African American colonization projects in the valley. Although initial investors bought shares, it appears that little resulted from these early attempts to establish all-black colonies in the valley.

In 1903, however, there was one colony that was, for a time, predominately African American. The Bowles Colony, near modern-day Fowler, included, at one time, at least one African American-owned general store and a black church.<sup>15</sup> Over time, however, the population mix has shifted and little else is known about what may actually be the first black settlement in California's Central Valley.

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<sup>13</sup> Colored Colonization Association of Fresno County, *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.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wellington Pilkinton, "Wellington Pilkinton Oral History Interview," ed. Vivian J. Jones (Fresno, CA: Fresno City and County Historical Society, 1977).

Five years later, in 1908, five African Americans in Los Angeles established the *California Colony and Home Promotion Association*.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of this association was to promote a so-called race colony in southern Tulare County. Allensworth, as this community was to be known, was one of two communities developed by the *Pacific Farming Company*. Situated on highly alkali soil, Allensworth was financed by a group of Los Angeles investors. Although the original plan for the community called for both wells and a water system, neither was ever delivered by the developers.<sup>17</sup>

By the time the California Department of Water Resources determined that Allensworth's water supply contained unacceptable levels of arsenic, just thirty-four families still lived within the colony.<sup>18</sup> Although Allensworth never supported more than about one hundred and fifty residents, the departure of these last few families marked the end of the black colony.

Allensworth was one of the last endeavors of the Exoduster movement that stressed the ideals of self-sufficiency, the importance of education, and a focus on community building. Allensworth was never able to achieve most of those lofty goals. The town was 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 factors in neighboring communities.

In the remaining time, I want to focus on three specific communities, each with their unique history, however, all of which share significant elements relating to those push-pull factors that lead to growth and population shifts. Just as Allensworth was created at the

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<sup>16</sup> Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1919), 154.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

intersection of the Exoduster Movement and the California Colonization Project, these three communities also reflect regional and national migrations and economic factors, as well as the racial and social mores of the time.

Founded just 4 years after Allensworth, the community of Fairmead looked to be one of the state's most successful colonization ventures. Nestled between the towns of Madera and Chowchilla in the newly minted Madera County, this town and agricultural colony looked to have everything. For almost a decade, newspapers throughout the country lauded the remarkable advantages offered by this miracle on the Valley floor. Within a year of initial construction, electricity was connected to every town and rural lot. Eighteen freight and passenger trains stopped at the Fairmead depot, everyday. At least two general stores competed for local trade. A local cheese factory shipped cheese throughout the Western States. The largest lumberyard south of Stockton provided building materials to the town and the thirteen agricultural colonies. The Fairmead Inn, boasted a world-class chef imported from San Francisco and provided accommodations to celebrities, politicians, and businessmen. In 1912, 1913, and 1914, the Inn hosted a Thanksgiving feast that fed fifty, three hundred, and fifteen hundred guests, respectively. Large numbers of Mennonites from Russia and Germany arrived to purchase agricultural and town lots, and they built one of the first churches and schools in the new town. Farmers were initially encouraged to irrigate their fields with groundwater, pumped from wells as shallow as sixty feet. However, as the population increased and demand for water increases, Fairmead, like Allensworth began to dry up. By 1920, the Cooperative Land and Trust, the developers who had originally built Fairmead, closed their local office and moved to Fresno. Having profited as much as possible from their initial investment, the developers moved on. Promotion of the fledgling little community ceased.

Madera County was, as it remains, one of California's poorest counties. Presently, only Madera and Chowchilla are incorporated towns, leaving every other community in the county under the County Board of Supervisors. The county includes numerous unincorporated communities including popular tourist destinations in the foothills and mountains, and poor agricultural communities on the Valley floor. Throughout the twenties and thirties, businesses left Fairmead, often relocating to the larger towns of Chowchilla and Madera. By the early thirties, the lumber yard, cheese factory, hotel, and most other businesses were gone, leaving a market or two and several juke joints—or as the locals prefer to call them, lounges.

In the early 1930s, several African American families had moved into Fairmead. Like many of the so-called Okies who moved to the Central Valley during the years of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, these black families came to work in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley. Madera County, like many areas of the Valley, relied heavily on the production of Cotton, the number one cash crop in the county. Cotton requires a skilled labor force, and as in other areas, during this period, many blacks from the American South arrived ready to work, already skilled in planting, chopping, and picking the valuable crop. For African Americans, the initial choice of location hinged on several factors; primary among them were exclusionary practices that prevented them from moving into the nearby communities of Madera or Chowchilla. Madera, the County Seat, was originally known as the Alabama Colony. Founded in 1869 by former Southerners who, as described by Rintha Robbins, “lost their fortunes, their positions and were unhappy under the existing social conditions.”<sup>19</sup> Obviously, put another way, Madera was founded by white southerners who abandoned the South during Reconstruction. The fact that the majority of the original settlers returned to Alabama by 1877 reinforces this point.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rintha Robbins, “Alabama Settlement: Founding of Madera in Madera County” (Fresno State College, 1955), 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Although the Alabama Colony was eventually established as the foundation upon which Madera was founded, it was not considered a success in the early days of the so-called colonization efforts, in the Valley. As one early chronicler put it:

The earliest colony proved a failure. It was... comprised almost exclusively of Alabamians, and was known as "The Alabama Colony." Want of water, lack of experience and disinclination to labor had much to do with its disastrous outcome.<sup>21</sup>

However, Madera became no less exclusionary with the departure of many of the founding white southern families. As in many places throughout California, both Madera and Chowchilla continued to enforce restrictive housing covenants that excluded blacks, Armenians, Basques, Asian Americans, and others until the California State Supreme Court overturned Proposition 14 and the federal Civil Rights Act was enacted, both in 1964.<sup>22</sup> Through a combination of de jure and de facto practices, people of color found it difficult, if not impossible to rent, lease, or purchase homes in the two nearby communities. Fairmead, as an unincorporated community under the jurisdiction of Madera County was unable to enforce these restrictions, through legal or governmental processes, allowing the so-called Black Okies to settle in this community.

Eventually, more African Americans, including the Brown, Thompson, Knott, Johnson, Howard, Evans, Valentine, Davis, Simpson, McGee, Mitchell, Wright, Amey, Monroe, Garland, and McAllister families settled in Fairmead. A few of these families arrived during the original influx, as part of the great migration during the Depression and even during the Great War, however, several of them arrived after World War II following the labor reductions in the shipyards and airplane factories in the Bay Area and Southern California. At the time, most of

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<sup>21</sup> Ziegenfuss, 14.

<sup>22</sup> The Los Angeles Times, "Proposition 14: The Case for and Against," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1964 1964.

the black families that were able to rent or purchase land outside of the town center of Fairmead owned just five acres—barely enough to almost feed a family, with a small surplus, in good years.<sup>23</sup> Some of the black families who worked as farm labor during the Depression who lived in Fairmead erected simple homes out of wood frames, covered with canvas.

One such family was the Williams family. During 1942, in Louisiana, Morial Williams purchased a used truck and had it fitted with an old bus body. According to his son, Fred, Morial loaded up his bus with a number of his neighbors, and headed for California. Initially his children went to Southern California and Morial went to work in the shipyards in the San Francisco Bay area—presumably in Richmond. Shortly thereafter, he rejoined his wife Cora and their children in Southern California where he worked in the shipyards and naval bases. Having kept the bus, the elder Williams shuttled his fellow workers daily to the shipyards—for a small fee. It was while working in Southern California where he met Sam Aimee.<sup>24</sup> The Aimee family was one of the earliest African American families in Fairmead, having established the first Coptic Church in the area.<sup>25</sup> Aimee took Williams to Madera County, one weekend, and Williams decided to try his hand at farming. He borrowed six hundred dollars from one of his sons and rented forty acres.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the first season, even though they rented their own farm, the family worked with migrant African American farm labor crews picking cotton.<sup>27</sup>

In 1946, Williams purchased eighty acres, which he put in to alfalfa and cotton. Several years later, he acquired six cows in a trade for some alfalfa. From that small beginning, Williams and his sons built one of the largest, and the only black-owned dairy in the state of California. At

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<sup>23</sup> Fred & Dorothy Williams, "Interview with Dorothy & Fred Williams," ed. Tony LoPresti (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Tauhida Ali, "Tauhida Ali Interview Transcription (Including Barbara and Antoinette Mitchell)," ed. Tony LoPresti (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Williams.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

one point, one of Morial's ten children farmed over two thousand acres in Madera County.<sup>28</sup> However, not every black family in Fairmead fared as well as the Williams family.

In 1950, the Fairmead Mennonite Church, which had been founded by German and Russian immigrants to the Fairmead Colony in 1913, closed its doors and relocated the church to Madera. By that time, many of the immigrant families had moved to the Madera, or to Reedley, another community with a large Mennonite presence. By this point, the majority of the population of Fairmead was black. When I asked the researcher at the local Mennonite college why the Fairmead church had shut down, his reply was "there probably wasn't anything there for them."<sup>29</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the population began yet another shift as large numbers of Hispanics began moving into Fairmead. This shift is crucial to understanding all of these historically black rural settlements because it was in 1965 when most cotton growers were finally able to pick more than ninety percent of the fiber in their fields with a combination of defoliant and mechanical cotton pickers, making skilled hand labor unnecessary.

Almost directly West of Fairmead sit the communities of Dos Palos, South Dos Palos and Midway. South Dos Palos and Midway have been, at one time or another, populated by largely African American populations. Like Fairmead, Dos Palos started out as part of the Colonization projects of the early twentieth century. Whereas, Fairmead was developed by the Co-operative Land and Trust Company which purchased the land upon which it planted its colonies from larger landowners, Dos Palos was actually developed by San Francisco's Miller and Lux, one of the richest and most powerful business partnerships in the State. In 1891, the Southern Pacific

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication.

Railroad built a depot and hotel for railroad workers in the new community of Dos Palos.<sup>30</sup> This townsite was part of an expansion, that year, that included establishing the towns of Dos Palos, Firebaugh, Mendota, Jameson, Collis, McMullen, Cando, Caruthers, and Hedwick.<sup>31</sup> Miller and Lux used the colony model to sell off land that spanned the county line between Fresno and Merced Counties. The town center, developed as a market center on the Merced County side of the line, with those portions of the rural colonies within Fresno County remaining farmland. Originally, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the majority population of the new community consisted primarily of Italian immigrant families.<sup>32</sup> Well water was so unreliable, at that time, that water had to be brought in, on the train, for the earliest settlers.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the Dos Palos post office was established in 1898.<sup>34</sup> By 1903, agriculture was well established, in the Dos Palos area, as evidenced by the coverage of large fields of alfalfa growing outside the small town in the April 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the Pacific Rural Press, of that year.<sup>35</sup> Although the original townsite of Dos Palos suffered from a lack of access to a reliable aquifer, some of the rural farmsteads advertised access to ample groundwater.<sup>36</sup> In the same year, Miller and Lux were given kudos by the same newspaper for their advanced dairy techniques at their Dos Palos dairy.<sup>37</sup>

The first African American family to move into Dos Palos (now South Dos Palos), may have been the King family, in 1924. Mrs. Carrie King's sister, Elizabeth, was married to Edgar Peterson, both originally of Texas. The latter couple moved from the Lone Star state to

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<sup>30</sup> Docia Robinson, "Midway District an African American Community in the 1960s," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 1989), 157.

<sup>31</sup> Los Angeles Times, "Railroad Affairs," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 6, 1891 1891.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, 157.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Los Angeles Times, "Pensions and Post Offices," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1898 1898.

<sup>35</sup> Pacific Rural Press, "Progress in Merced County," *Pacific Rural Press*, April 25, 1903 1903.

<sup>36</sup> Pacific Rural Press, "Advertisement," *Pacific Rural Press*, January 25, 1913 1913.

<sup>37</sup> J. C. Loomis, "California Dairy Industry," *Pacific Rural Press*, November 1, 1913 1913.

Oklahoma, and by 1920 had relocated to Southern California. Seven years later, in response to the encouragement of Carrie King and her husband, Elizabeth and Edgar Peterson moved their family to farm their own twenty-acre plot, outside of Dos Palos. Like many local farmers, the Petersons normally grew cotton. As new African American families moved into Dos Palos and the surrounding land, some were able to purchase their own land, others worked as hired hands on dairies, or sought seasonal work picking cotton and other crops.

Within a few years, the black families in Dos Palos included the King and the Peterson, as well as the Straughter, Barnes, and Rice Families.<sup>38</sup> This small group of African American families began church services on “boxes and benches” under the shade of local trees, as there was no building available for them to use.<sup>39</sup> Over the next few years the Todd, Hutton, Pool, and the Montgomery families arrived in the area. By 1930, Reverend James Peterson—Edgar Peterson’s brother—arrived in Dos Palos and established the First Baptist Church. After initially holding services in the building owned by the local Seventh Day Adventist Church, the group built their first chapel.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, in 1934, at as the Great Depression raged on, many local African American families lost their homes, in Dos Palos. Even the building for the First Baptist Church was foreclosed upon.<sup>41</sup>

One unique aspect of Dos Palos reflects the power of white flight. As more and more African Americans moved into Dos Palos, white businesses and families moved several miles north to establish a new town. By moving the post office, at the same time, the new town remained known as Dos Palos, and the original townsite was renamed South Dos Palos. The area between South Dos Palos and Dos Palos, which also attracted many people of color (who were

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<sup>38</sup> Docia Robinson, "African American History -- Delivered at a Picnic in South Dos Palos in 1989," in *2006 Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 1989), 156.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

restricted from living in Dos Palos proper) became known as Midway, because it is mid-way between the two Dos Paloses. Over time, the commercial buildings in South Dos Palos, many of which were still owned by the white businessmen of Dos Palos, were originally boarded up before ultimately being razed, leaving, as in Fairmead, little to no trace of the economic history of the once thriving area.

Katherine Brooks Lane recalled what she referred to as “subtle” “racial tension” growing up in Dos Palos in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>42</sup> “There were several places the African American felt they could not go. One was called The Four Corners and supposedly it had a sign that read ‘No Colored Allowed... When we went to the movies we chose to sit in a certain section. I don’t think we had to...’<sup>43</sup> Many of the black farmers and farmworkers congregated at the corner of Blossom and Center, by Pingel’s Drug Store in the evenings, and at least two bars—the Midway Club and the White Front Club—catered to a black clientele.

Just as in Fairmead, the close of World War II, and the shrinking demand for labor in the shipyards of Richmond led to many new African Americans moving into and around Dos Palos. Some were lucky enough to have enough money saved to purchase their own land, while others sought seasonal field labor. As cotton became more mechanized, in the mid-1960s, those who relied on seasonal work either branched out to other crops, or more often, left the area and sought employment in the urban areas of the Bay Area, Stockton, Fresno, or elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Some of those, like Dewey Todd, who moved to Dos Palos from Oklahoma, in 1941 to pick cotton, eventually

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<sup>42</sup> Katherine Brooks Lane, "An Early African American Family," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 2008), 109.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

found more stable work , locally. After ten years in the fields, Todd was hired at the Dos Palos High School to work in the maintenance department, a job he held for twenty-eight years.<sup>45</sup>

During the so-called *War on Poverty*, South Dos Palos received grants to build one of the first *Head Start* programs in the area, as well as install a water and sewer system.<sup>46</sup> Like similar communities—Lanare, Teviston, and Sunny Acres—residents carried water to their homes in buckets and milk cans.<sup>47</sup>

### Cookseyville

At the close of World War II, in 1945, Sid and Olevia Cooksey along with several of their adult children, returned to the family farm outside Fordyce, Arkansas after two years working in the Bay Area shipyards of Richmond, California. When they left California their daughter Edna and her husband “Doc” Wilson remained on a small farm on several acres outside of the Central Valley town of Atwater. Several members of the family purchased this property while on a family drive through the center of the state.<sup>48</sup> Although the details 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.<sup>49</sup>

Shortly after returning to Arkansas, in part to escape the increased presence of the Klan and to provide greater economic opportunities to their children and grandchildren, Sid and

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<sup>45</sup> Dewey Todd, "Cotton Attracts Oklahomans," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 2008), 112.

<sup>46</sup> Lane, 109; Todd, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Arax, "A Lost Tribe's Journey."; Todd, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Diana Marcum, "Welcome to Cookseyville," *Fresno Bee*, February 8, 2007 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project*, ed. Michael Eissinger (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

Olevia returned to the Atwater property. Timothy, the youngest son, his new wife Myrtle, and several other family members returned with the elder Cookseys.<sup>50</sup> Timothy described the 1946 trip as akin to the opening of the *Beverly Hillbillies*:

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>51</sup>

The family proceeded to build additional homes on the property.<sup>52</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. 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>53</sup>

The family built or moved in additional homes to accommodate the expanding population, which, at its height, was larger than Allensworth's largest population numbers.<sup>54</sup> The family dug several wells, soon after arriving in Atwater, initially hitting water at just sixty feet. As the population of the compound increased, shallower wells began to dry up forcing new wells as deep as two hundred and forty-five feet.<sup>55</sup> Initially, some homes utilized outdoor privies. The final septic tank was installed by 1959, replacing the last outhouse.<sup>56</sup> This basic infrastructure of wells and septic tanks accommodated the small community, which received electricity from the county grid.

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<sup>50</sup> Allen Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project*, ed. Michael Eissinger (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Pearl Kemp, "Pearl Kemp Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project*, ed. Hector Hernandez (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>55</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>56</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

Several of the Cooksey men brought skills important to the construction industry with them to California. This allowed them the find local employment away from the compound and outside of farming. Between construction jobs, most of the men and the older children also worked agricultural jobs to supplement their family's income. 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>57</sup>

Sid and other family members raised hogs and occasionally, a few head of cattle.<sup>58</sup> Each family grew a large garden, chickens, and several fruit trees provided produce for the families. Some families also raised rabbits. Black-eyed peas, peanuts, corn and other staples were dried or canned.<sup>59</sup> Although each household maintained their own house garden, the families exchanged surpluses, and shared in activities such as operating smokehouses, butchering, and distributing shared pork and beef.<sup>60</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.<sup>61</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:

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>62</sup> However, in the early

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<sup>57</sup> Kemp.

<sup>58</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>59</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>62</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

1960s, Icy's health deteriorated, and the family closed the store, which after being torn down, left the corner vacant.<sup>63</sup>

In 1956, Ozie Cooksey and his children were the last to arrive from Arkansas.<sup>64</sup> By the mid-1960s, as many as ninety Cooksey grandchildren, and great grandchildren lived within the confines of Cookseyville.

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 that served a larger African American population beyond the Cooksey family. Other blacks from Atwater and Castle Air Force Base also attended services. At the passing of the founding preacher, the church was deeded to Timothy Cooksey, who, in his late eighties, carries on as pastor.<sup>65</sup> Many 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 the church played in their individual and collective lives.<sup>66</sup>

The community often shared recreational activities. The children fielded two baseball teams that played for hours on the homemade diamond on the Cookseyville property.<sup>67</sup> 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>68</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>69</sup> The family even

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<sup>63</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>64</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>65</sup> Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>66</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview.,"; Renee Dunn, "Renee Dunn Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project*, ed. Scott David Peterson (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> Dunn.

<sup>68</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*; Marcum.

travelled, as a group, trips to visit distant relations in Arkansas.<sup>70</sup> Large projects such as construction also involved every able-bodied person in the community. When the home movers delivered Ozie's house everyone helped build the foundation.<sup>71</sup>

Education was important; however, unlike colonization efforts that sought to be self-sufficient, the residents of Cookseyville lived close enough to the town of Atwater that they simply took advantage of local schools.<sup>72</sup> Since Atwater was not that large, the Cooksey children made a physical impact on the school population. By the middle of the 1960s, Atwater High School filled an entire bus with youth from Cookseyville every morning and afternoon.<sup>73</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>74</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 accommodate additional homes, so many moved into Atwater, or Merced, while a few traveled farther from Cookseyville.<sup>75</sup> As the children of Sid and Olevia began to age and die, the population of Cookseyville dwindled. Some second generation Cookseys moved off the property to live in newer homes with their children,

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<sup>70</sup> Dunn.

<sup>71</sup> Kemp.

<sup>72</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>73</sup> Marcum.

<sup>74</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

<sup>75</sup> Ibid; Dunn.

or in nursing homes. 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.<sup>76</sup> In just a few generations, this small rural African American township took one family from slavery to the so-called “American Dream.”

<NEED TO WRITE A CONCLUSION>

To a certain extent the development of these historically African American rural settlements across the San Joaquin Valley result from the convergence of a wide range of factors. Westward expansion, in the San Joaquin Valley, was represented by the commercial programs labeled California colonization by speculators and developers. Efforts in by African Americans Stockton, Fresno, and Bowles flow into this broader stream of activity. Likewise, Allensworth sits squarely in the period of California colonization, but also serves to culminate the the Exoduster movement that created such all-black communities as Nicodemus, Boley, Lanston, and other towns throughout Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and elsewhere. Fairmead and South Dos Palos/Midway are also tied to the era of colonization, as these communities started out as colonies—not black colonies—but colonies like the dozens of other colonies that grew up across the Valley floor. However, during the 1930, in response to external forces—the Second Great Migration, the Southern Diaspora, and the transplantation of the Dust Bowl era Okies and Arkies—these communities began to attract large numbers of African Americans, primarily because Jim Crow era practices that prevented them from living in neighboring communities. Following World War II, African American workers from shipyards and airplane factories from

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<sup>76</sup> Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

Richmond to Long Beach arrived in the valley, often with enough cash to invest in property. With exclusionary practices well established to keep blacks out of some communities and existing communities providing a safety net of churches and businesses, these predominately black settlements attracted many of these new African Americans, after the war. This is most noticeable in Fairmead and the South Dos Palos region, but is also manifest in the last all-black enclave to have been established: Cookseyville, which began immediately following World War II and continued to thrive into the mid-1980s.

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