Where Water Flows Communities Grow:
Water and Rural California African American Settlements

California's Great Central Valley, once an alluvial plain between two mountain ranges has become one of the most productive agricultural regions on Earth. This transformation was only possible because of the massive redistribution of the water that once filled numerous lakes and rivers into irrigation systems and urban water works. Begun with a series of irrigation districts at the end of the nineteenth century, according to the Bureau of Reclamation of the United States Department of the Interior, the current *Central Valley Project*, as the current federal project is known includes twenty dams and reservoirs, almost a dozen powerplants, and five hundred miles of canals, conduits, tunnels, and related facilities to manages more than nine million acre-feet of water, including about 5 million acre-feet for farms – enough to irrigate about 3 million acres as well as enough water to supply close to a million households.[1] These numbers do not include the hundreds of additional miles of canals, pumping stations, and other features of the many irrigation districts throughout the region. California has lots of water. Unfortunately, little of it is where it needs to be for either irrigation or human consumption.

In the following presentation, I explore how the lack of potable water, as well as water for irrigation, contributed to the fate of many rural all- or majority-African American settlements that cropped up beyond the city limits of farming towns or on the edge of cotton fields, orchards, and vineyards throughout Central California. Utilizing archival material, as well as first-person interviews and other ethnographic sources, this paper surveys how Allensworth, Lanare, Teviston, Fairmead, and other black rural settlements struggled to survive while the land under their feet turned to dust without the life-giving power of water.

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[1] Bureau of Reclamation, "Central Valley Project", U.S. Department of the Interior http://www.usbr.gov/projects/Project.jsp?proj_Name=Central+Valley+Project (accessed September 4 2013).

For a number of years, now, I have been studying a series of rural historically black settlements throughout Central California's San Joaquin Valley. Whether planned colonies like Allensworth; unincorporated town sites like Lanare, Fairmead, or Teviston; or labor camps such as Harris Tractor Farm or Cadillac Jack's Camp, my research has focused on not only re-collecting the history of these communities, but on trying to understand the processes that created the need for such settlements and maintained them, as well as those factors that relate to social memory, forgetting, and nostalgia. One of the earliest works I encountered when I began this research was Eleanor Mason Ramsey's 1977 dissertation, *Allensworth—A Study of Social Change*.[2] This unpublished work, which earned Ramsey a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, provides information about this black colonization effort. Beyond providing historical narrative, Ramsey suggested an interdisciplinary, ethnohistorical approach to the examination of similar communities:

> The ethnohistorian has as a goal the presentation of a group's behavior from the participant's perspective. Obviously, it is not enough to simply document the material and social changes which have occurred from one point in time to another. The investigator must go further and examine the cultural processes which motivate the individuals in the group. To do so necessitates heavy reliance on the memories of the participants, who must be seen as active agents…[3]

Ramsey's reliance on first person memory, in the form of interviews and personal correspondence as a method of scrutinizing the motivations behind the creation of community underscores that, beyond a few isolated and far-flung newspaper articles, few primary or secondary sources offer specifics concerning the settlements at the heart of my research.

In 1961, John C. Ewers wrote:

> When the archeologist climbs out of his excavation... when the ethnologist records his last field note... when the folklorist turns off his tape recorder... and

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[2] Eleanor Mason Ramsey, "Allensworth-a Study in Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977).
[3] Ibid., 4.

> when the historian rewinds his microfilm... each have concluded an experience that will contribute substantially to the cause of ethno history.[4]

At one point, or another, I have worn each of those hats. It is this interdisciplinarity that I bring to this investigation, relying upon those techniques, tools, and theories that best apply to the work at hand in each step of my research. I too must place "…heavy reliance on the memories of the participants…"[5]

In 1908, five African American businessmen, in Los Angeles including Col. Allen Allensworth, established the *California Colony and Home Promotion Association* to promote a so-called *race colony* in southern Tulare County.[6] The town of Allensworth was one of two neighboring communities, less than five miles apart, developed by the white developer, William O'Bryan, and his *Pacific Farming Company*. These two colonies, Allensworth and Alpaugh developed within different contexts. Alpaugh was located on a parcel of land known as Atwell Island, a tract in the dry Tulare Lake basin with fertile alluvial soil. Early on, O'Brian drilled ten wells and installed a city water system.[7]

Conversely, Allensworth was situated on highly alkali soil, and although the original plans for the colony called for a domestic water system and agricultural irrigation, neither was ever delivered by O'Brian, and his Pacific Farming Company.[8] Alpaugh, built on good land, was provided with the water needed to survive, Allensworth, built on poor land, was to receive none.

Allensworth and Alpaugh were not unique valley communities in one respect. Like many of their neighbors, they were planned agricultural communities, promoted by land developers for profit. From the 1890s through the 1920s, this process, which had begun in Orange County, was often referred to as the California Colonization Project.

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[4] John C. Ewers, "Symposium on the Concept of Ethnohistory - Comment," *Ethnohistory* 8, no. 3 (1961).
[5] Ramsey, 4.
[6] Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1919), 154.
[7] Ramsey, 49-50.
[8] Ibid., 50-53.

M. C. Coats, of the California Development Board, explained this process of colonization in California's inland valleys, in 1912:

> [T]he land company selects good land near transportation, grades the avenues, puts on water, builds school houses… and finally handles these products to the best advantage for the settler. This is California in 1912, up to date…All that is required is energy. Nature furnishes the other requisites of sunshine [and] soil…[9]

In her unpublished dissertation about Allensworth, Eleanor Ramsey described the processes specific to Allensworth:

> Most agricultural communities… were organized on small tracts averaging 10,000 acres, subdivided into 50x100 foot town lots and 1 to 29 acre rural parcels. Acquisition of the vast acreage associated with large-scale farming was rarely possible and certainly not economically feasible within this scheme… Group settlement was the business strategy employed to generate a profitable number of sales in the shortest time frame.[10]

This process required three distinct steps: land acquisition, recruitment, and group settlement. In Allensworth, with the land acquired by *Pacific Farming*, the last two steps became the responsibility of the Colonel Allensworth's group, *the California Colony and Home Promotion Association*.

In 1912, Allen Allensworth wrote in the *New York Age* newspaper that the establishment of the Colony was to "organize a town, to become a model city, surrounded by intelligent farmers."[11] Col. Allensworth, echoing the sentiments of the so-called Atlanta Compromise, suggested that African Americans "must change public opinion by meeting its demands…"[12] The town of Allensworth, therefore, was an opportunity for African Americans to resolve what Allensworth dubbed, "their subordinate caste frustration."[13] Several settlers who participated in

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[9] "Diversified Farms Are Newest Feature of State's Growth," *San Francisco Call*, 2 March 1912.
[10] Ramsey, 45-46.
[11] Allen Allensworth, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Age*, January 11, 1912. Thomas Fortune established the *New York Age* (as the *New York Freeman*), in 1884. This was one of the *Race Papers* frequently used by Col. Allensworth and William Payne, the colony's main promoters to attract potential pioneers.
[12] Allen Allensworth, "Social Status of the Negro," *New York Age*, June 10, 1889.
[13] 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): 268.

the building of Allensworth had been involved with the Exoduster movement elsewhere, including Joshua Singleton, the son of "Pap" Singleton.[14] Singleton arrived with his wife and eleven-year-old son, Henry, in 1912.[15] Another veteran Race Man, James Alexander Hackett, who had taken a large group of African Americans from North Carolina to San Francisco, saw the potential of the new colony and built a house there in 1910. Upon his retirement in 1917, he moved with his family to Allensworth, where he remained until his death in 1932.[16]

During the first five years of the colony, promotion fell upon the shoulders of Allensworth and William Payne, another member of the board of directors. It was their responsibility to recruit residents to make their planned community a success.[17] Occasionally, Journee White, conducted speaking tours to promote the colony as far away as New Orleans, while Allensworth and Payne focused on speaking engagements throughout California.[18] Advertising materials included a promotional newspaper, the *Sentiment Maker*; various circulars and flyers; and news releases to both the white and black press, including so-called *race papers* such as the *Western Reserve*, the *Oakland Sunshine*, the *Los Angeles New Age*, the *Los Angeles Eagle*, and the *New York Age*. [19] Local white papers, such as the *Tulare Register*, the *Visalia Daily Times*, and the *Delano Record* also published promotional material. By April 1914, the *Los Angeles New Age* began running a regular column called "Allensworth Notes."[20]

The Pacific Farming Company subdivided Allensworth into approximately eleven hundred city lots and one-, five-, and ten-acre rural parcels. City lots sold for between one and four hundred dollars, depending upon size and location. The price for the rural lots included an

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[14] Lawrence B. de Graaf et al., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), 156.
[15] Ramsey, 85.
[16] Ibid., 82-83.
[17] Ibid., 75.
[18] Ibid., 77.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 78.

additional charge for irrigation water from the Allensworth Mutual Water Company, based on the total number of acres acquired.[21] The fertile, irrigated land surrounding Alpaugh sold for thirty dollars per acre, whereas the alkali soil with not access to irrigation water in the Allensworth area was priced at one hundred and ten dollars an acre. By 1913, *Pacific Farming*, having earned a large return on its Allensworth investment, withdrew from the venture. Rather than provide the promised domestic and irrigation water systems, O'Brian and his company assigned the (now worthless) shares of stock of the two water companies to the residents of Allensworth. This transferred the problem, and any associated debt, to the town.[22] Joshua Singleton remarked:

> The venture was a skin game, plain and simple—White men cheating Black men. Pacific Farming did not intend to honor the contract, and the Race could not command the political support to make it do so.[23]

By 1914, the public utility company in Tulare County had still not extended electricity to Allensworth, and used a recession as an excuse to further delay doing so.[24] Water, power, and other infrastructure issues would continue to plague the fledgling community. Within a year, the Santa Fe Railroad installed a spur line to Alpaugh and bypassed Allensworth, shutting down the station that had provided transportation of goods and people in and out of the all-black town. This was a major blow to the economy of Allensworth.[25] Within six years of the creation of the colony, the town still had limited water, no power, and lost rail service. After 1914, all political activity focused on Allensworth centered on issues concerning the local water board and the necessity of providing municipal and agricultural water.[26] The population of Allensworth peaked

[21] Generally, the water companies existed only on paper. Although the developer initially drilled three of the promised ten wells, few provisions were made for pumps, irrigation systems, or town water.
[22] Ramsey, 57-63.
[23] Henry Singleton, "Interview with Eleanor Mason Ramsey," (1775). (cited in Ramsey, 155-158.)
[24] Ramsey, 63.
[25] Ibid., 65.
[26] Ibid., 135.

during 1914, at about one hundred and sixty residents. As of 1920, after almost ten years, the population of Allensworth never exceeded one hundred and fifty settlers.[27] By 1930, the population of Allensworth dropped to just forty-four.[28] A few Allensworth farmers were able to make a solid living from the land; however, most residents combined part-time or seasonal work with part-time farming.[29]

Allensworth's boosterism also contributed to the expansion of African American communities in other nearby towns. Many immigrants, after seeing the harsh conditions in Allensworth, settled in nearby towns where they perceived better-established infrastructures and greater economic opportunities. Between 1910 and 1924, several families moved from Allensworth to Tulare.[30] In 1919, Lee Crane left Allensworth for Fowler to pursue truck farming (commercially growing vegetables for market), rather than concentrate on growing sugar beets, which was, at the time, the focus of agricultural efforts in the colony because of the lack of water for irrigation.[31]

By the time the California Department of Water Resources determined that Allensworth's water supply contained unacceptable levels of arsenic, in the early 1930s, just thirty-four families still lived within the colony.[32] Their departure marked the end. Allensworth was one of the last endeavors of the Exoduster movement. Based on a philosophy that stressed the ideals of self-sufficiency, the importance of education, and a focus on community building, the goals of Allensworth were lofty. However, it never achieved most of those lofty goals. The town was plagued from the outset by neglect from the developer, which resulted in a domestic water

[27] de Graaf et al., 156.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ramsey.150.
[30] Michael L. Smith, "The Edna Wade Project" http://ednawadeproject.com/Overview.html (accessed March 2008).
[31] Beasley, 153.
[32] Ramsey, 189.

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.

Founded just 4 years after Allensworth, the community of Fairmead looked to be one of the state's most successful colonization ventures. Unlike Allensworth, however, this colony was never envisioned as a community, which would ultimately host a majority African American population. Coats description of the Colonization Project, above, used Fairmead as a prime example of the process:

> The Sharon estate… sold part of its Madera ranch to raise money for San Francisco building construction… With the development of the underground water this region will soon fill with small farmers. Fairmead colony is the name applied to the new district. Surveyors have been at work… platting the farms and laying out the townsite on the railroad… several successful wells have already been put down… it will be the only large town between Madera and Merced and will be the shipping point for more than 60,000 acres of land…[33]

North of Madera, and initiated before the start of the nearby Chowchilla Colony (which would be racially exclusive through the 1960s), Fairmead appeared to have everything. For almost a decade, newspapers around the nation 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, every day. 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 from San Francisco and provided accommodations to celebrities, politicians, and businessmen. Mennonites from Russia and Germany arrived to purchase agricultural and town lots. Farmers were encouraged to irrigate their fields with groundwater, pumped from wells as shallow as sixty feet. Unlike some of the neighboring colonies and developments, the

[33] "Diversified Farms Are Newest Feature of State's Growth," *San Francisco Call*, 2 March 1912.

promoters of Fairmead felt that abundant groundwater would be sufficient for both town and irrigation uses. However, as the population and the subsequent demand for water increased, Fairmead, like Allensworth began to dry up. By 1920, the *Cooperative Land and Trust*, the developers who built Fairmead, closed their local office and moved to Fresno, having profited as much as possible from their initial investment.

Throughout the twenties and thirties, businesses left Fairmead, often relocating to the larger, incorporated towns of Chowchilla and Madera. By the early thirties, the lumber yard, cheese factory, hotel, and most of the other businesses were gone, with the exception of a market or two and several juke joints—or as the locals preferred to call them, lounges.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as white settlers moved out of Fairmead, African American families moved into Fairmead. These black families came to work the fields of the San Joaquin Valley. As in many areas of the Valley, Madera County relied heavily on the production of Cotton, the number one cash crop in the county. Cotton required a skilled labor force, and many blacks from the American South arrived ready to work, skilled in planting, chopping, and picking the valuable crop. For African Americans, the choice of where to live hinged on several factors; primary among them were exclusionary practices that prevented them from moving into nearby communities. Madera, the County Seat, was originally known as the *Alabama Colony*. Founded in 1869, by former Southerners who "lost their fortunes, their positions and were unhappy under the existing social conditions,"[34] white southerners who had abandoned the South during Reconstruction, established the town, although the majority of those original settlers returned to Alabama by 1877.[35] The original Alabama Colony was not considered a success in the early days of the colonization efforts, in the Valley. As one early chronicler put it:

[34] Rintha Robbins, "Alabama Settlement: Founding of Madera in Madera County" (Fresno State College, 1955), 2.
[35] Ibid., 7.

> 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.[36]

At the time Fairmead was being built, Madera had its own irrigation district, as part of the statewide initiatives that irrigated many parts of the Valley, and had ceased to be as exclusive as it had been under the expatriate Confederates during Reconstruction. However, Chowchilla, which had begun construction the same year as Fairmead, remained exclusively white until the 1960s. Banks in neither Madera nor Chowchilla were willing to make loans to non-whites, making it difficult for African Americans to purchase homes in or land near those communities. Fairmead, as an unincorporated community under the jurisdiction of Madera County was unable to enforce housing restrictions. This would open the door to black settlers in and around Fairmead. Fairmead landowners sought potential new residents from other populations. One such landholder, Jacob Yakel, a Jewish farmer in the Fairmead region, who offered African Americans both town and farm lots for sale, as well as the all-important financing necessary to purchase these properties. According to one resident, to whom Yakel sold twenty acres in the late 1930s, the family was able, through hard work, to pay off the loan for their property in just seven years.[37]

By the 1920s, the Amey family was already established in the Dixieland region of Fairmead. Enoch Amey, the patriarch of the Amey family, along with his wife Lula and their ten children, at one time owned more than two hundred acres in the area and was directly

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[36] 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), 14.
[37] Steele.

responsible for bringing many of the African Americans into the area.[38] Enoch Amey founded the Ethiopian Coptic Church of Fairmead, the first black church in Madera County, in the 1920s.

Many African American families began moving into Fairmead, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, an inward migration that continued, at various levels, until the 1950s. Both census records and interviews indicate that many of these newcomers arrived through the mechanism often referred to as stem-family migration: family members migrate from one location to another, to live close to other family members. They came from Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Illinois, Georgia, North Carolina and other parts of the country.[39] Henry Brown an African American who initially purchased twenty acres from Jacob Yakel had two goals: raise cotton and get his family far away from the rising tide of the Ku Klux Klan, in Arkansas.

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 archivist at the local Mennonite university why the Fairmead church had shut down, his reply was "there probably wasn't anything there for them."[40]

Whether it was the changing demographics or the lack of irrigation and potable water, whites continued to flee Fairmead, as the black population continued to increase. Although never completely black, the African American population was, by far, in the majority, and sustained a

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[38] Tony Lopresti, Nila Natarajan, and Oriana Sondoval, *Tracing the Roots of Neglect: Understanding the History of Discriminatory and Disinvestment in the Communities of South Dos Palos and Fairmead* (Berkeley CA: University of California, Berkeley, 2010).
[39] Most of these names were taken directly from the handwritten census records from the Federal Census of 1930. These spellings are based on these records, some of which may have been incorrectly recorded while others are difficult to read in the original census-taker's handwriting.
[40] Personal communication.

larger black population, for a longer time, than Allensworth. It is ironic that the lack of water caused African Americans to move out of Allensworth, and, at almost the same time, made it possible for blacks to purchase land and move into Fairmead.

Recently, Fairmead residents, along with planners from Madera County, agreed to designate Fairmead as within Chowchilla's secondary sphere of influence. This designation means that although Fairmead is not close enough to Chowchilla's current borders to be annexed, it can (and in some cases, must) be considered, in future plans. Jointly, the communities of Fairmead and Chowchilla have an increased chance to apply for Federal and State funds for water and sewage improvements—both of which are necessary for any future growth in Fairmead proper. Recently, the Madera County Planning Department published, in anticipation of future growth in both Berenda and Chowchilla, a Fairmead Specific Plan for future development of the community.[41] The plan, is supposed to be "a first step forward in serving a low income community with a crippled infrastructure system."[42] The county hopes to provide a major overhaul of Fairmead's infrastructure, to promote industrial and commercial development in Fairmead.[43] One aspect of all this city and county planning is that, after more than a hundred years, the possibility of Fairmead getting access to sufficient potable water (and sewage treatment) is beginning to look like a distinct possibility. Local residents have taken an active role in that future. At the core of this operation is the Fairmead Community and Friends operation, established by Barbara Nelson, Nettie Amey, Lawyer Cooper, and Annie Cooper. Since that time, the group, with its thirteen member board of directors, advocates for community issues that relate to the Fairmead area. According to the group:

[41] The Madera County Planning Department, *Fairmead Specific Plan* (Madera California: County of Madera, 2008).
[42] Ibid., 6.
[43] Ibid., 8-9.

> Their goal is to… help make Fairmead a better place for families to live… The community is still in need of a new water and sewer systems, safe paved roads, sidewalks and adequate streetlights. Fairmead Community & Friends is working to get a public park and a multi-culture community center to meet, work together and socialize with their neighbors.[44]

It was Fairmead Community and Friends who, through constant pressure on county officials were able to get the county to upgrade a recent water storage facility that, although still insufficient to the needs of the community, has greatly mitigated the worst problems related to water in the homes of Fairmead residents.

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 both Allensworth and Fairmead, Dos Palos started out as part of the Colonization projects of the early twentieth century, with Dos Palos developed by San Francisco's wealthiest butchers, Miller and Lux; at the time, one of the richest and most powerful business partnerships in the State. In 1891, the Southern Pacific Railroad built a depot and hotel for railroad workers in the new community of Dos Palos.[45] The town center was developed as a market center on the Merced County side of the colony, with rural colonies within Fresno County to remain farmland. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the majority population of the new community consisted primarily of Italian immigrant families.[46] However, like Allensworth and Fairmead, well water was so unreliable, at that time, that water had to be brought in, on the train, for the earliest settlers.[47] Even with limited water, 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 25th edition of the Pacific Rural

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[44] Vickie Ortiz, "Draft Promotional Materials," ed. Fairmead Community and Friends (Fairmead, CA: 2012).
[45] Docia Robinson, "Midway District an African American Community in the 1960s," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 1989), 157.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Press, of that year.[48] 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.[49] However, similar claims about the abundance of shallow wells had been made in the Fairmead Colonies, until that aquifer had been depleted and deeper and deeper wells were required.

The first African American family to move into Dos Palos (now South Dos Palos), may have been the King family, in 1924. Additional black families from Texas, and other points east, and those who could purchase land often attempted to grow cotton, while those without their own farms often worked cotton fields owned by local white and black farmers. By 1930, with the steadily growing black community in Dos Palos, Reverend James Peterson arrived in Dos Palos and established the First Baptist Church.[50] In the early thirties, the community split. As more and more African Americans moved into Dos Palos, white businesses and families moved several miles north to establish a new town. With them went the post office, and the new town became known as Dos Palos (the name of the original town and post office), 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 restricted from living in Dos Palos proper) became known as Midway, because it is mid-way between the two Dos Paloses. Although the site of original Dos Palos Colony (now known as South Dos Palos) was selected because of access to the railroad, the new site was chosen because there was better access to both ground water and irrigation. Over time, the commercial buildings in South Dos Palos, many of which were still owned by the white businessmen of Dos Palos, were boarded up before ultimately being razed, leaving, as in Fairmead, little to no trace of the economic history of the once thriving area.

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[48] Pacific Rural Press, "Progress in Merced County," *Pacific Rural Press*, April 25, 1903 1903.
[49] Pacific Rural Press, "Advertisement," *Pacific Rural Press*, January 25, 1913 1913.
[50] 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.

Under Lyndon B. Johnson's *War on Poverty*, South Dos Palos received several grants to build one of the first *Head Start* programs in the area, as well as install a water and sewer system.[51] Like similar communities—Lanare, Teviston, and Sunny Acres—many residents carried water to their homes in buckets and milk cans prior to the building of the new system.[52] Now, half a century later, as in Fairmead, the existing water and sewage systems are in disrepair and insufficient to meet current demands. The black and Hispanic residents of South Dos Palos have organized, centered on the Carver Center, between Midway and South Dos Palos, and are looking to partner with various organizations and agencies to try to emulate even the small progress made in places such as Fairmead.

Many blacks settled in Tulare and Kings Counties—some of them in and around the township of Teviston, outside Pixley, near Allensworth State Park. Over the years, large numbers left for other parts of the state seeking work, while others moved to nearby towns like Pixley, Tulare, and Hanford. A few of the old-timers remain, although Spanish-speaking farm laborers now dominate Teviston.[53]

Teviston's population resulted directly out of the efforts of a few individuals. Those who brought African Americans to the Pixley area needed farm labor. Three such men who contributed to this migration were a white sheriff in Oklahoma; his younger, who ran a labor camp in the Tulare Lake Basin; and a bus driver named Robert "Boots" Parker. These three provided a steady stream of labor to the largest Central California landowners like J. G. Boswell.[54] The sheriff of McCurtain County, Oklahoma, guaranteed safe passage to blacks from

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[51] Katherine Brooks Lane, "An Early African American Family," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 2008), 109; Dewey Todd, "Cotton Attracts Oklahomans," in *Dos Palos High School Reunion*(Dos Palos: 2008), 112.
[52] Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002; Todd, 112.
[53] Arax.
[54] Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), 258.

his county who wanted to get away from the perpetual debt in which they were trapped as part of the sharecropping system. Initially, thirty-five dollars was the fare to the San Joaquin Valley. Thirty-two times, beginning in 1948, a former black bootlegger, picked up groups of African Americans on the steps of the County courthouse to begin the fifteen hundred mile trip to Teviston. Under the cover of darkness, he picked up other sharecroppers across Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma at secret rendezvous in fields or wooded areas, or under bridges.[55] Other labor contractors, similarly transported large numbers of blacks to the San Joaquin Valley from Oklahoma on flatbed trucks, the migrants riding fifteen hundred miles sitting on homemade benches bolted to the truck bed.[56] However, Teviston was actually little more than a dusty spot nestled between the cotton and produce fields in the heat of the San Joaquin Valley sun. Most of the residents lived in small wood frame homes, with no access to water or electricity. Near the end of 1959, Teviston installed a water pump atop a recently dug, deep-water well, to provide, for the first time, water to the more than three hundred residents of the dusty village. Prior to that, Teviston residents carried water from the nearby towns of Pixley, and Earlimart, in milk cans, drums, and buckets.[57] A year before the installation of the new pump, Bard McAllister—a "bearded Quaker in a red beret"–began working with Teviston residents to form their own water district, dig a well, and provide water to their small houses and shacks.[58] Forty years later, even with limited running water, little had changed:

> Teviston…is a glorified squatters' village on the outskirts of Pixley. The city cops don't come here, and neither to do the city sewer lines. There are no stoplights, no schools and no businesses, except for a soda machine. [59]

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[55] Arax, A24.
[56] Arax and Wartzman, 262.
[57] "The Gift," *Time*, Dec. 28 1959.
[58] Arax.
[59] Ibid.

Although many of the black residents of Teviston owned sufficient land to farm at a subsistence level, they had no agricultural water. Excluded from the Pixley Irrigation District, even though the canals ran through their lands, the residents in, and around, the small black township had no access to water for irrigation. While the fields surrounding their settlement received adequate water, the residents of Teviston were actually assessed a regular annual payment to offset any water that might have trickled from the canals into their wells.[60] Today, a few of the African American settlers remain in Teviston. Hispanic farm workers have replaced blacks, both in the fields, and as the majority population of their small community.[61] In Teviston, as elsewhere, where the water flowed, power followed.

Labor contractors brought many of the residents of another black township in Kings County.[62] African American field hands who worked for Boswell and Salyer originally lived in a labor camp at one end of Corcoran. White locals simply called the area “Nigger Town.”[63] Saloons and juke joints, illegal gambling, brothels, and a couple of all-black churches were scattered among the tents and tarpaper shacks on that side of town. However, the camp did not offer the sort of life many of the Black Okies came to California sought. Families who wanted a better life moved across town to form a new black settlement, initially dubbed Boot Hill and covering forty acres just outside of Corcoran. Edwin Matheny, a salesman from Tulare, like Jacob Yakel in Fairmead, sold the land to African American clients for a low cash down payment and reasonable terms that he handled himself. He also moved in houses to the parcels of this small black settlement. Howard Toney, who had built a small, functional shack on the property he bought from Matheny, purchased two such houses for his property. He rented one

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[60] Ibid., A25.
[61] Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: Land of Hope Is Sown with Tragedy," *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2002.
[62] Arax and Wartzman, 258.
[63] Ibid.

out while his son lived in the other.[64] However, the homes had no running water. As elsewhere, the residents of Boot Hill had to carry water in milk cans, and buckets, from a single spigot in Corcoran.

In the summer of 1964, Toney began the process of bringing running water to the homes of his neighbors. Federal assistance money, through the *War on Poverty* program, was available to help the nation's poorest populations, and the people of Boot Hill qualified. Toney and his neighbors hoped to demonstrate local support for the project by enlisting the city of Corcoran. Hoping to get the city to install less than a mile of water mains from the edge of town to the black township, he and his supporters approached city officials. Corcoran was willing to allow the black enclave to connect to the municipal water system; however, the city was not disposed to provide any assistance to make it happen. Shortly after, Toney, and his neighbors, formed the Sunny Acres Water District, which received a forty-six thousand dollar federal loan to install municipal water to the newly renamed black township. The city of Corcoran did eventually install the water mains halfway to the black community. Sunny Acres was the name given to the enclave by Toney to replace the unofficial name of Boot Hill. Although Corcoran would eventually annex the Mexican American neighborhood on the outskirts of town, to this day, Sunny Acres remains separate, and apart, from Corcoran.[65]

Hispanics now make up majority of the population of another historically black settlement known as Lanare, just four miles west of Riverdale, in Fresno County. Today, over one hundred blacks make up almost twenty percent of Lanare's residents. Scattered along the edge of two miles of Mt. Whitney Avenue, and partly up several side roads, this dusty little collection of homes, trailers, three churches and a mini-mart, was once home to an even larger

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[64] Ibid., 272.
[65] Ibid., 285.

population of African Americans. Whereas the community once featured juke joints, and illegal games of poker and dice, today, it is little more than a sleepy, dusty backwater for farm workers and the poorest of the rural poor. On one of the three north-south roads that cut across Lanare sits the small, aging, ramshackle Lanare community center, surrounded by a dirt yard and a chain link fence. In contrast, the predominately-white town of Riverdale sports a recently built, large, freshly painted community center, with trim lawns and weed-free flowerbeds. It is impossible to ignore the stark differences between the two communities.

Named after an early landowner, L. A. Nares, Lanare grew after the Second World War as labor contractors brought in African Americans, primarily from Arkansas and Oklahoma. As elsewhere, these contractors initially focused on hands to work cotton.[66]

Like Matheny and Yakel, Eugene Tomasetti sold parcels in Lanare to black farmworkers on installment plans. His son Louis continued selling parcels in the community until as recently as 1992.

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. South of the road, on land with water, the largest business, Powell's Warehouse had been a lumberyard before it had been converted to a grain warehouse after World War II. Many of the residents of Lanare found seasonal work in the warehouse, or driving trucks during the two grain harvesting seasons. 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

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[66] Robert Powell, (Fresno CA: 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, after 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.

provided reasonably steady employment for many Lanare residents. During the late 1960s and 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 settlements, 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. Unfortunately, just as Fairmead still struggles with sufficient water for her population, Lanare residents struggle with the added problems created by having water so polluted by agricultural chemicals that they rely on an expensive, water treatment facility that they can no longer support through local property taxes. While other possible funding sources are being sought, the treatment facility has been shuttered and residents are forced to purchase drinking water or risk their health with water from the local system.

The lack of access to clean water destroyed the hopes and dreams of the middle class blacks who sought to build Allensworth. However, that same condition – lack of access to water – led to the accidental creation, over time, of other historically black rural settlements in the region. It is sad to consider that white residents abandoned these unincorporated communities because they had poor access to water, which, in turn, made them some of the few available options for people of color. Fairmead, South Dos Palos, and Lanare, like Allensworth, were initiated as part of the California Colonization Project. Allensworth, as a project, dried up and blew away. However, the residual infrastructure in the other communities provided a foundation upon which these poorer settlements were able to hang their hopes and dreams. The absence of water – and the power connected to such access – created a void into which African American settlers, powerless to go elsewhere, ventured to create their own communities. Over time, they

built churches, operated businesses and farms, and accomplished many the goals (although to varying degrees of success) that the founders of Allensworth laid out at the creation of their failed colony. Conditions that halted development in one community allowed for the fulfillment of those same objectives elsewhere.

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