The Black Towns
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MOST BLACK-TOWN RESIDENTS were disciples of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, which at least overtly emphasized concentration on the economic and moral betterment of blacks at the expense of political and social demands. From the beginning, however, settlers entered the new towns intent upon enjoying a full political life. For some, this represented their first opportunity to direct their own destiny through the ballot box. Although lacking experience, most citizens refused to be deterred and were soon engrossed in the raging battles over the merits of various candidates and issues. Local politics were serious business, and, as election day approached, the heat of the campaign spread throughout the town. Just before an election in Boley, mass meetings were called and candidates took turns publicly tracing and commenting on each other's life histories, sometimes nearly coming to blows in the process.\(^1\)

Even though the black towns possessed a formally elected government, usually a mayor and council, leaders sometimes called open meetings to provide a forum for debate or to gauge public sentiment on a specific issue of mutual interest. Women were prohibited from voting in elections, and in
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early Clearview only property owners could cast a ballot. But in specially called town meetings all adult members of the community, regardless of sex or economic standing, could take part in the general discussion. For example, in 1904 the federal government designated Clearview as the name of the post office there and refused several requests to change it to Lincoln. At a mass meeting in August, citizens passed a resolution changing the town name to correspond to the postal designation. And on at least two occasions between 1905 and 1910, Mound Bayou residents met en masse, once to formulate plans to close a “blind tiger” (illegal saloon) operating within the town limits, and again to present a united community front against the repeal of prohibition in Bolivar County.²

Newspaper editors boasted of racial solidarity and argued that the consensus found within the black towns clearly set them apart from neighboring white communities, said to be constantly besieged with political squabbles. Despite typical claims like “There is no town where the people work more in harmony than those who inhabit this . . . city,” the distrust of public officials and factional fights were commonplace.³ As in most small communities, politics revolved around cliques which warred over the adequacy of services, taxes and their use, the cost of business licenses, and operation of the public school. Although the editor at Langston attempted to calm tempers on all sides, citizens there were embroiled throughout most of 1895 in conflicts with the school board and town council over attempts to pass bonds for school construction and what some residents felt was an excessive occupations tax. By mid-August, one irate group threatened to circulate a petition to dissolve incorporation of the town unless council members resigned. Some Langston settlers charged that during the community’s early years town organizers used the local government and school district as a screen to write fraudulent warrants amounting to $20,000. Once detected, most of those involved in the scheme
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fled, leaving the people to pay the obligation, a task which took until 1915 to complete.4

Unlike blacks living in mixed communities, people in the black towns were shielded from white domination, and, as their political interest and involvement grew, ordinary disagreements were sometimes blown out of proportion. During the spring of 1911, City Clerk E. R. Cavil charged that the Boley council, dominated by promoter Thomas M. Haynes, accepted illegal claims presented to it. At a May council meeting, the Haynes majority voted to remove Cavil as clerk, declaring the office vacant. He refused to accept their decision, resign, or to surrender his records, contending that the council possessed no such authority. When Cavil's books were later forcibly seized, he instituted legal action and sought public support, publishing an extended account of the incident in the local newspaper.5

Disputes over this and other issues continued in Boley, and by the time of the 1914 meeting of the National Negro Business League in Muskogee, the conflict in the town had come to Booker T. Washington's attention. Boley businessmen were anxious to have Washington visit there sometime during the league meeting in August and had extended him an invitation. Washington hesitated. Always careful to avoid any public display of racial disunity in his presence, he instructed Emmett Scott, his private secretary, to check into the matter and correct it before he would accept the Boley offer. Scott in turn contacted T. J. Elliott, president of the Oklahoma State Negro Business League and prominent black merchant in Muskogee, asking him to visit Boley to investigate. Elliott, however, was "already aware of a somewhat unpleasant situation over there" between two rival factions. In early January, 1914, Elliott met with what he called "two political clubs, each clamoring for supremacy," and warned both that unless their differences were resolved a Washington visit was out of the question. On January 21, Elliott assured Scott that Washington could now safely include Boley on his itinerary, because "they are all in line...
and agree to work under the leadership of the State Business
League movement.” Scott checked again during the sum-
mer before finally committing Washington to the visit, and
on June 22, 1914, Elliott assured him that all factionalism
in Boley was wiped out and that leaders there were now
working together.

Booker T. Washington also took a keen interest in
Mound Bayou’s development, and from Tuskegee he chan-
nceled funds donated by Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosen-
wald, and other white philanthropists into various town
projects. Washington was well acquainted with Isaiah T.
Montgomery, the town father, but it was Charles Banks, the
energetic cashier of the Bank of Mound Bayou and promoter
of several local enterprises, who became his personal con-
fidant. In addition to his many business investments, Banks
was an active Republican, and for several years he kept
Washington abreast of political affairs in Mississippi. By
1907, he had risen to the first vice-presidency of the National
Negro Business League, second only to Washington himself,
and president of the state organization in Mississippi. After
Washington’s death in 1915, the ill feeling between Banks
and Montgomery, smoldering for years, finally surfaced, and
the two leaders and their respective following battled for
political and economic supremacy in the town. For a time,
two separate governments attempted to rule Mound Bayou,
each claiming legitimacy. After a mysterious murder there
in early 1917, Governor Theodore Bilbo intervened in the
struggle, sending in the National Guard and issuing a pro-
clamation recognizing the Montgomery faction as the legal
government.7

In comparison to the general apathy found in American
society, black-town residents were almost totally politicized.
During Boley’s early years, an average of 80 percent of its
eligible voters flocked to the polls. The elimination of regis-
tration in advance of municipal elections and the use of
secret ballots after 1915 encouraged political participation.
Although Boley was strongly Republican, two parties vied
for public support inside the town. At the first general election held there in April, 1906, voters could choose between candidates, all of whom had paid a $3 filing fee, running on either the Citizens' or the People's ticket. Nicodemus, too, was Republican, and as an illustration of political interest, 70 percent of the qualified voters in Nicodemus Township cast ballots in a March, 1887, bond election.8

In addition to taking an orthodox stand on taxes, law and order, improvements, and schools, black-town politicians appealed to voters on the basis of past service to the community, concern for the common people, and practical business experience. Since many residents lacked formal education, candidates frequently belittled it as a necessary prerequisite for holding public office. In announcing his candidacy for justice of the peace in March, 1908, Thomas R. Ringo informed Boley voters, "I am not a graduate of any college neither have I taught law. I am simply a laboring man . . . [but] I have done more to supress horse stealing at a sacrifice to myself than any other man in the community. . . ."9 Success in business gave candidates an advantage over less fortunate opponents. From its founding to 1914, Mound Bayou's five mayors were all prominent in business or agriculture, while at least seven of Boley's nine town officials elected in 1906 could claim substantial business investments.

The mayor-council form of government found in Boley and most of the other black towns represented the system most commonly employed in working-class communities in the United States. Boley's town council, composed of five aldermen elected by wards for two-year terms, met twice monthly. At the first meeting following a general election, the council selected one of its number to serve as mayor. He, in turn, appointed councilmen to head standing committees on ordinances, streets and alleys, sanitation, and education. During a regular meeting, Boley citizens could address the council only by invitation. The marshal, justice of the peace, treasurer, assessor, and clerk were elected to office.
In conjunction with the marshal and justice of the peace, council members enforced ordinances ranging from prohibitions against discharging firearms inside the corporate limits and blocking public thoroughfares to keeping lots raked and free of trash and ensuring that private outhouses were maintained in a sanitary condition. New ordinances and fees for business licenses emanated from the council, but questions involving new taxes, bonded indebtedness, or permitting a private company to supply the community with services were usually put to the voters at a special election.\textsuperscript{10}

As long as they remained inside the confines of the black town, the people who lived, worked, and played there could conduct campaigns, pass laws, and grumble about the inaction of their elected officials. Beyond the road signs which marked the town limits, however, whites dominated county politics. Perhaps new-found freedom and isolation blinded black-town residents to the realities of American life. They rushed headlong into politics in the county, seemingly oblivious to the certain disaster awaiting them. In the fall of 1886, Hugh Lightfoot, the editor at Nicodemus, reflected the political optimism of the other towns when he predicted that inequalities would soon be a remnant of the past and that men would cease to classify one another by color.\textsuperscript{11}

The black town gave its residents a false sense of security. But, had they thought back over their previous experience with whites or had they simply observed daily events in the wider world, few would have welcomed the future. Some settlers had fled to the towns to escape the terror of night riders, and as late as 1910 the \textit{Boley Progress} claimed that southern blacks en route to that town were stopped, harassed, and molested.\textsuperscript{12} Even before the incorporation of Langston and Boley, blacks were driven forcibly out of many biracial communities in the twin territories. Such violence accelerated during the 1890's, and by the time of statehood a host of Oklahoma towns prohibited blacks inside their limits except during daylight hours.\textsuperscript{13}

A full year before the dispute over the permanent loca-
tion of the county seat, blacks living in Nicodemus were already beginning to sense the white resentment and hostility toward their involvement in politics in northwestern Kansas. The first issue of the *Western Cyclone* appeared on the streets of Nicodemus in May, 1886, and by early July its editor, Arthur Tallman, found himself engaged in journalistic exchanges with several newspapers in both Rooks and Graham counties. What normally would have passed as harmless bantering between two country editors lingered on, and racial antagonisms quickly surfaced. W. L. Chambers, editor of the *Rooks County Record*, published at Stockton, initiated an argument with Tallman when he announced that "[Edward P.] McCabe will dispense 4th of July 'tiffy' to the Ethiopians of Nicodemus on Independence Day." This slur prompted the *Cyclone* editor to question Chambers' ancestry, referring to him as "an almond eyed shoat." Tallman went on to advise Chambers, "you had better learn to pound sand into a rat hole, Creamy, before you get so 'flip.'" 

In late July, 1886, Hugh K. Lightfoot assumed editorship of the *Cyclone*. Lightfoot, who had previously worked on newspapers at Logan, Phillipsburg, and Webster, immediately pushed Nicodemus as the most desirable location for the permanent seat of Graham County. Leaders in Nicodemus hoped that the two leading contenders, Hill City and Millbrook, would reach a stalemate and turn to their town as a compromise, thus avoiding a divisive and costly campaign. Millbrook, located south of the Solomon River, had been designated temporary county seat at a special election five years earlier, but W. R. Hill, founder of Hill City, wanted the prize for his town. James P. Pomeroy, Atchison coal dealer and speculator in western Kansas lands, backed Hill, and promised to construct an elaborate courthouse in Hill City if voters would relocate the seat of government there. From the beginning it was obvious, except perhaps to the citizens of Nicodemus, that neither the boosters of Millbrook nor Hill City would ever tolerate moving the county seat to a black town.
During the spring of 1887, Hill purchased the *Western Cyclone* from Lightfoot and installed George Sanford, a white employee of Hill’s newspaper, the *Hill City Reveille*, as the new editor. Sanford maintained his residence in Hill City but traveled back and forth to Nicodemus on weekdays to conduct the business. Coming as no surprise to anyone, the *Cyclone* now openly endorsed Hill City for the county seat. From May on, the political pot continued to boil, and, as Nicodemus residents paused for a holiday on August 1 to hold their Emancipation Day Celebration, racial hatred in the area continued to grow. At that gathering, an altercation between two blacks over a business deal resulted in the shooting of an innocent bystander, and a fist fight broke out between an intoxicated white man and an Indian.15

The fracas at Nicodemus generated responses from some of the white newspaper editors in the immediate vicinity. H. N. Boyd at the Logan *Freeman* simply reported the fights without comment, but W. L. Chambers of the *Rooks County Record* implied that such violence was typical of black behavior, telling his readers that Nicodemus visitors “had a monkey and parrot time up there, in which two men nearly lost their lives, and in which a revolver, a razor, and a pair of knuckles figured largely.” Chambers was especially irked by “our wooly-headed Ethiopian friend, H. R. Cayton,” a Nicodemus resident, who, in the columns of another newspaper, charged that Chambers’ news coverage of the event reeked of bias against blacks. In a letter to the Nicodemus newspaper, Cayton pointed out what he considered the “deep seated prejudice of this miserable puke . . . who thought a good nigger was one who worked as a hotel porter, a boot black, or as a monkey for the amusement of the general public.” M. H. Hoyt and R. D. Graham, of the *Webster Eagle*, joined in the attack, arguing that “Rinehart’s tonic, pistols, shooting, stabbing, etc.,” evidently constituted the normal holiday attractions in Nicodemus.16

Politics increased racial tension. Representative James Justice called Graham County Republicans to order at their
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regular party convention held in Millbrook on September 8, 1887. Justice, a close friend of W. R. Hill, and party secretary W. L. Wallace acted as a self-appointed committee on credentials to determine which delegates would be seated. The major plank of the Justice-Hall faction, as the opposition labeled it, was support for Hill City as county seat. Disputes over the seating of contesting delegations split the convention and a group of bolters walked out, nominating a competing slate of candidates. Of course, the Hill-owned *Western Cyclone* at Nicodemus supported the regular party ticket backed by Justice and Hill.17

The county seat fight now threatened to divide Nicodemus. For the first and only time in Nicodemus' history, its residents could purchase and read two newspapers published inside the town. On August 12, approximately three weeks before the Republican convention had convened, Hugh Lightfoot launched the *Nicodemus Enterprise*. In its columns, Lightfoot supported the bolting faction of the party and personally attacked the character of W. R. Hill, indirectly boosting the Millbrook cause in the county seat contest. As Hill campaigned for re-election as county coroner, Lightfoot maintained a constant barrage of criticism, at one point suggesting that the "unsavory record of Mr. Hill morally unfit him for the office." Lightfoot chided Hill for running a Democratic newspaper in Hill City and one of the opposite political persuasion in Nicodemus, both for the purpose of securing the county seat. During the extended illness of George Sanford, the succession of part-time editors at the *Cyclone* also received their share of Lightfoot's venom. On September 28, for example, he noted that the "Cyclone changes assistant editors every week. H. R. Cayton is doing Hill's bidding this week."18

Never one to avoid a controversy, Lightfoot continued a stream of chatter at what he considered hostile newspapers in the area. Reflecting the black-town attitude toward Orientals, he suggested that one editor in a nearby town "was badly mixed with Chinese blood and wears his 'pig tail'
under his coat." In late September he ridiculed the organizers of the Hill City Fair for segregating black and white babies in their annual contest and offering separate prizes for the prettiest child in each race. In early October he commented on the quality of the *Freemont Star*, describing it as "a disgrace to the newspaper fraternity and craft in general... make up. The *Star* looks like bird tracks on a very frosty morning and after closely scrutinizing it we are led to believe that [William H.] Cotton uses common shoe pegs for type."19

Lightfoot also went after the regular Republican ticket, painting some of its members lily white and accusing them of prejudice and discrimination.20 In this respect, he possessed strange allies. Since Nicodemus' founding, a few whites in the county had distrusted Hill's original motives, suspecting that he had founded the colony to control politics and eventually to maneuver the county seat to Hill City. As early as September, 1879, the *Graham County Lever* at Gettysburg had claimed that Hill admitted he had brought blacks into Kansas to ensure the success of his town. Two months later, the *Lever* quoted Hill telling a friend that "we will have to make concessions to the niggers and give them a few little offices, but when we get the county seat at Hill City they may go to hell."21 Hill denied the charge. Despite such attempts to weaken his support in Nicodemus, most of the residents there continued to remain loyal to him.

In the county-seat struggle, Hill City made much of its supposedly superior location north of the Solomon River. As soon as Nicodemus residents were convinced that their town was out of the running, they threw their support to Hill City, primarily because of Hill's part in settling Nicodemus and the dangers involved in attempting to cross the river south to Millbrook during high water. Natural disaster also played a role. In late August, 1887, a severe windstorm, probably a tornado, virtually leveled Millbrook's business district. Lightfoot apparently changed few minds; the regular Republican ticket swept the November elections. He
printed the final issue of the *Enterprise* two days before Christmas, but remained in Nicodemus to practice law and sell farm implements. The following spring, Graham County voters chose to relocate their courthouse in Hill City; Nicodemus Township voted 115–1 in favor of the move. Some political observers in the county were convinced Lightfoot had cast the one dissenting vote.²²

Whites responded quickly to the threat of black political participation in Okfuskee County, but for a few short months Boley citizens lived and voted in a fantasyland of unrestrained privilege. On April 6, 1905, the *Boley Progress* invited southern blacks to join their brethren in a future county of their own, free from want and fear. Blacks living outside the town, however, saw no reason for such rosy predictions. Other signs foretold the future. For example, throughout the twin territories, whites brutally forced blacks from mixed communities, sometimes allowing them only twenty-four hours to depart. On April 7, the *Lexington Leader* heralded the triumph of an all-white ticket in the Guthrie city elections, proudly announcing, “Great Guthrie ungages her eyes after sixteen years of darkness....”²³ And delegates to the Muskogee meeting of the Western Negro Press Association in September passed resolutions asking for protection from lynching and assurances that Oklahomans would impose no Jim Crow laws after the territory gained admission to the Union.²⁴

With great enthusiasm, Boley blacks turned out in large numbers to elect their first slate of town officials in April, 1906. Undaunted by events outside the town, they looked forward to elections later that year to select delegates to the state constitutional convention. Unfortunately for their future, Boley citizens were unaware they held the balance of political power in the Seventy-Ninth District. Through gerrymandering, Boley had been included with the larger white towns of Okemah, Henryetta, and Weleetka. In the election, the three white communities split almost evenly between the two major parties, but Boley’s vote, 265 Republi-
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can to 26 Democrat, carried the Republican candidates to the convention by a margin of less than two hundred.\textsuperscript{25} The political joy ride would soon end.

The dynamiting of two homes in Okemah in January, 1907, marked the beginning of open violence against blacks living in the county. In mid-August, Okemah hosted the meeting of the Republican county convention, and on the opening day several white delegates refused to sit with the blacks in attendance. After the convention elected a white president and O. H. Bradley, former editor of the \textit{Boley Progress}, as secretary, several whites walked out, later meeting separately to nominate an alternate slate of candidates. The remaining delegates, fifty-eight black and twenty-four white, presented a ticket with James E. Thompson, Clearview town promoter, and another black as candidates for county commissioner.\textsuperscript{26}

Immediately after the convention, the Democratic \textit{Okemah Ledger} and \textit{Weleetka American} both launched a systematic campaign of racial hatred. On the front page of the August 29 issue, readers of the \textit{Ledger} found photographs depicting Reverend A. J. Walker of Boley leading the Republican convention in prayer, a caucus of black and white convention officers, and racial mingling before the opening of a session. The following day the \textit{American} pulled out all the stops, asking the Republican "candidate for sheriff on the nigger ticket . . . whether or not, in your canvass, you met a Clearview nigger . . . and promised to give a deputyship to a Boley nigger . . . ?"\textsuperscript{27} By the middle of September, the \textit{American} had become totally paranoid, desperately warning whites:

\begin{center}
\textbf{STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!}
\textbf{TO A RAILROAD DANGER SIGNAL! THE COUNT\textsuperscript{Y} IS IN DANGER OF NEGRO DOMINATION—WHITE VOTERS, CRUSH THE INSOLLENCE OF THE NEGRO! PROTECT YOUR HOMES WITH YOUR BALLOT!}\textsuperscript{28}
\end{center}

In commenting on the political activities of W. B. Toney,
candidate for county judge on the regular Republican ticket, the *American* on September 13 finally sunk to its lowest level. Toney had visited Boley and, like many whites before him, had stayed overnight in the hotel there. The headline to the brief story reporting the incident read, “SLEEPS WITH NIGGERS.”

On the grounds that the ticket was incomplete, the Democratic-controlled Okfuskee County Election Board refused to certify the slate of regular Republican candidates nominated at the Okemah convention in August. Although the regular Republicans finally appeared on the ballot, the election board threw out the returns from predominantly black precincts and the Democrats took political control of the county. The *Weleetka American* endorsed the decision to reject black ballots because at the polls “the niggers chased out the white judges . . . and allowed every nigger big, little, young, and old to vote as often as they desired.”

Despite the Democratic victory, the white fear of black participation in politics continued unabated. The selection of the permanent location of the county seat still lay in the future, and the animosity between the races intensified during the fall of 1907. In October, Clearview narrowly avoided a small riot. As a large number of Clearview residents waited on the depot platform to board a passenger train, Charles Allen, a white man, charged through the crowd, hitting people with a suitcase and umbrella and demanding that blacks step aside and let him go first. Blacks outnumbered whites by at least five to one, and violence was avoided only by locking Allen in the train and persuading the conductor to move it farther down the track away from the station. Two months later, the first lynching of a black in the new state of Oklahoma occurred at Henryetta, twenty miles east of Okemah.

Pending the outcome of a later election, the State Constitutional Convention had designated Okemah temporary county seat. Although Boleyites dreamed of a two-story stone courthouse standing in the center of their town, most whites
living along the Fort Smith and Western Railroad from Weleetka to Paden shuddered at such a thought. Violence erupted again. In two successive weeks in April, 1908, dynamite blasts ripped through a hotel and black-owned restaurant in Okemah. With an eye cast toward the coming county-seat election, the editor of the Okemah Ledger abandoned any semblance of objective journalism and moved to discredit Boley, picturing it as a lawless community unworthy of the seat of government. A brief story in the May 14 issue, for example, reported a burglary at the United States post office at Castle. Officials investigating the crime had found what they believed to be the robbers’ footprints in the mud just outside the post office window. Although the police had only indicated that the footprints led west of the building, the Ledger headlined, “Post Office Robbed at Castle . . . Trail Leads Toward Boley.” During the next two weeks the black town was featured by headlines reading, “A Wanted Negro Found at Boley,” and “Woman Publicly Whipped in Boley.” Although Boley citizens voted by a narrow margin to award the county seat to Weleetka, Okemah retained permanent possession in a very close election in August, 1908.

Politically, Boley died. To be sure, citizens there continued to vote in municipal elections, but out in the county approximately 90 percent of Boley’s adult population was disenfranchised. Even before Oklahomans enacted a grandfather clause in 1910, Okfuskee County whites utilized their hold on registration and the threat of violence to ostracize blacks politically. Moreover, to neutralize Republican strength, Democrats gerrymandered Boley and simultaneously relocated the registration and polling site in Paden. Those few blacks who traveled the six miles to Paden to register and vote met open hostility and intimidation. Agreeing to allow only a limited number of blacks to participate in each election, white registrars required “legible” handwriting and a clear indication that voters could “understand” the state constitution. Blacks who still attempted to vote
found precinct lines redrawn again and again in order to confuse them. One newspaper suggested that black voters needed a search warrant to locate the poll.36 The hatred sown by the Okemah and Weleetka newspapers finally matured. Its ultimate harvest came in 1911. In May of that year, Paden residents Mrs. Laura Nelson and her teenage son, charged with murder, were forcibly taken from the Okemah jail and lynched. Mrs. Nelson was raped several times, and then she and her son were hanged from a bridge over the Canadian River.37 For a time, terror gripped blacks in eastern Oklahoma, and some who lived in Boley must surely have remembered their past experiences in the South.

Most of the people of Mound Bayou never enjoyed the opportunity to take part in politics outside the community. Long before the town was incorporated, Mississippians had moved to disenfranchise blacks living in the state. Ironically, Isaiah T. Montgomery, Mound Bayou’s promoter, led the drive to disarm his race politically. A Republican and loyal party worker, Montgomery served as a delegate to both the Warren County and Congressional District Conventions during the late 1880’s, later sat on the Bolivar County Republican Committee, and held a patronage position in the federal land office at Jackson. On at least one occasion he joined a state delegation traveling to Washington, D. C., to testify before a Senate committee studying flood problems on the Mississippi River. In a July, 1890, election, he and George Melchoir, a white man, were chosen to represent Bolivar County at the State Constitutional Convention.38

During the post-Reconstruction period, Montgomery had taken part in the fusion politics endemic to Bolivar and a few other counties in the state possessing heavy concentrations of black laborers. Under the arrangement, black Republicans joined forces with Democrats, agreeing in advance of an election to the exact number of offices each race would receive. Under normal circumstances, blacks could expect low-paying jobs with little authority, a few spots on the County Board of Supervisors, and perhaps a seat in the state
legislature. As the two delegates to the State Constitutional Convention, Melchoir and Montgomery represented the candidates of the fusion ticket in Bolivar County.30

When Montgomery entered the convention hall in Jackson on August 12, 1890, he encountered a body composed of 130 Democrats, one National Republican, one Conservative, and one Greenbacker. He was black, Republican, and alone. Public demands for prohibition and cleaning up state government were offered as reasons for the convention call, but the quest for a legal method to eliminate black voters in Mississippi constituted the major purpose for convening the body. Some blacks—John R. Lynch, a Mississippi congressman, for example—believed that Montgomery had already committed himself to support a group with announced intentions of barring blacks from the polls. And on the opening day, Montgomery helped to vote this faction into the chair, giving it control over the organization of the convention.40

Montgomery was appointed to the Committee on Franchise, Apportionment, and Elections, which returned a report to the convention calling for a state literacy test. At the discretion of an election judge, voters could be required to offer a "reasonable interpretation" of the constitution when read to them. If adopted, the plan would eliminate at least 124,000 blacks from politics, leaving the state with a white majority of more than 48,000. On September 15, Montgomery gained the floor to join in the debate. "My mission here," he told the white delegates, "is to bridge a chasm that has been widening and deepening for a generation." In an hour-long speech, Montgomery went on to evoke visions of an ante-bellum South where master and slave worked hand-in-hand, sharing mutual admiration and respect. But war had destroyed that beautiful world ruled by "the proudest aristocracy that ever graced the Western hemisphere," and outsiders had gained the confidence of his people, upsetting the harmony between the two races. Now, "every form of demoralization, blood-shed, bribery, [and] ballot stuffing"
plagued the politics of a once-proud state. In his opinion, most blacks had failed to attain the "high plane of moral, intellectual, and political excellence" reached by whites, and blacks were currently stalled at an "inferior development in the line of civilization." To those soon to be disenfranchised, Montgomery justified his support of the proposal on the grounds that "we have not taken away your high privilege, but only lifted it to a higher plane." The restriction, he argued, would encourage blacks to improve, allowing them to re-enter the electorate once they had earned the right.41

The convention loved him. What better endorsement for disenfranchisement than a supportive speech from the lone black delegate whom many considered a leading spokesman for his race? Any opposition to the committee report quickly faded, and by a lop-sided margin the literacy test was incorporated into the draft of the new state constitution. White newspapers in Mississippi were elated. The Raymond Gazette, for example, praised Montgomery for his perception of the race problem. Some black leaders were less pleased, however. In the neighboring state of Alabama, Booker T. Washington remained silent on the issue, but T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the New York Age, blasted Montgomery for the serious wound inflicted on his people. Montgomery returned home to Mound Bayou, and later became one of the half-dozen residents there eligible to vote in elections held outside the limits of the town. Fourteen years later, in a letter to Booker T. Washington in 1904, Montgomery privately confessed that his stand at Jackson had been a serious blunder.42

Disenfranchisement plagued the other black communities as well. By the time Oklahomans enacted a grandfather clause to eliminate black voters in 1910, the residents of Clearview, Langston, and Boley were accustomed to discrimination. Many had moved there to escape the open hostility of whites in the South. Geography changed nothing. In Indian Territory, separation of school children was left to county option until 1904; thereafter, children of African
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descent were legally isolated. And white missionaries dis­
patched to the area after the Civil War had already estab­
lished separate Indian churches. In December, 1907, the
legislature of the new state of Oklahoma passed a statute
requiring Jim Crow cars on all railroads operating within its
borders. In May of the following year, Governor C. N.
Haskell signed a bill officially outlawing interracial marriage.
More terrifying, however, were the number of “sundown”
communities prohibiting blacks inside the town after dark
and the acts of violence inflicted upon blacks.

During the early territorial and statehood years, racial
hatred in Oklahoma exceeded that found in either Kansas or
Mississippi. Despite the emotionalism of a few Democratic
newspaper editors in northwestern Kansas, blacks living in
or near Nicodemus never seriously threatened the white con­
trol of Graham County politics. Most of the early white
settlers of Graham County, moreover, had come from the
North and lacked the intensive racial animosity found among
many southern whites. Thanks in part to Isaiah Montgom­
ery, blacks were already disenfranchised in Bolivar County,
Mississippi, before Mound Bayou incorporated. Oklahoma
was unique. With its various land runs and lotteries, what
became the state of Oklahoma represented an open frontier
in which both races, each antagonistic toward the other, vied
for the economic exploitation of the area's resources. While
they never accounted for more than 10 percent of the total
population, blacks competing for those resources intensified
white antagonism toward them. In addition, Oklahoma's
late statehood, in 1907, allowed the large number of southern
whites who migrated there the opportunity to draw upon the
segregation laws already adopted in other states. Once blacks
were economically and politically neutralized and socially
segregated, racial hatred in Oklahoma subsided to levels
found elsewhere. As late as 1915, however, white Oklaho­
mans still felt insecure. In that year, the legislature author­
ized the State Corporation Commission to establish separate
telephone booths for black and white callers.43

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By their very existence the black towns encouraged segregation. Reflecting much of the current attitude toward the ghetto of a major city, prejudiced whites could point to the towns as an indication that blacks wished to live apart from the rest of society. Black-town leaders worked to ensure the location of segregated institutions in their communities and state legislators willingly obliged. Although whites continued to control their operation, facilities for the deaf, dumb, blind, and orphans, a girls' reformatory, the hospital for the insane, the state training school for boys, and a university were all located in the various blacks towns of Oklahoma. In Okfuskee and Logan, the county superintendent of schools usually designated Boley and Langston, respectively, as the site for the summer "normal" or "institute" held for the training of black teachers. As discrimination increased, the towns also became a haven for blacks wishing to hold public and private meetings, and fraternal organizations gravitated to them. In 1911, for example, the black Masonic Lodge of Oklahoma authorized construction of a $20,000 temple at Boley.

To the people living in or near Clearview and Boley, the treatment of blacks by some Indians was perhaps more galling than white discrimination. Of the Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaws and Chickasaws perhaps held the strongest views toward other races. In 1866, the federal government withheld $300,000 owed to the two tribes until they adopted their former slaves. Both refused. The Indian freedmen problem, which continued for some time, was compounded by an illegal invasion of blacks from Texas and Louisiana who slipped across the Red River into Indian territory. Chickasaw light-horse police and vigilante committees met little success in attempting to turn back the immigrants or to remove those already located. Such action, in fact, prompted a flood of black petitions to Congress pleading for army protection from Indian cruelty. In 1883, the Choctaws reluctantly accepted $10,000 to include their freedmen in the tribe (the Chickasaws never capitulated), but racial ani-
mosity continued. Blacks were socially segregated and excluded from Indian schools, and as late as 1891, the *Lexington Leader* reported that the “Choctaws are driving the negroes out of the Nation. Anyone employing a colored servant is subjected to [a] $50.00 fine.”

Okfuskee County blacks expected little sympathy, or even kindness, from the Choctaws or Chickasaws, but the Creek attitude toward them was difficult to accept. Clearview and Boley were located in the Creek Nation, and blacks had married into the tribe. Creek freedmen generally enjoyed amiable relations with their former masters. One freedman born during slavery later remembered that right after the Civil War “we live right in amongst them, sometimes a nigger in one side of the house and an Indian in the other . . . no Jim Crow then.” The rapid influx of white southerners into the area quickly changed such red-black intimacy. Creek freedmen identified with the Indians, assuming a higher status position than newly arrived blacks from the South. Whites refused to recognize these fine class distinctions. Such comments as, “The Creek niggers are niggers just like the rest of them . . . ,” and, “In any mixture nigger blood will dominate and show out,” represented attitudes common among most whites. In fact, many whites pointed to miscegenation as the major reason for what they considered Creek backwardness relative to other tribes. By the turn of the century, most full-blood Creeks had accepted the white southern racial ideology and were moving toward total segregation.

Black-town editors like Ernest Lynwood in Clearview and S. Douglas Russell at Langston felt empathy for Indians. When Indians discriminated against them, however, or when whites placed Indians in a superior position, black tempers flared. Generally, Lynwood supported Indian rights, but when the Creeks established segregated schools in 1904 he slipped into a bitter denunciation of the school board of the Creek nation, calling it an educational fake. Lynwood pondered about the plight of the Creek freedmen and those
blacks listed on tribal rolls. Would “they be permitted,” he wondered, “to ‘butt in’ to the sacred confines of a government civilizing machine?”40 In Langston three years later, Russell commented on the new Oklahoma constitution, sarcastically lamenting that at least for the time being “every blanket, raw meat eating Indian is recognized by the constitution as white persons to associate, marry and give in marriage with white persons.” This would no doubt continue, he argued, until the land sharks had eaten their fill of the Indian domain. He questioned “whether [then] they will be able to march to the music of the white man’s civilization?” Eventually, both black and red would face the same problem, and once Indians felt the full force of white discrimination they might come to recognize the absurdity of their haughty attitude.50

Because black-town residents were totally isolated from them, most whites who expressed an opinion on the subject generally supported the idea of a separate community at least during the early years of its existence. In referring to Boley in 1905, the editor of the Weleetka American felt that having “the colored people all to themselves beats the Guthrie system,” where the races attended school together and where a white customer was “forced to refresh himself at a bar where the colored man’s money was good.”51 Contact between white and black towns was sometimes cordial. Such was the case in December, 1879, when a Nicodemus minister delivered a speech on prohibition to a large audience in the nearby town of Gettysburg; in turn, two Gettysburg residents visited Nicodemus to organize a temperance society.52

A viable black town, however, made the white argument for disenfranchisement and segregation seem all the more contradictory. If blacks were excluded from the electorate on the grounds of their inability to make an intelligent decision at the polls, how could one explain their success at self-government in their own community? And if their economic and social behavior inside their own corporate limits contradicted the white stereotype of the race,
by what standard could one justify segregation? As soon as
the black towns made it clear that they expected to share
equally in public funds available for schools, road main­
tenance, and bridges, or threatened to disturb the balance of
power in county politics, such questions were easily brushed
aside. To the extent that they ever recognized or faced the
dichotomy between their racial prejudices and the realities
of black success, whites solved the dilemma in several ways.

In the minds of some whites, the people who dwelled in
the black town were atypical of the race. Those holding
strong racial views had sometimes pointed to the possibility
of mixed blood in an effort to account for the abilities of
Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and other black
leaders. The dark complexion of many black-town residents,
however, quickly nullified that argument. Yet, if blacks
were supposedly inferior, an explanation for their success
must surely exist, and eventually an answer was found. In
the January, 1910, issue of *Century Magazine*, Hiram Tong,
a white reporter who had visited Mound Bayou to write a
feature story on the town, admitted that the “maximum
amount of white blood in the colony is so slight that Mound
Bayou’s ultimate success cannot be attributed to Caucasian
race qualities.” Rather, Tong argued, “the negroes of
Mound Bayou are black; five sixths of them are descendants
on both sides of African slaves.” Tong suggested that only
a cursory comparison of the photographs of Mound Bayou’s
leaders with that of Booker T. Washington would “reveal
the racial purity of the Mound Bayou type.”53 In June of
the same year, Thomas Arnold, a writer for the New Orleans
*State*, elaborated upon the same theme, contending that the
people of Mound Bayou were the pure offspring “of the real
old-time African race into whose veins has crept no germ of
that shiftlessness, worthlessness, criminal tendencies, or self­
importance that characterizes so many of the race who have
grown to be such a fester upon the average city. . . . That
kind of blood has never found permanent lodgement in the
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citizenship of Mound Bayou, nor of the farming element of the 'colony.' 54

Rather than issuing such testimonials praising the accomplishments of the "African race" or groping for other rationalizations to explain black achievement, some whites in nearby communities refused to acknowledge explicitly the existence of a black town in the immediate vicinity. The newspaper at Coyle, located approximately ten miles from Langston, seldom mentioned the black town either in news items or among business advertisements. But the people of Coyle were well aware of the presence of blacks in the area. Mears Drug Store there discriminated against them and the owner of Shellhammer's Barber Shop assured customers that "only white workmen [were] employed." Although Langston residents frequently shopped there, the proprietors of the New York Cash Store rejected appeals to advertise in the Western Age at Langston or in other black newspapers. 55

In most cases, black-town leaders refrained from publicly commenting on acts of discrimination aimed directly at the community or its citizens. In fact, they sometimes pretended as if brotherly love characterized all contacts between their town and those in the larger society. "The Negroes of Langston and the white people of our twin town Coyle are living within a stone's throw of each other, on terms of perfect American friendship," boasted S. Douglas Russell in June, 1905. 56 And, in concluding a brochure on Mound Bayou, Charles Banks felt it would be "unjust to close this brief write-up . . . without making mention of the kindly disposition of the white people near here in laying no barriers in the way of the effort to build up a substantial and creditable Negro town and colony." 57 Such statements were designed for white consumption, but they frequently produced adverse results. By ingratiating themselves, praising whites for what little freedoms they enjoyed, and accommodating to segregation, leaders reinforced the white belief in black inferiority, thereby encouraging further injustices. Not to fight back was one thing and, given the times, was
The black-town reaction to segregation reflected some of the trends in black thought in the United States. Certainly, Isaiah Montgomery's support for Mississippi's literacy test in 1890 paralleled the shift from protest to accommodation throughout the South. But because of their location in a frontier environment, which briefly permitted the exercise of freedoms denied most blacks in older states, those residing in Langston, Clearview, and Boley were slow to respond to the realities of open discrimination. Even as they rode in Jim Crow railroad coaches, watched their children come and go to separate schools, and listened to legislators debate disenfranchisement, leaders in Oklahoma's black towns remained optimistic. As late as October, 1907, readers of S. Douglas Russell's *Western Age* at Langston were advised to ignore talk of segregation, keeping in mind "that this is not a real southern state, remember that the majority of Oklahoma people are for fair play and full enjoyment of personal liberty."

Russell knew, of course, that such rhetoric might temporarily raise the spirits of a few people, but it would never curb the white drive for total segregation. Earlier, in April
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of the same year, he had chaired a convention of three hundred blacks meeting in Oklahoma City to protest the new state's proposed constitution. Out of that gathering came the Negro Protective League, a statewide organization set up to coordinate opposition to the document before it came up for ratification by the voters in August. Russell was elected chairman of the league's executive committee, and the *Western Age* became its official organ. Since the Democrats were screaming "race" in Oklahoma politics, Russell gradually conceded ground on the issue of total black equality. In his April 26 issue, he advised blacks to blot "out the word social equality but by the eternals write in burning letters POLITICAL EQUALITY," and one month later Russell captioned an article on state politics with, "SOCIAL EQUALITY COUNTS 0." 62

When the Republican party convened its state convention at Tulsa in September, 1907, blacks were persuaded to withdraw all demands for representation on the ticket, as Russell put it, "to save our party from the ignorant democratic prejudice and harang of Negro domination, and social equality." 63 Neither did blacks sit on the Republican Central Committee. Party leaders, however, agreed to allow blacks to select two representatives from each congressional district to act as an advisory body. As secretary and manager of the Black Advisory Committee, Russell secured a suite of rooms in the Melrose Hotel in Oklahoma City, installed office equipment, employed a staff, and opened a state headquarters. When criticized about the separate office, Russell responded that the race was segregated in all other areas and the arrangement would immediately disarm any Democrat charging black equality inside the Republican party. Russell combined his duties for the party with those of the Negro Protective League, collecting signatures on a petition to the federal government seeking rejection of the constitution and mailing out thousands of letters to black Republicans. 64 All efforts failed. With constitution intact, Oklahoma entered the Union on November 16, 1907. Democrats controlled the
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first legislature; and on February 15, 1908, the state's Jim Crow law went into effect.

On the same day, Edward P. McCabe, former Nicodemus resident and promoter of Langston, filed suit in United States Circuit Court at Guthrie. McCabe's legal protest, the first of a succession of failures, sought a temporary injunction against the establishment of separate railroad coaches until their constitutionality could be determined in court. In early February, McCabe appealed to blacks across the state for funds to carry on the legal battle, and at Boley the editor of the Beacon urged readers to send money to him, "as we have a good show at winning; and if we do it will make the difference in the world to Boley." On February 25, William Henry Harrison Hart, professor of law at Howard University in Washington, D. C., who had previously won a 1905 case in Maryland against segregation in interstate travel, joined McCabe. Despite their combined efforts, however, legal challenges to Oklahoma's Jim Crow law eventually ended in failure.

As soon as it became apparent that newspaper editorials, political organization, and court action would fail to hold back the Jim Crow onslaught, black-town leaders abandoned such efforts. Most demands for social equality ceased, but instead blacks insisted that all laws must be enforced to their letter. At Langston, S. Douglas Russell argued that if Oklahoma must have a Jim Crow statute, the state had to ensure "equal accommodations for black and white—not the way it is done in the rabid southern states." In December, 1908, Russell filed a complaint with the State Corporation Commission charging that blacks were being denied equal accommodations on four railroads operating inside Oklahoma. In Mound Bayou, promoter Charles Banks frowned on such methods, however. In a July, 1914, letter to Booker T. Washington, Banks claimed that the separate day coaches offered black travelers between Memphis and Vicksburg equaled those provided for whites. Banks told Washington that the few blacks who instituted lawsuits against the rail-
roads in that state hindered his efforts to persuade officials of the Yazoo and Mississippi to upgrade the facilities for all blacks. Some way had to be found, he told Washington, to discourage such legal action in the future.  

In time, black-town leaders accepted segregation as a fait accompli, but they demanded that it be total. Specifically, they called for absolute black control over their own institutions, facilities equal to those offered whites, and equal pay for equal work. Whites conceded little. At Langston, two blacks sat on the Board of Regents of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University, but remained in the minority. In May, 1907, the Western Age pointed out that the faculty at CA and N received less pay than comparable white teachers throughout the state. Although CA and N President Inman E. Page had openly endorsed the Booker T. Washington approach of concentration on industrial education, the school’s regents voted to remove him in 1916. According to Harlow’s Weekly, Page, who had previously been president of Lincoln Institute in Missouri, was fired because he had embraced the philosophy of W. E. B. Du Bois and “could not be convinced of the inapplicability of the idea in Oklahoma.” Most state institutions for blacks were located in black towns, but whites continued to dictate policy and control operations.

For years, black-town promoters had preached that isolation from whites constituted the first step toward a solution to the race problem in the United States. But their actions, especially attempts to gain the county seat and to participate in politics, belied their public statements. When segregation and disenfranchisement came, however, most leaders abandoned any semblance of opposition, in time even praising them as blessings in disguise. Separation would spur black-town population growth and bring racial solidarity, something impossible, they said, before the advent of Jim Crow and the grandfather clause. Indeed, segregation was good. It provided blacks the opportunity to learn self-government, built character, and offered employment for teachers.
those blacks who could still vote in Oklahoma in 1912, the Clearview Patriarch advised them to seek out a candidate who stood for the separation of the races and "vote for that man, and let the politics take care of themselves."72

Politics, however, had always been an important part of black-town life, both in and outside the community, and some leaders were reluctant to advise residents to forsake all demands for political equality. Yet, whites might permit black participation in county and state elections if they could
be shown that such activity offered no real threat. The answer seemed obvious—make peace with the Democrats. The idea of splitting black votes equally between the two major parties had been suggested by several prominent blacks as early as the 1880's, but S. Douglas Russell, editor of the *Western Age* at Langston, set out to bring the proposal to fruition in Oklahoma. Shortly after Oklahoma entered the Union in 1907, a Democrat sat in the governor's mansion and the party controlled the legislature.

Beginning in November of that year, Russell embarked on a campaign aimed at convincing blacks to abandon their solid support for the Republicans. Russell praised Governor C. N. Haskell as a brave and fearless leader, thanked the Democrats for their continued financial support for the university at Langston, and asked his race to study the cardinal principles of the Democratic party; most would come to recognize that justice and fair play constituted its chief cornerstone. In early January, 1909, Russell sent a circular letter to all members of the Oklahoma legislature and high state officials, asking Democrats to refrain from making derogatory remarks about the race and to pass no legislation endangering the civil rights of blacks. In return, Russell assured them that through the columns of the *Western Age* he could convince his people of the futility of voting solidly Republican at the polls.73

The response to Russell's proposition came in the form of a letter from Oklahoma Attorney General Charles West. West told Russell that open antagonism toward the "ruling class whites" had done much to damage race relations in the state and that vote splitting might help to alleviate the problem. Furthermore, West thought it extremely foolish of blacks to seek office in the Oklahoma Senate or House of Representatives, "or to put themselves in any position where they attract the fire of economic and political hostility." He also hinted that Russell had overlooked an important yet simple alternative—blacks could refrain from voting.74

Russell's overtures to the Democrats represented one
last attempt to forestall passage of Oklahoma's grandfather clause. Russell's subsequent career also suggests that other motives may have prompted his behavior. As early as the fall of 1908, Russell had pushed for establishment of a state-supported institution for black orphans and deaf and blind children. Governor Haskell and the legislature responded in the following year, agreeing to locate it in Taft, a black town ten miles west of Muskogee. From the beginning it was obvious that Russell wanted to head the new institution, and in March, 1909, he scolded those who voiced concern over who might be appointed superintendent. Blacks should be thankful, he told his readers; and although the new institution was his idea, "who manages it is not of importance." By the time he spoke to the annual meeting of the Western Negro Press Association in Topeka, Kansas, in late November, 1911, Russell was editor of the Tribune at Taft and superintendent of the school for the blind there.75

For a time, the idea of vote splitting between the two major parties was more rhetorical than real. Most black-town settlers had migrated from the South, and few could forget the wounds of the past. Inside the towns, the terms "Democrat" and "race prejudice" were synonymous. Years later, one of Boley's early residents recalled, "We hated them democrats down south and we kept them out. One man was shot when he tried to make a speech. In them days, if you was a democrat you had to keep it to yourself."76 Farther north, in Nicodemus, Democrats collected only fifteen of the 652 total votes cast in the nine presidential elections from 1880 to 1912.77

Later, as Democrats gained control over registration and elections in the county, black-town citizens seemed more disposed to switch parties. Practicality entered the picture. Those who refused to give up their Republican affiliation were denied the right to vote. Lawyers in Boley, for example, found it advantageous in their law practice in the county court to ally with the dominant party. At least in name, the black towns became progressively more Democratic.78 One
old settler objected to the trend, however, lamenting that
"Boley was a good little town 'til we started dealing with
them damn democrats."79 In the formative years of Nicodemmus, only avowed Republicans could expect to win election to local office, but in September, 1887, eight Democrats met at Hays' Drug Store to form the party's first town caucus.80

The shift of some black-town residents to the Democratic party in no way represented an ideological commitment to its principles. But recognition of the practicalities of county politics along with what some considered the Republican betrayal of the race made the switch more palatable. At least the Democrats had always been honest; they had never attempted to conceal their racial feelings. Republicans, on the other hand, had paraded as the champions of black rights. In a strange way, the hatred of some blacks for the Republicans overshadowed their traditional aversion to the Democrats. Although Democratically controlled legislatures disenfranchised and segregated black-town citizens, Republicans received the bulk of their criticism. Editors and other leaders frequently singled out Republicans who voted for Jim Crow laws, refused to stand and protect the race, or failed to appoint blacks to office.81

In general, the black towns remained loyal to the Republican party on the national level, but between the first election of Theodore Roosevelt and that of Woodrow Wilson their devotion was sorely tested. The black-town oscillation of first praise and then rejection for both Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft reflected the frustration of all blacks throughout the country. Roosevelt seemed to move back and forth between appeasing blacks, reflected by his invitation to Booker T. Washington to visit the White House, and accommodating the demands of the lily-white elements of his party. The nationwide uproar over Roosevelt's dishonorable discharge of three companies of black soldiers accused of rioting in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906 seeped into the black-town press.82 Yet, although they grumbled and threatened to withdraw their support, few
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blacks followed that course. Experience had shown that no other home awaited them in the American party system.

By the same token, socialism found few converts inside segregated communities. Most citizens there failed to perceive that, at least in the abstract, the proponents of socialism and those favoring economic self-help shared many common assumptions and goals. Furthermore, the idea of a class conflict, irrespective of color, completely eluded them. Editors, however, sometimes attempted to pressure white Republicans, suggesting that blacks might abandon the party and embrace socialist candidates on the local level. In January, 1906, the Western Age at Langston warned Republicans seeking office that if Logan County blacks joined in a political alliance with Socialists they could elect an entire Socialist ticket. “Will the corrupt and arrogant white men who have been running Republican politics stop, think and act this year?” asked the Age. Such statements represented nothing but shallow threats. Black-town leaders quickly learned that hostile whites could point to socialism as an alien philosophy and use it against the race. During the fall and winter of 1911, for example, the editor of the Okemah Ledger equated socialism with black demands for justice. In its December 14 issue, the Ledger ran an article entitled “SOCIALISM URGES NEGRO EQUALITY.”

To some people in the black towns, the Populist solution also seemed too radical; to others, Populist candidates represented nothing more than temporarily displaced Democrats. Mary Elizabeth Lease, the well-known Populist orator from Kansas who once counseled farmers to raise more hell and less corn, spoke to a large audience in Langston in October, 1895. In part reflecting his attitude toward the Populist party and in part echoing the black-town reaction toward a woman in politics, R. Emmett Stewart, editor of the Langston City Herald, argued that Mrs. Lease’s address proved that “ladies must stay at home and take care of the babies while the men run this great government.” In Nicodemus, on the other hand, the Populist platform evidently
appealed to several residents. The Populist candidate for president garnered 35 and 39 percent of the total votes cast in Nicodemus Township in 1892 and 1896.85

Although some blacks had never forgiven Theodore Roosevelt for the Brownsville Affair, or for his failure to act decisively in their behalf, by 1912 he seemed the least of several evils. To most black-town spokesmen, the election of Woodrow Wilson, Eugene Debs, or William H. Taft spelled certain disaster. In August of that year, Clearview town promoter James E. Thompson felt that, given the realities of American politics, Roosevelt’s views on the race question seemed the most tenable. And when Roosevelt appeared as the presidential candidate of the Progressive party, Thompson reluctantly supported him. In general, however, Thompson, along with blacks living inside the towns and throughout the nation, saw little in the entire progressive reform movement of any great benefit to the race. Progressives, they argued, should concentrate on purifying the ballot and permitting each individual the opportunity to express their will at the polls. The reform of city government, recall of judges, or referendum meant nothing to a black person who could not vote.86

The black-town excursion into politics had proved disastrous. Coming in quest of economic security and arriving with little experience in political matters, yet eager to exercise their legal rights as citizens, residents met discrimination and disenfranchisement. With the opportunity to enjoy political and social equality now gone, only one other area remained. As early as October, 1907, S. Douglas Russell at Langston had argued that the recent Democratic sweep of state offices in Oklahoma meant nothing for the race or the town. Look from the ballot box to the soil, Russell advised. “Your farm land will produce just as good a bale of cotton now as before.”87
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