The Black Towns

Crockett, Norman L.

Published by University Press of Kansas

Crockett, Norman L.
The Black Towns.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83996

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2881305
AS THE COTTON BELT spread north and west into Oklahoma and Texas, blacks generally refused to follow. But the early settlers of Langston, Clearview, and Boley who had migrated from the South brought some knowledge of cotton culture with them to the area. According to Herald editor R. Emmett Stewart, Langston, in September, 1895, was already recognized as the "cotton belt center of Oklahoma."1 Despite some bad years, the interest in cotton remained high in and around Oklahoma's black towns. In early 1913, the U. S. Department of Agriculture dispatched agents to Clearview and other communities to demonstrate the techniques of planting, plowing, harvesting, and marketing the crop. In February, officials of the Fort Smith and Western Railroad joined in the effort, sponsoring a "cotton train" to transport the USDA agents and their equipment. The arrival of the group in Clearview prompted a day-long celebration, and school children in the upper grades enjoyed a holiday from regular classes in order to attend the "cotton lecture."2

Concentration on cotton meant a serious lack of diversification. Some farmers continued to grow a variety of agri-
cultural produce ranging from corn and beans to melons and potatoes, but as early as 1895 the editor at Langston warned local farmers that total dependence on cotton might eventually prove disastrous. After crop failures in 1910 and 1911, Clearview farmers were urged to turn to truck gardening. To encourage the move away from cotton, Clearview town promoter James E. Thompson proposed establishment of a cooperative canning factory in the community to provide a market for those who switched to truck farming. Thompson’s factory never materialized, and, when some disgruntled farmers complained that there was no place to sell their produce, the *Clearview Patriarch* advised them that at least the 1912 crop could be eaten.³

Specialization in cotton, coupled with a lack of capital, made sharecropping inevitable. At first, black-town promoters heralded each community as a haven from the horrors of the crop lien system. “That none may be mistaken,” announced the editor at Langston in 1895, “this is no share business with the negro on the cotton bound for town,” and in 1905, the *Progress* invited southern farmers to come “to Boley where every man is a man, and when you raise a crop the whole of it is yours to dispose of as you see fit.”¹ Such pronouncements applied only to those possessing sufficient funds to finance their own farming operations. Few black-town settlers fell into that category, however. By 1911, those advertising Clearview had abandoned all pretexts of economic independence, advising prospective newcomers that general “farming is run on the credit or supply system, just as it is in the southern states,” and that farmers could rent land on a third and fourth basis, getting supplies while working their crop.⁵ Those unable to find credit inside Clearview might receive an advance from A. H. Tyson, a furnishing merchant who operated a loan company in Wewoka, a small town twenty miles to the south.⁶

Among the first to join Isaiah T. Montgomery and Benjamin T. Green in the founding of Mound Bayou, Simon Gaither, a former slave, typified many black-town farmers.
Although he purchased a forty-acre farm inside the colony, Gaither found money scarce and deprivation a way of life. After making the initial payment on his land, purchased from the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad, and buying a few necessities, Gaither possessed only $10 in cash. In 1888 he cleared a plot of land for a garden, constructed a crude log house for his family, and planted one-fourth acre of corn, cane for molasses, and a small quantity of rice. He next searched for opportunities to make money. While his wife and children traveled as far as thirteen miles to pick and chop cotton, Gaither contracted to clear land for others in Mound Bayou at $4 per acre and to cut timber for stave boards at $6 per cord. In 1890, he found it necessary to turn to sharecropping, agreeing to cultivate four acres of cotton for J. C. Lauderdale, a white man, on the share system. Under the arrangement, as Gaither later recalled, Lauderdale "was to furnish the land, the team, team feed, tools, and seed, while I was to supply the labor and to tend and harvest the crop which was to be divided equally between us." By the turn of the century, Gaither had added an additional forty acres to his farm, attributing much of his success to his wife's willingness to endure hardship.

The desire to own land in part sustained the Gaither family and others in the black town during hard times. Holding title to a farm or town lot represented much more than the ownership of property. To some black-town residents, land constituted the first step in a long march toward economic independence, and community leaders frequently capitalized on such feelings. "Real estate is the basis of all wealth," proclaimed promoter Edward P. McCabe in the Langston City Herald in 1892. Property, according to the boosters, provided its owner with individual dignity, free from the economic and political control of others. As S. Douglas Russell at Langston phrased it in June, 1908, when "a farmer owns the land and raises his meat and bread, he is a prince, a king or a monarch within himself, and don't have to bow to the whims of oily politicians and sharks."
During the formative years land was cheap in most towns and credit was available, and many settlers took advantage of the opportunity. In early Mound Bayou, undeveloped farm land cost from $7 to $8 per acre, with $1 down and the balance in yearly installments. As a consequence, by 1907 approximately 50 percent of the farmers near Mound Bayou owned the land they cultivated, most holding forty-acre tracts. In Nicodemus Township in 1881, most land was held by individual owners, each of whom possessed 160 acres. Within a few years, however, property appears to have been less well distributed. By 1887, James P. Pomeroy, one of several speculators, had acquired approximately 15 percent of all the land in the township.  

If blacks could buy land, they could also lose it. Leaders urged black-town farmers to work hard, diversify crops, and save for future emergencies. Newspapers like the Tribune at Clearview and the Progress at Boley ran long articles on the need for blacks to learn to economize and to understand the value and dignity of hard work. Some went beyond lecturing. The wife of a black-town banker in Oklahoma recalled that her husband had "run the good-for-nothing Negroes out of town." She remembered that in the early days the streets were nearly empty from Monday morning until Friday night because when her husband saw a black farmer on weekdays "in town having a good time, he would tell him to get back out on that farm where he belonged. He was good to all of them . . . but he saw to it all people worked." Charles Banks, cashier of the Bank of Mound Bayou, exerted a similar pressure in his town. In a speech before the Washington, D. C., Commercial Council in 1910, Banks made it clear that "there is not a loafer or idler in the community—men who won't work cannot stay there."  

Despite his dictatorial attitude, in large part a reflection of his economic power as cashier and major stockholder in the Bank of Mound Bayou, Charles Banks worked to encourage and help local farmers during good and bad times. With the aid of Booker T. Washington, he convinced the
U.S. Department of Agriculture to send a permanent extension agent to the town. J. A. Booker, the agent, established a Farmers' Institute to teach better methods and improve crop yields. In addition, Booker demonstrated the use and maintenance of the latest farm implements, touring Bolivar County farms in a Jessup Agricultural Wagon. To promote competition among area farmers, in 1909 Banks proposed creation of an annual Mound Bayou Fair to display agricultural produce and award prizes each fall. And, in late April, 1910, he attempted to gain a county agricultural school for the community.\textsuperscript{13}

Banks periodically mailed letters to black farmers in the county giving advice on crops and predictions on future prices. In such letters, he frequently lectured them on what he considered their extravagance and lack of industry as well as the need to keep abreast of new trends in agricultural production and marketing. During the fall of 1909, for example, Banks scolded farmers for hiring cotton pickers while family members remained idle, warning that merchants and bankers would no doubt demand full payment on all accounts before advancing credit for the coming year, since crop failures seemed imminent. Thus, money foolishly spent would be needed later. In January, 1910, he told farmers to straighten "your fences, white wash farm houses, paint the house, build new out-houses and otherwise improve your premises and make farm life attractive and pleasant." Each family should subscribe to at least one farm newspaper or magazine, having the children of the house read it aloud to the adults. To those who thought they knew everything about farming, Banks responded that most had been working since emancipation yet had little to show for their efforts, living on credit from a local store. When the boll weevil infected nearly all the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in 1911, Banks pleaded with farmers to remain in the area rather than abandoning their land. The arrival of the weevil, he argued, represented a blessing in disguise because many merchants
The Black Towns

had refused to extend credit, thereby leaving more total profit for blacks than in previous years.14

In regard to the land, black-town settlers generally shared the contradictions of the larger society. Well-grounded in the tradition of a homestead, they believed that a farm was something to be purchased, improved, added to, and passed on to future generations of the family. Close to nature and well removed from the decadence of a large city, a farm was an excellent environment in which to raise children and agriculture a superior means of livelihood. Black-town parents were urged to sacrifice now so that their offspring might hold land in the future because contact with the earth instilled virtue in the farmer and his family. Invoking the pastoral ideal, more common to the nineteenth than the twentieth century, the Clearview Patriarch in 1912 assured residents that out “of the pastoral life springs the moral brawn and sinew, the physical endurance, that wins in the race of life.”15 Farmers were respected. The picture on a calendar given away by the Bank of Mound Bayou in 1910 showed a man with his arm around a small boy. The man was pointing to a bale of cotton and the caption under the picture read: “As long as there are mouths to feed, backs to clothe, and lands to be tilled, the place of the farmer in the hearts of the American people will be supreme.”16 To its boosters, each community was securely nestled in nature. In 1895, Langston was destined to become “one of the garden spots of Oklahoma.” Not to be outdone, Boley achieved the remarkable feat of becoming the “garden spot of the Southwest” in the same year it was incorporated.17

In reality, however, and more consistent with other Americans, black-town promoters treated land as a commodity, something to be bought, sold, and speculated with in much the same way one made a profit from trading horses or grain. Boosters assured potential settlers that land speculation held out the promise of quick wealth. The Western Cyclone in May, 1887, proudly proclaimed that “50 to 200 percent has been realized on money invested in Nicodemus

120
lands.” Those considering Clearview as a permanent location in 1912 were advised that the first year's cutting of alfalfa would pay for the farm. The less industrious need not be discouraged, however. They could rest at night content with the assurance of developers that “CLEARVIEW land EARN MONEY while you sleep.”

The image of large cities produced contradictions similar in many respects to the dichotomy of the farmer as both land speculator and noble yeoman. Much of the rhetoric concerning black-town life dealt with residence in a rural paradise. Like Booker T. Washington, leaders projected the image of urban areas as wicked, tempting young members of the race into gambling, prostitution, drinking, and extravagance. “What chance has the negro boy or girl who lives in the 'nigger quarters' of the cities?” asked J. W. Covington, editor of the Mound Bayou Demonstrator in 1910. “They soon learn to think they can never amount to anything and to despise their race no matter how hard they work or moral they be.” The editor at Clearview preached the same theme two years later, arguing that the so-called good life in the cities drove the race into crime. “There can be plenty of pleasure in the country,” he said, “to satisfy any conservative mind.”

The skin color of a town promoter, however, had little impact on his basic objective—rapid population growth. Like every other booster in the American West and South, black-town promoters equated bigger with better. In writing to a possible investor in 1908, Charles Banks clearly indicated what he had in mind for the future. Rather than the idyllic community envisioned by its founder, Banks planned to make Mound Bayou “a larger and more pretentious town.” Instead of buying thirty thousand acres in the immediate vicinity, Banks meant to “own and control all the land that can be brought under our influence.” Cities might be condemned on moral grounds, but images of a small agricultural service center quickly faded, yielding to visions of a giant city complete with all the paraphernalia associated
The Black Towns

with urban life. In a paper read before the November, 1911, meeting of the Patriarchs of America, a fraternal order, a local schoolteacher visualized what was in store for the residents of "CLEARVIEW Ten Years Hence":

Main Street will have changed its appearance from the few present stores to five or six blocks of large business stores interspersed with one or two "Skyscrapers." . . . The place where the Printing Office stands will be occupied by a large Garage Shop. Autos, Taxicabs, and motors will be of common use. There will be at least two aeroplanes. . . . There will probably be three railway lines . . . and at least two good depots of stone or brick. . . . The size and population of the town will necessitate electric railways. . . . There will be three, two-story School-houses, Primary, Grammar, and High School, one University, and a Conservatory of music and a Business College.23

Indeed, Clearview was destined to become an industrial center. In early December, 1911, the editor there assured those who might scoff at such a prediction that the immediate locality contained "plenty of stone and sand to build a second New York."24

Of course, growth and development required population and capital. Whether it was called the Businessmen's League, Chamber of Commerce, Board of Trade, or Commercial Club, every infant community, regardless of the color of the inhabitants, spawned one. The purpose of such booster groups, usually dominated by business and professional men, was to "boom" the town, hoping to attract permanent residents and increase sales. Typical of the other black towns, A. R. Wheeler, editor of the Patriarch, presided over the Clearview Commercial Club in 1913 aided by James E. Thompson, the town's most prominent merchant and land speculator. Such organizations arranged trade excursions, sponsored celebrations, and maintained a constant chatter of optimistic pronouncements concerning local prosperity (always good) and opportunities for quick wealth. Accuracy
Economy and Society

was no virtue. Few seemed concerned that promotional literature or newspaper editorials exaggerated the beauties of the local climate or grossly over-estimated the number of new arrivals during the past week.

New settlers were important, but most welcome were those people who brought money with them into the community. During their formative years most of the towns were inundated by a flood of poverty-stricken sharecroppers from the South, many of whom possessed only a few personal belongings. The success of the town building venture in large part depended upon capital for business ventures, the establishment of schools (since blacks seldom received their fair share of county tax revenues), and for the extension of credit through local stores. Speculators and developers also needed money to finance the sale of land both inside the town limits and in the surrounding countryside. Much of the black-town promotional effort was thus focused on those who had the capital to fund their own operations or to extend credit to others. In June, 1908, S. Douglas Russell at Langston stated the priorities as he saw them, arguing that “the dollar is next to the Almighty.”

Although a few came, black-town boosters found in difficult to attract enough people with capital to meet the increasing demand of each community. The absence of money forced the early residents of Nicodemus to resort to simple barter inside the town. The $18,000 annual payroll of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University probably saved Langston citizens from a similar fate. Promoters quickly recognized that bank formation offered the only way to generate a sufficient supply of money necessary to carry on normal business operations. In 1905, the same year the town sought incorporation, Boley druggist and land speculator David J. Turner convinced the Business Men’s League there to seek a state charter for the organization of a bank. Turner, who later became cashier and one of the bank’s largest stockholders, purchased one-third of the first subscription taken by the public. Within three years, Turner’s Farmers and
Merchants' Bank was joined by the Boley Bank and Trust Company, also with a capital stock of $10,000. Unfortunately, the latter institution lost much of its money through embezzlement in 1910. Some investors in black-town banks lived in surrounding communities. W. H. Dill, a stockholder and president of the Farmers and Merchants' Bank in 1908, resided in Okemah, and J. W. Walker, a Muskogee grocer, succeeded Dill in that office. When Clearview promoter James E. Thompson called a meeting in October, 1912, to discuss the organization of a bank in that town, he received promises of stock subscriptions from local citizens and from black businessmen in Atoka, Boley, and Wewoka.27

Banks provided the community with a circulating medium of exchange, advanced crop loans to area farmers, and financed the merchants' extension of credit through local stores. But a few residents resented bankers and felt they abused their power. Several settlers had come to the black towns hoping to escape economic exploitation by whites. To some, exploitation had merely changed colors. Exhibiting a great deal of bitterness, one early resident of an Oklahoma black town argued that the bank "prospered on short loans with high interest. . . . Even the grocery stores were run like the commissary plan of the plantation—seasonal loans, to the grocer by the banker, who made creditors sign notes which were in turn sold to the bank." 28 One Boley resident claimed that living there offered the opportunity for the exploitation of others and to "get rich in this town, for it's full of 'dummies.' " 29

The meteoric rise of Charles Banks of Mound Bayou from grinding poverty to financial success exemplified the opportunities open to those people with money to invest in black-town enterprises and the entrepreneurial talent to do it wisely. Banks' career also illustrates how it was possible for a few individuals to acquire power, prestige, and wealth while most black-town citizens struggled just to survive. Born in 1873 in a shack later used for a chicken house, Banks grew up under the influence of a prominent white family for
whom his mother labored as a cook. Financed by white friends, he attended Rusk University at Holly Springs and at the age of sixteen entered into a mercantile partnership with his brother in Clarksdale. In 1903, he moved to Mound Bayou and, within one year, organized a bank there with a capital stock of $10,000.

Before the establishment of the Bank of Mound Bayou, area residents faced heavy mortgage payments. Moreover, most farm families found themselves perpetually owing from $600 to $1200 per year, paying interest charges of 25 to 30 percent for supplies advanced by white furnishing merchants in the nearby Delta towns of Shelby and Merigold. To compound their problems, when the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas Railroad sold its interests to the Yazoo and Mississippi line, the fear of total failure spread throughout the black farmers of the colony. The new owners threatened to foreclose on all outstanding loans. Charles Banks, however, renegotiated contracts and organized the Mound Bayou Loan and Investment Company to aid those who failed to meet mortgage payments and to fund improvements in the town. Banks assumed the secretary-treasurer post in the investment company, capitalized at $50,000, and served as cashier of the bank. Both firms occupied the same two-story brick building.30

Indicative of the demand for its services, the Bank of Mound Bayou earned 17 percent during the first eight months of operation and declared annual dividends of at least 7 percent for the next six years. Armed with an increasing supply of capital and a growing reputation for his contribution to the community, Banks sought additional investment opportunities. In 1907, he formed a partnership with John W. Francis, a local undertaker. Banks and Francis operated a mercantile firm, dealt in lumber and building supplies, and speculated in town lots. Later that same year, the pair opened a real estate development called the Banks and Francis Addition to Mound Bayou. For the next five years Banks increased his holdings. Everything he touched seemed
to succeed. He organized a sawmill, directing its financial operations, and became the general manager of the Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company, one of the largest black manufacturing enterprises in the South. By 1910, he lived in a $10,000 house, "commodious enough to house a small-sized army," owned one thousand acres of land in Bolivar County, held title to 250 town lots valued at approximately $7,000, was a stockholder in most of the eleven banks controlled by blacks in Mississippi, held an interest in several smaller businesses in the town, and employed a full-time manager to handle his cotton speculations, paying him $5 per day, including Sundays. As his wealth increased, his prestige spread throughout the state. He was a director of two insurance companies and sat on the board of trustees of two colleges. In *My Larger Education*, published in 1911, Booker T. Washington called Banks "the most influential, Negro business man in the United States."  

The close relationship between Charles Banks and Booker T. Washington began in 1900 at the first meeting of
the National Negro Business League. Banks, at that time a merchant in Clarksdale, Mississippi, traveled to the Boston convention in the company of Isaiah T. Montgomery, the founder of Mound Bayou, who talked to the group on "The Building of a Negro Town." In 1905, Banks organized and assumed the presidency of the Mississippi State Negro Business League; and the delegates to the 1907 national organization meeting in Topeka, Kansas, elected him first vice-president, second in rank to Washington. For the next eight years, until Washington's death in November, 1915, the Tuskegee Institute and Mound Bayou, Mississippi, worked hand-in-hand.

In articles, speeches, and books, Washington used Mound Bayou to support his philosophy of self-help and racial uplift. Isolated from whites, he argued, the black town acted as a laboratory, proving that under the correct circumstances the race was hard working, law abiding, and capable of self-government. In "Law and Order and the Negro," published in The Outlook in 1909, Washington cited statistics from Mound Bayou to illustrate the absence of serious crimes there. Blacks also benefited from their residence in the community. "As I look at it," he wrote in 1911, "Mound Bayou is not merely a town; it is at the same time and in a very real sense of that word, a school." Inside the community, he claimed, blacks gained inspiration through observing the achievements of other racial members while learning the duties and obligations of social and civic life.

Washington derived several benefits from his close association with Banks and others in Mound Bayou. In September, 1908, for example, Banks contacted C. P. Mooney, editor of the Commercial Appeal in Memphis, and a number of other southern newspaper editors, asking them to provide extensive press coverage of Washington's proposed tour through the South later that year. During the summer of 1910, Washington invited Banks to New York to speak to several groups composed of influential whites. In his presentations, Banks was urged to discuss the success of the town
and wherever possible "to equate the growth of Mound Bayou with the work being done at Tuskegee." In a letter to the New York Sun in December of that year, Banks came to the public defense of Washington and his philosophy, attacking his critics and labeling them "calamity howlers" and a "whining impotent contingency." Apparently unknown to Washington, Banks tried to boost the Tuskegeean's books. In March, 1910, he expressed concern to Emmett Scott, Washington's private secretary, that the sales of The Story of the Negro appeared to be lagging. Perhaps, he said, "it may be well for us to get some things in motion among our own people that might increase the demand. . . . Just at this time, we want no stumps whatever."

Publicly, Washington disavowed direct participation in politics, advising blacks to concentrate on economic and moral betterment. Behind the scenes, however, he worked closely with Banks, an avid Republican, to keep informed on political appointments and discrimination against blacks in Mississippi. Banks' involvement in state politics began in 1890 with an appointment as federal census enumerator for his district. With the support of whites, he became supervisor of the Twelfth Census for the Third District of Mississippi in 1900. In 1904 and 1908, he served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention, supporting William Howard Taft at the latter meeting. According to one account, black delegates there selected Banks to second Taft's nomination, but "for the sake of political expediency this honor was not conferred upon him." Banks turned Progressive in 1912 and served as a delegate-at-large from Mississippi to the Bull Moose Convention which nominated Theodore Roosevelt.

From the neighboring state of Alabama, Washington sometimes asked Banks for information on political developments in Mississippi, usually cautioning him "not to use my name." In February, 1910, for example, he wanted Banks to investigate the circumstances surrounding the removal of the postmaster at Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Federal officials
had apparently informed Thomas I. Keys, the black postmaster there, that a white man would replace him in office. Banks was instructed to check on Keys' character, the number of years he had held the post, and the "extent he is backed up by white people." Banks also sought to apply pressure in the case, asking Fred R. Moore, editor of the New York Age, to run an article in his newspaper exposing discrimination at Ocean Springs. In return, Washington tried to help Banks with federal patronage positions inside the state. Such was the case in early 1910 when Banks wrote to Tuskegee seeking assistance in naming a white woman to a postal position in the nearby town of Rosedale.

In the Rosedale matter, as in a number of other cases, Banks was trying to maintain some influence in Republican politics in the Yazoo Delta. That struggle remained. In a letter to Washington in October, 1915, one month before the Tuskegeean died, Banks expressed his disillusionment with the party structure in the South. Now was the time, he told Washington, for northern Republicans to think about strengthening their position in the southern states, but they might find it difficult to work through the southern wing of the party. It was Banks' opinion that entrenching themselves for the disposal of patronage constituted the major aim of most Republican officeholders. In Mississippi, as elsewhere in the South, Republicans failed to "command the following of the other Whites and the independent, self-sustaining Negroes who can be relied upon for real party growth." Reflecting his own experiences, he predicted that political disaster would ultimately result from "ostracizing and curbing the Negro."

Like the other black towns, Mound Bayou periodically suffered from a shortage of skilled and semiskilled artisans and laborers. To alleviate the problem, community leaders looked to Booker T. Washington for help. Beginning as early as 1908 and continuing for several years, a procession of Tuskegee graduates, trained in such areas as carpentry, teaching, bricklaying, and business management, moved from the
institute to Mound Bayou. As examples, during January, 1910, Banks wrote to Washington asking him to send a qualified blacksmith and later, in April, a woman trained to operate a laundry. In both cases, Banks offered to arrange to finance the new ventures. Emmett Scott channeled letters from black farmers who wrote to Tuskegee asking for crop loans to the Bank of Mound Bayou. People writing to Washington seeking investment opportunities were advised to contact Charles Banks.

As the economic and political ties between Mound Bayou and Tuskegee grew stronger, Charles Banks and Emmett Scott became close personal friends. By 1910, both were stockholders and directors of the Mississippi Beneficial Insurance Company, and Scott supported Banks when he won the post of secretary-treasurer of that organization. Scott held stock in the Bank of Mound Bayou and sat on its board of directors. The pair also arranged for mutual donations between the school and the town. Banks, a member of the AME Church and one of its prominent lay leaders in the South, yearly contributed $25 toward the “Banks Prize” at Tuskegee awarded to the outstanding student of the Phelps Hall Bible Training School there. When Mound Bayou dedicated its new library, Scott purchased two chairs for the building.

Other than an honest admiration for Scott and a strong commitment to the Washington philosophy, Banks nurtured the Mound Bayou–Tuskegee relationship for a very practical reason. Association with Washington, the most influential black leader of his time, offered the tiny community a direct connection to white philanthropy. In a letter to Scott in late November, 1908, Banks initiated the suggestion of funneling some white capital through Tuskegee to the town. “I am writing to have you start a campaign,” he said, “to have Mr. Rockefeller or Mr. Carnegie, or some other philanthropist, built a Y.M.C.A. building, a library building or a school building for the Negroes of Mound Bayou.” One week later after discussing it with his mentor, Scott responded,
instructing Banks to write directly to John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, mentioning Washington's name. As he thought on the possibilities, Banks' vision of Mound Bayou apparently grew much larger. Through Scott, he asked Washington to approach Carnegie in February, 1910, about the possibility of funding the purchase of large tracts of land around the town to be held in trust for future settlers. "You have an idea," he confided in his friend, "what it would mean for us to ultimately control this corner of the county as we now control Mound Bayou. Talk this over with the Dr. and let us see what can be done." Over the next few years, Banks proposed a similar scheme to several white businessmen, including W. L. Park, vice-president and general manager of the Illinois Central Railroad.

Most of those contacted, including Rockefeller, politely declined to invest in the town or to contribute to its development through a direct gift. Although Banks failed in his efforts to convince philanthropists to buy up the unoccupied lands surrounding the community, he enjoyed some success in other areas. In late 1908, as he had done in so many other places in the United States, Carnegie agreed to donate $4,000 to finance construction of a public library for Mound Bayou. In turn, the town council offered to raise 10 percent of that amount for the maintenance of the building and grounds. The Rosenwald Fund provided $1,000 for a school in the community in 1909, and Banks gained the aid of the Jeans Fund of New Orleans for rural schoolteachers in Bolivar County. Banks' most striking success, however, made possible through Washington's endorsement, was convincing Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Company to invest in a proposed $100,000 cottonseed oil mill which opened for business in November, 1912.

At its 1907 meeting, held in Meridian, the executive committee of the Mississippi State Negro Business League, chaired by E. P. Montgomery of Mound Bayou, voted to establish the oil mill. In order to gain wide support from blacks all over the state, representatives from fourteen com-
munities sat on the Ways and Means Committee of the new corporation. Banks soon discovered that disposal of $40,000 in bonds and the $100,000 worth of stock posed a formidable problem. He approached Washington. In a series of meetings at Tuskegee, the pair formulated a plan to fund the enterprise. Isaiah T. Montgomery was sent to New York and other northern cities to seek out white philanthropists, Banks launched a stock-selling campaign in Mississippi, and Washington agreed to use his influence with Julius Rosenwald as a possible investor. After an exchange of correspondence and a final meeting with Banks in Alabama in February, 1913, Rosenwald offered to take $25,000 of the $40,000 in bonds bearing 6 percent interest. Rosenwald was to hold a first mortgage on the plant and equipment, and the bonds were to be retired at the rate of $2,500 per year. Banks insured the building and its contents for $45,000.51

Washington risked using his name and throwing his support behind the mill. He realized that its failure might harm his reputation as well as jeopardize future support from prominent whites. In a September, 1912, letter marked “Private and confidential,” he lectured Banks on his responsibilities in the matter, warning him to be certain “that every promise which you have made to Mr. Rosenwald be strictly and fully carried out. If Mr. Rosenwald be disappointed in this investment he will lose faith in our entire race.”52 Washington also wrote to businessmen in Ohio, California, and Massachusetts, seeking their assistance in buying the remaining $15,000 worth of bonds. B. B. Harvey, a white owner of an oil mill in Memphis, finally purchased the remainder of the issue and agreed to lease the mill.53

To promote stock sales, Banks, Montgomery, and other officers utilized an appeal to race pride, arguing that the mill would stand as a monument symbolizing black business acumen to future generations. Each investor received a letter advising him to frame and hang the stock certificate in his home to indicate his contribution to racial solidarity and to encourage “neighbors and . . . friends to join in this
uplifting of the rising banner of race progress." Banks asked for Washington’s help in this area as well. With much advance publicity and great fanfare, Washington arrived in Mound Bayou on November 25, 1912, to open the mill officially. In his dedication speech, the Tuskegeean stressed two major points. Whites in Mississippi should also be proud of the undertaking because it helped blacks while benefiting the entire state. And those in the audience with money to invest should buy stock in the corporation. Since Banks still needed to dispose of from $10,000 to $15,000 worth of stock and because he always tried to accommodate whites, Banks had written Washington on November 2 asking him to emphasize these two areas in the address. Some of the stock issue, costing $1 per share, was taken by the Odd Fellows, Pythians, Masons, and other black fraternal organizations in Mississippi.

Other than Mound Bayou, to which he seemed totally committed, Washington exhibited some interest in other
The Black Towns

black towns. He was familiar with Boley, Oklahoma, visiting there in 1905 at about the same time its promoters sought incorporation. Three years later, he published an article in The Outlook, entitled “Boley, A Negro Town in the West,” in which he called the community “another chapter in the long struggle of the Negro for moral, industrial and political freedom.” Yet, the Tuskegeean remained ambivalent about most segregated communities. In general he opposed northern migration, believing that blacks must work out their destiny in the rural South. Towns like Boley, therefore, were temporary experiments, a resting place along the path of racial uplift where blacks could improve themselves, gain self-confidence, and show their capacity for self-government. In the report of the 1914 meeting of the National Negro Business League, which Washington edited for publication, William Arey of the Hampton Institute argued that Boley was undoubtedly a success and reflected credit upon the race. If, however, “the Boley idea were carried to its logical conclusion, the Negro would suffer and so would his white friends” from the lack of mutual contact.

Because the philosophy of Booker T. Washington coincided with that of most black-town promoters, they supported him and his ideas long before the Tuskegeean reached the pinnacle of his power and attracted the attention of white philanthropists. As early as 1896, newspapers like the Herald at Langston ran weekly news items on the activities at Tuskegee Institute. By 1905, the editor of the Boley Progress was running reprints of Washington’s speeches, praising him as the greatest living member of the race. When Washington spoke at the Opera House in Guthrie, Oklahoma, in November of that year, Inman E. Page, president of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University at Langston, headed a delegation of 236 people from the community who traveled the twelve miles to hear the address. Like Charles Banks in Mound Bayou, leaders in other black towns recognized the importance of direct contact with Tuskegee. Typical of similar requests, Boley banker David
J. Turner wrote to Emmett Scott in the fall of 1914 hoping that Scott and Washington would "say a good word for us wherever you think best, and to send us some good people with money to help build our town."  

Black-town leaders rushed to join the National Negro Business League after its formation in 1900, and Washington used them to increase membership in the organization. Usually through a personal letter, Washington urged the towns to affiliate with the league. In December, 1914, he wrote to J. Harold Coleman, promoter of Blackdom, New Mexico, seeking more information on that community and encouraging formation of a local chapter there. Such prompting frequently produced results, and from the league's first meeting in Boston until Washington's death fifteen years later, representatives from segregated communities attended national conventions and appeared on the programs. At the 1914 meeting, held in Muskogee, Oklahoma, businessmen from the black towns of Mound Bayou, Mississippi; Allenworth, California; and from Taft, Foreman, Rentiesville, Tullahassee, Wybark, Clearview, and Boley in Oklahoma either spoke to the convention or sat in the audience. Black-town leaders were active in the state organization as well. In Oklahoma, three of the ten state officers and 20 percent of the executive committee resided in a black community in 1914.  

To guarantee a large turnout at the Muskogee meeting, Washington accepted an invitation from Boley businessmen to visit the town by special train. Ralph W. Tyler, ex-auditor of the United States Navy and hired by Washington as a traveling organizer for the league, felt the site chosen for the convention was a mistake. Since Chicago, Boston, and other major cities had usually hosted previous meetings, Tyler felt it unlikely that members would be willing to travel to a small and somewhat isolated town in the Southwest. The unique character of Boley might entice delegates, however. Approximately one month before the convention, Washington wrote to Emmett Scott from Castine, Maine, hoping that
Tyler could be proved wrong and suggesting that “the idea of going to Boley will attract a great many people if it is kept constantly to the front.” 62 Accompanied by a delegation of league members, Washington spoke at the Boley city park on Saturday, August 22. At that time, some blacks in eastern Oklahoma were joining a back-to-Africa movement headed by Alfred Sam, an Akim chief from the Gold Coast. Reflecting his attitude toward African migration, the Tuskegeean advised Boley residents not to follow “Chief Sam or Chief anybody else.” Much to the consternation of Boley leaders, Clearview promoter James E. Thompson also convinced Washington to visit his town as well. At the railroad depot, Washington was met by Clearview school children and later entertained by the “Rough Riders,” a group of local horsemen. 63

A Washington visit raised spirits for a few days and perhaps even sparked a minor “boom,” but, soon after his departure, residents returned to the everyday problems of life. As in all communities, large and small, taxes had to be paid. In Boley, property owners were assessed an ad valorem tax of 2 percent, 1.5 percent of which went for schools with the remainder allocated to the town’s general fund. Boley schools also received all the revenue collected from the $1 poll tax. Since money was scarce, some communities accepted or required payment in labor rather than cash. Mound Bayou pioneers constructed the roads in the settlement by serving ten days per year. Later, each male citizen of Mound Bayou was “taxed” three days’ work on the roads of the colony. Boley’s town council in 1909 directed property owners living on certain streets to lay their own oak-plank sidewalks and, by the mid-1920’s, males of voting age were required to work on town streets four days, eight hours a day, or face a fine of $10. Communal volunteers also helped. Town residents and nearby farmers subscribed money for bridge construction, donated time, and supplied teams and the crude apparatus necessary for street and road maintenance. Heavy rains in March, 1888, for example, made Nicodemus streets nearly
impassable, prompting the editor of the newspaper there to call for volunteers to repair them.64

In addition to the usual property and poll taxes, businessmen paid license fees to their respective town treasuries. Costs varied. In Boley in 1905, businesses of a less permanent nature—fortunetellers, auctioneers, and peddlers—were charged $1 to $2 per day, while circuses paid $10 for every twenty-four hours of operation. More established firms received yearly rates, from a high of $25 for banks and $6 per table for billiard parlors to a low of $4 each for drug stores and drays of two horses. Half of all tax revenue collected from businesses was earmarked for the Boley school fund.65

Like their white counterparts, black-town businessmen were of course interested in increasing sales. Based on the frequency of use, most felt that an appeal to race pride constituted an effective device to attract customers and to ensure that local consumers shopped at home. The black-town trade area extended well into the surrounding countryside, and merchants were eager to entice farmers away from neighboring white communities. “Buying Black” inside the town kept capital in black hands. “Where does most of your money go?” Boley attorney Moses J. Jones asked a local group in March, 1905. “To the white merchant. Why not circulate that money among ourselves and allow our boys and girls to become business men and women?”66 Moreover, some leaders argued that those who purchased from whites financially supported prejudice and discrimination. In June, 1905, S. Douglas Russell at Langston insisted that self-respecting blacks should boycott all businessmen who refused to respect the race.67 Typical of most supporters of the National Negro Business League, Jones and Russell apparently failed to recognize the internal contradiction of their own argument. If economic laws were color blind, why encourage blacks to buy only from other blacks? As Jones put it, “A man in business is not recognized by the color of his skin nor his curly hair, but by the amount of business he does.”68

Although Arthur Tallman, editor of the Western Cy-
assured residents in June, 1886, that “you can buy anything from a wheelbarrow to a twine binder right here in Nicodemus, and it is your duty to patronize home industries,”60 black-town businessmen faced competition from other communities. People living in Clearview, Boley, and Mound Bayou could board the train at the local depot and be shopping in a nearby town in a few minutes, in part attracted there by advertisements run in the columns of the black-town press. In November, 1904, for example, firms in Boynton, Weleetka, and Okmulgee sought customers through advertisements in the Clearview newspaper. And in December of the following year, advertisements in the Western Age invited Langston citizens to trade with merchants in the neighboring towns of Coyle and Guthrie. When out of town on business, however, black-town editors urged their readers to trade with businesses operated by members of the race.70

If the black-town merchant, or the banker who backed him, failed to extend credit, many customers were compelled to shop elsewhere. Local residents were upset during the fall of 1887 when a severe drought and lack of funds forced Henrie and Brothers, a Nicodemus dry goods and grocery store, to announce a “cash only” policy in August of that year.71 To be sure, hard times affected white storekeepers as well, but the overall scarcity of capital in the black community, even during prosperous years, imposed severe limitations on the black merchant.

The greatest threat, however, came from another source. By the turn of the century, all country storekeepers, regardless of location, felt the competition from mail-order houses such as Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.72 In time, merchant concern turned to fear and then to panic. In a November, 1905, article entitled, “LOCAL MERCHANT VS Mail Order Houses,” Boley editor O. H. Bradley described the firms as a growing evil threatening to destroy the prosperity of the small towns and cities in the West. In Bradley’s eyes, females were in large part responsible for
their continued success. Women purchased from mail-order houses for many of the same reasons one attended a séance, patronized an oriental honky-tonk, or read a dime novel—because of the mystery and romance and the thrill of getting a package from some "monster corporation." Bradley placed those who bought from mail-order houses on a par with persons who married through correspondence. Unlike the local merchant, mail-order houses never extended credit, and they "never tell you to send them any farm products that you may have, all they want is your cash, and when you send them a dollar you may as well kiss it good-bye forever." And besides, Boley blacks were already sending too much money east for insurance payments. Bradley pleaded with residents to support local firms as a matter of race and town pride, even if mail-order goods were cheaper.

The scarcity of money in Boley, to which Bradley indirectly alluded by mentioning the outward flow of cash, was manifested in several ways. Four of the five black towns possessed at least one, and sometimes two, joint-stock trading companies organized to deal in a general merchandise business. At the 1914 meeting of the National Negro Business League, Eugene P. Booze of Mound Bayou, a brother-in-law of Charles Banks, discussed the reasons underlying the formation of the Farmers' Cooperative Company in his town. Because of the lack of capital to stock goods and to extend badly needed credit to customers, Mound Bayou merchants could handle only 25 percent of the business available there. The remainder of the population shopped in the neighboring towns of the Yazoo Delta, paying high interest charges on accounts held by white storekeepers. Although they perhaps could never totally solve the problem, Booze felt that several such ventures might make Mound Bayou a more attractive trading center.

The Abe Lincoln Trading Company of Clearview, incorporated in June, 1904, typified the methods employed by the promoters of such firms in the other black communities. With a capital stock of $2,500, company directors offered
shares to the public at $25 each. To reach smaller investors, residents could pay 25 percent of the price of each share in cash, with 10 percent of the remaining balance due each month. By mid-September, $280 worth of stock had been paid in, and the company held assets, including cash, fixtures, hardware, and groceries, valued at $338. Sales from June 1 through August 30 amounted to approximately $300. Dividends for those few with money to invest were handsome, on one occasion reaching 21 percent, but the overwhelming majority of Clearview citizens lacked the capital to benefit from the enterprise. In November, 1909, Clearview boosters suggested a similar approach in an attempt to organize a joint-stock canning factory in the town.

The multiple ownership of businesses by a very few individuals also indicated the absence of a large pool of investment capital, but more importantly it also illustrated the unequal distribution of income in most black towns. Perhaps to an even greater extent than that found in corresponding white communities, the control of the black-town economy rested in the hands of a small group. The list of the officers and directors of the Farmers and Merchants' Bank at the time of its formation in March, 1905, read like a directory of Boley's most prominent businessmen. Included were the owners of the cotton gin, hotel, drug store, and three general merchandise firms, plus a lawyer, the railroad station agent, and the town promoter, most of whom speculated in real estate. David J. Turner, the bank's leading stockholder and its cashier, held investments in town lots and farms, a drug store, ice plant, brickyard, newspaper, and lumberyard, and was an agent for the Equitable Life Insurance Company. Economic and political power went hand-in-hand. The mayor of Boley and four of the five town aldermen were either officers or directors in the Farmers and Merchants' Bank.

Partnerships proved ephemeral, as small entrepreneurs, committed only to the opportunity for a good return and a rapid turnover of money, searched for possible investments.
The movements and activities of Jay C. Trimble, one-time resident of Boley, illustrated both the geographic mobility and peripatetic nature of many black-town businessmen. Born into Alabama slavery during the Civil War, Trimble lived with his parents on a farm until the age of twenty. He taught "subscription school" at Marion, Alabama, for one year, receiving fifty cents per pupil, and then worked as a laborer for two different railroads in Tennessee. Hearing stories about Indian Territory from acquaintances, he decided to relocate there, arriving in Claremore in September, 1900. From his savings as a railroad worker, he purchased a barber shop and leased 160 acres of Indian land for a coal mining operation. Losing his mining lease in a court dispute with an oil company, Trimble sold the Claremore barber shop and signed on as a traveling barber with the Sills and Dumas Circus, where he received $100 per month and expenses. In 1904, he moved to Boley, opened a barbershop there, started a contracting company, and entered into a partnership with two other individuals to manufacture bricks. With Issariel Johnson, he purchased forty acres of land and plotted it into town lots. Trimble donated $50 to John C. Leftwich toward the founding of the Creek-Seminole college in Boley, and he taught manual training there for two years. In later life, Trimble suffered from cataracts and eventually lost the sight of one eye. In 1937, at the age of seventy-six, Trimble was living in Oklahoma City on a social security pension, but he continued to work, making and selling brooms, leather suspenders and belts, and rubber doormats, which he fabricated from discarded automobile inner tubes.78

Black-town businessmen like Trimble advertised in the columns of the local newspaper, and their promotional schemes and advertisements paralleled those used by small firms throughout the South and West. Like most country merchants, town shopkeepers ran the same announcement for several months heralding the arrival and a "new" stock of goods. Advertisements often revealed the multiple nature
of some businesses, such as the February, 1912, claim of J. A. Roundtree in the Clearview Patriarch that he could “make your clothes, cut your hair, clean your clothes and shave you too—Walk in.” At T. C. Jordan’s in Mound Bayou, customers could buy a meal, purchase meat, and shoot a game of pool. Promotional gimmicks were also commonplace. Hoping to increase sales through a show of community spirit, Abraham Hall, a Nicodemus merchant, offered in March, 1888, to donate $2 of every one hundred in sales toward a library for the town. In Boley, Hosmer’s Store gave a new suit of clothes to the man who brought in a wagon with the most women in it; John Eaton, a local resident, crowded fourteen females into his wagon and won. And, during the 1912 season, the Clearview Cotton Gin gave each farmer patronizing that firm a ticket for a drawing on a new wagon.

Money was scarce and unevenly distributed, and, with few exceptions, the black-town class structure was drawn along economic lines. Unlike people living in the black section of most mixed communities, however, those who provided direct personal services—doctors, lawyers, barbers, and undertakers—failed to achieve upper-class positions in black-town society. Rather, the land promoter, merchant, and banker, since each held capital and could extend credit, dominated the economic life of the town. Alliances or feuds between or among economically important families could influence municipal politics and affect town prosperity. In Mound Bayou, Isaiah T. Montgomery and his cousin Benjamin T. Green founded the community and started several of the first businesses there. Montgomery’s daughter, Mary, married Eugene P. Booze, a wealthy merchant, who migrated to Mound Bayou from Clarksdale, Mississippi. Booze was related by marriage to Charles Banks, in time the town’s most prominent entrepreneur. In turn, Banks formed multiple partnerships with John W. Francis, who had married Benjamin T. Green’s widow. Kinship and economic ties among the Montgomery, Green, Francis, Booze, and Banks families could have given them virtual control of Mound Bayou.
Factional fights soon developed, however, and long after the elder Montgomery's death and Banks' departure from the community, the Green and Booze families vied for power.  

Consistent with their commitment to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington and their support for the Republican party, the black-town leaders generally favored political programs on the national level which aided the American business community. Editors and other leaders opposed government regulation of the private sector of the economy and antitrust legislation while supporting a high protective tariff aimed at keeping out competitive foreign goods. The tariff supposedly provided jobs and luxuries for American workers and kept the price of farm products high. Following the 1912 election, Clearview town promoter James E. Thompson feared the "tariff tinkering" of Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats. To protect the country from the "radical element" of his party, which Thompson believed had produced financial disasters in the past, Wilson would have to follow the example of Grover Cleveland and use the veto power of the presidency extensively. To the black-town press, ideas threatening to alter the economic status quo endangered American stability and freedom. For example, according to the editor at Nicodemus in October, 1887, Henry George's "absurd and ridiculous" proposal for a single tax on land values was being agitated among "organizations of anarchical inclinations."  

Organized labor also came in for its share of criticism. Totally isolated from the daily problems of industrial life in a large city, some black-town leaders felt that labor unions violated the freedom of the individual and disrupted the normal relationship between workers and capitalists, and that union leaders seemed more interested in their own status than in the welfare of their members. Commenting on the Knights of Labor in October, 1887, George A. Sanford, the editor at Nicodemus, argued that serious problems had developed inside that organization when men "who were well satisfied with their employers were forced to surrender their
The Black Towns

jobs and go out on strike to favor a few figure heads who called themselves bosses.⁸⁶ Although the presence of blacks in a labor-management dispute only increased racial antagonisms, occasionally editors rejoiced at a walkout. In November, 1892, the Langston City Herald reprinted an exchange from another newspaper commenting on the Homestead Strike at a Carnegie-owned steel works in Pittsburgh. "Where no Negroes were formerly employed," reported the Herald, "four hundred of them . . . now have an equal show to earn a living."⁸⁷

For those owning no farm or business or possessing few skills, earning a living in the black town meant part-time work on the railroad or on adjacent farms. During the summer of 1905, Boley provided approximately twenty-five hands for the Fort Smith and Western Railroad, and each fall area farmers entered the community seeking cotton pickers. Such jobs were only seasonal, however, and rural parents frequently sent young children to the cotton field rather than the classroom, thereby eliminating the need to pay for additional help during harvesting. The cotton gins in each black town employed some men, but like all firms oriented toward agricultural service, they operated only a few months each year. To assist the idle in finding work, Boley formed an employment bureau during the summer of 1911. The local newspaper printed notices of jobs available in the community and in neighboring towns along with a listing of people looking for work.⁸⁸

To be sure, black-town leaders recognized the lack of employment opportunities. As a result they concentrated much of their promotional effort on enticing manufacturing firms or inducing the local populace to contribute toward their construction. Residents in nearly every town witnessed attempts at local manufacturing. From February through April, 1908, the L.L.C. Medicine and Toilet Factory in Langston produced Blood Remedies, Magic Linament, Gofer Powders, Cough Catarrh Asthma Balsam, and Bloom and Life Tonic and Hair Preparation among its full line of medi-
cines and perfumes. Four years later, the Boley Carbonating Works, successor to the Boley Bottling Company, was turning out soda water and vinegar for local customers. Aside from Mound Bayou's $100,000 cottonseed oil mill, Clearview boosters embarked on the most energetic campaign of industrial promotion. In addition to a standing offer of "land and water free gratis to any Mfg. Co. who will establish a plant here," business leaders organized the Clearview Development Association with offices in the Harris Building in Muskogee. In two advertisements in March, 1912, the association announced plans to build six factories in the town within eighteen months, ultimately increasing Clearview's population from three hundred to ten thousand. The boom was on. Residents were urged to write to friends and relatives in other states advising them of the natural advantages of the area and to provide association members with the names of fifty people to be contacted. According to the promoters, the output from the overall, canning, glove, and other concerns would be sold to blacks throughout the United States who would give "preference by buying those articles made in factories owned, operated and controlled by their own race."

Promoters of every tiny community in the West and South thought they saw the coming of the railroad as the key to future greatness. Black-town leaders were no exception. Clearview, Boley, and Mound Bayou were plotted along established rail lines. Isolated in a sparsely settled area of northwestern Kansas, Nicodemus was less fortunate. After resigning themselves to the loss of the county seat, Nicodemus citizens turned their attention to attracting one or more railroads to the town. In January, 1887, Hugh K. Lightfoot, editor of the Cyclone, and a representative group of businessmen, conferred with W. W. Fagan, superintendent of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, about extending that line west from Stockton. Later, the Nicodemus group met in a local church to sign a petition calling for a special election to approve $16,000 worth of bonds. And, on March 22, by a
vote of 82 to 3, Nicodemus Township approved the proposition. In general, Lightfoot opposed "paying tribute," but advised *Cyclone* readers that getting the railroad would provide a home market and boom the town. Meanwhile, the township was asked to consider voting bonds for the Union Pacific also laying track toward the community from the southeast. According to one resident, James P. Pomeroy, a business and political associate of W. R. Hill and a heavy investor in Graham County lands, supposedly sent word advising Nicodemus to forestall any vote on additional bonds. Pomeroy held a financial interest in the Missouri Pacific and virtually guaranteed its construction to the town. Thus, Nicodemus waited.92

For some, black-town life proved monotonous. Consequently, any diversion from the everyday routine of hard work represented a welcome diversion. Residents looked forward with anticipation to one or more celebrations usually held each summer or fall. In Mound Bayou, local citizens and out-of-town guests gathered to hold Founders' Day, honoring the original settlers of the colony and those who had contributed to its subsequent development. Both Clearview and Boley staged annual festivities commemorating the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, while several thousand people converged on Nicodemus every August 1 to celebrate the freeing of the West Indian slaves in 1833. A carnival atmosphere usually prevailed with bands, parades, rides, games of chance, and sporting events, plus the standard rural picnics held under shade trees. Typical was the June, 1911, Clearview Emancipation Day Celebration, which featured prayers, songs and hymns such as "Marching Through Georgia" and "Blessed Assurance," as well as speeches on education, the black press, and town building.93 Promoters, sensing the possibilities for profit, took advantage of the excellent opportunity to sell town lots while politicians delivered speeches or mingled with the crowd hoping to garner votes for an upcoming election.

Baseball games, excursions, band concerts, and special
programs provided other attractions during the summer months. Like the other Oklahoma towns, Boley maintained a highly commercialized baseball team which traveled to other communities in Oklahoma and occasionally played teams from Texas. Black-town citizens took intense pride in their team, and the enthusiasm of fans plus the large attendance at games sometimes prompted editors and other leaders to lecture residents on what they considered an excessive preoccupation with the sport. In reporting Langston's loss to El Reno in July, 1907, the editor of the *Western Age* noted that baseball was the current rage in his town, and it "may be all right for the unemployed, but there is too great a demand for farm hands now in this section." Editors also criticized groups of people who took "Sunday Excursions" on the train to visit other communities. D. F. Whitaker at Clearview welcomed the warm April days in 1911 but feared that with baseball and excursions good Christians would "never see the inside of a church until cold weather." The cornet band, common to nearly every black town and from which some prominent jazz musicians emanated, also traveled to other communities. Nicodemus organized a ten-member cornet band in April, 1887, and the following spring the group performed at Hill City during the celebration of that town's victory over Millbrook in the county seat race. "Entertainments," as they were called, encompassed a wide range of activities, including specially organized programs staged at a church or school, lectures, speeches, concerts, and recitals. Promoters of such events, usually a church or civic group, used the money collected from the nominal admission charge or donation to fund a specific project.

The literary society, organized to hold public debates, attracted large audiences. In explaining to Clearview citizens why the town needed a literary society in 1911, Georgia Talifaerro, a school teacher there, argued that such groups helped participants overcome timidity, trained the mind, and educated blacks by teaching them to speak in public. Resolutions debated seldom dealt with issues of importance
to the town or race, such as prejudice, discrimination, poverty, or injustice, but usually concerned trivial topics of limited social, economic, or political consequence. During 1895, for example, members of the Langston Literary Society debated resolutions that "Morality Increases with Civilization" and that "Laziness Is More Common among Males than among Females." And in 1912, Clearview debaters argued whether fire had more power than water and whether a girl had more right to an education than a boy. No doubt reflecting the abilities of the speakers rather than the possible implications of the decision, the negative won a 1905 debate at the Union Literary Society in Boley over the question of whether blacks should celebrate George Washington's birthday. 97

The black towns contained the usual lodges and fraternities common to the race whether living in a mixed or segregated community. In some cases, membership was large, indicating that individuals belonged to several different organizations. At one time Mound Bayou supported no less than twelve lodges: Sons and Daughters of Jacob, Knights of Pythias, Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights and Daughters of Tabor, Eastern Star, Order of Calanthe, Independent Order of Eagles, Royal House of King David, Benevolent Industrial Association, Woodmen of Union, and the Household of Ruth. In addition to five of those mentioned, some Boley blacks held membership in the Elks, American Woodmen, Brotherhood of Friends, and Sisters Mysterious 10. The Patriarchs of America, and its women's auxiliary, the Sisters of Ethiopia, were unique to Clearview. James E. Thompson formed the fraternal order in January, 1911, to promote a colonization scheme. As the title indicated, the Clearview Patriarch served as the official organ of the group as well as the town newspaper. After his proposal failed to receive serious consideration, Thompson and the Patriarchs concentrated on economic self-help, moral uplift, racial solidarity, and boosting the community.

Black-town lodges were more social than benevolent.
Certainly, the United Brotherhood of Friends and Sisters Mysterious 10, who constructed a home for orphans and the elderly in Boley, the Daughters of Zion and the Benevolent Association in Nicodemus, who worked for community welfare, and the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, who later brought a hospital to Mound Bayou, all worked on improving the quality of life and aiding the less fortunate. But impromptu groups of volunteers and clubs less formally structured than the fraternal orders generally handled the civic improvements and charity on a small scale. In Langston, the women of the community made and sold fancy needlework and gave socials to buy fifteen gas lamps for the main street, while a Clearview minister solicited money on his own in order to light the streets of the town. Individuals and small groups also initiated direct assistance to the needy. The Women's Club of Boley met in February, 1908, and took up a collection of provisions and clothing for a poverty-stricken woman. In 1911, the townspeople of Clearview donated money to a family in which the father was disabled and the following year to another whose house had been totally destroyed by fire. In both Nicodemus and Clearview, citizens depended upon private donations or volunteer labor in order to attempt the digging of a town well.98

Like people living in other farm communities around the turn of the century, black-town residents seemed obsessed with their health. Editors reported attacks of consumption, grippe, diphtheria, typhoid, and a number of other diseases. By carefully scrutinizing local news items, readers could determine who was confined to bed, near death, or was up and about following a brief or extended illness. Contrary to previous claims that the area was "unexcelled for a healthy climate" and assurances that the water "contains many medical properties," the town fathers of Boley announced in August, 1905, a thirty-day postponement of the annual celebration because of what the Progress editor diagnosed as "yellow fever." Through advertisements in the readyprint section of the newspaper, residents became familiar with the
latest patent medicines of the day such as Anti-Grippine, Castoria, Piso's Cure for Consumption, St. Jacobs Oil, Carter's Little Liver Pills, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, and Hostetter's Celebrated Stomach Bitters. Evidently, the practice of medicine was a lucrative profession, and for that reason some black towns possessed an overabundance of physicians, in time making it difficult for any one of them to earn an adequate livelihood. In the mid-1920's, for example, seven doctors tended to the medical needs of 3,500 people in Boley. Despite the presence of physicians, even during the early years of settlement, the use of midwives was common during childbirth.99

In addition to doctors, most black towns contained a large number of practicing ministers as well. Some editors, such as Lee J. Meriweather at Langston, saw the "preaching plague" as one of the major stumbling blocks impeding racial progress, believing that "many turn to it to avoid hard work." Meriweather advised young men contemplating a career to consider business rather than "school teaching and preaching, for the world is getting full of them." At Boley, Ernest D. Lynwood, editor of the Beacon in 1908, thought his town could still use "a few lawyers, dentists, and doctors, but for the present we are overstocked with preachers."100 Too many churches dispersed the limited funds available, leading to underpaid ministers who were compelled to work at other jobs, and a lifeless religious environment. In 1904, the settlement at Mound Bayou listed ten churches, and, twenty years later, the people of Boley attempted to support thirteen different ministers. Most towns claimed the usual denominations—several Baptist, a Christian, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME), Methodist Episcopal (ME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion), Church of God, and, in a few cases, Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist. Intracongregational feuds, such as the one at Clearview in 1912, frequently led to different branches of the same church inside a community.101

During the initial years of settlement the absence of
Economy and Society

permanent buildings made intense denominationalism less common. In 1888, the pioneers of Mound Bayou held religious services under a brush arbor regardless of church affiliation. And in early Boley, the Methodists met in the morning and the Baptists in the afternoon, both utilizing the same one-room schoolhouse. Church-going members of the community usually attended both gatherings. Although the AME and Baptist churches in Clearview conducted separate Sunday Schools in 1911, ministers from the two denominations delivered sermons on alternate weeks. In most instances, ministers concentrated on racial solidarity and boosting the community rather than purely spiritual topics. Few extant sermons or articles contained the admonition of the Reverend L. B. Bryant of Clearview to “forget difficulties, hardships, and disappointments, and with our eyes upon the goal, overlook obstructions and continue to press forward to the mark of the high calling which is in Christ Jesus.”

On the contrary, pastors normally advised congregations to concentrate on this life, uniting to advance the race and town. In a December, 1911, article for the Clearview Patriarch, the Reverend B. L. Lockhart praised black progress and his community “with its businessmen, its stores, a Printing Office to herald the news to our millions of people; its schools, its churches. Bless God!” Characteristic of the secular nature of many religious services, Boley's ME Church celebrated Heroes Day on the second Sunday in March, 1906, to honor Abraham Lincoln, Frederic Douglass, and Ulysses Grant.

Barring inclement weather, spare time after church provided the opportunity to socialize with friends. During Boley's early years, townspeople gathered outside the church to visit with farm families who were in town for services, or joined those sitting on logs and stumps placed along main-street near the town well. Occasional out-of-town guests brought news from other localities. The arrival of a relative from another community or state usually provided the host or hostess with an excuse to hold a “social” to introduce the
The Black Towns

stranger, and in order to ensure thorough coverage of the event in the next issue of the newspaper, the editor usually received an invitation to such gatherings. Editors also expected visitors from nearby towns to drop by the printing office to pay their proper respects, and those who failed to do so were sometimes indirectly scolded for their poor manners or lack of appreciation concerning community protocol.

Although isolated from the dominant white society, residents kept abreast of changes in the outside world. Ready-print sections in the newspaper carried information on Booker T. Washington and other prominent black leaders on the national level, local editors ran special columns on activities in other black towns or provided news about blacks living in biracial communities, and, through their attendance at state and national meetings, town leaders encountered the views of blacks living in other localities. A meeting of black postmasters in Oklahoma City in September, 1915, for example, brought Caesar F. Simmons of Boley in contact with representatives from thirteen black towns and seven racially mixed communities in the state.106 Perhaps because they shared common values and problems, the residents of Oklahoma's black towns visited each other frequently. Other than people in Boley who were only a few miles away, families in Clearview hosted friends and relatives from the black towns of Lima, Lewisville, Taft, Langston, Porter, Red Bird, Booker-tee, and Rentiesville during the summer and fall of 1911.

Except for a special celebration, or an occasional drummer seen scurrying from store to store to display samples and take orders for merchandise, those entering or departing the town were usually black.107 During the summer and fall, the place bustled with activity. Cotton or grain wagons slowly rumbled through the streets headed for the local gin or grist mill where fleece would be cleaned and baled or grain ground into cornmeal and flour. On Saturday nights farm families filled the same wagons, coming to trade eggs, butter, and cream for groceries and later joining the knots of people visiting along mainstreet. After a hard day in the fields or
spent clearing brush and trees, older farm children within a radius of several miles sought out the town for entertainment, walking there or catching a ride with rural families bound for mid-week church services. At the height of the town's prosperity, blacks from the outside always seemed to be present, attending this or that meeting of the Masons, the Business League, a Sunday School convention, the Teacher's Normal, or one of the many lodges with mysterious sounding names.

Although the details and layout might differ slightly, a visitor walking the unpaved but well-graded streets of Mound Bayou in 1910 could gain an impression of the typical black town in the United States. The forty-plus shops and stores lining the mainstreet, running from the rail depot through the town, were designed to serve the daily needs of a community of one thousand and the four thousand farmers who considered Mound Bayou their town. Small yet well-kept houses lined most streets, and farther out stood the larger, more pretentious homes of the town's most prominent citizens. Several unsteeped churches, showing little appre-
The Black Towns

ciation for the niceties of architectural excellence, dotted the village along with three small schoolhouses. A handsome, two-story brick building housed the Bank of Mound Bayou located in the business district, a structure commensurate with the importance of capital to the community. Four cotton gins handled most of the five thousand bales exported annually, and a sawmill and lumberyard processed and stored some of the railroad ties and barrel staves marketed there. Local merchants considered the forty square miles surrounding the town as their trade area, and most of the farmers who lived within it owned the forty-acre plots they worked; approximately 80 percent raised the corn and hay needed for their livestock.

This was Mound Bayou in 1910. Asked by a newspaper reporter in June of that year about the future of his community, Charles Banks responded:

As the years go by and our schools, colleges, and churches improve in power and capacity, as our streets are drained and paved, our oil lamps replaced by electric lights, the old antiquated characteristic Delta pump is displaced by bountiful streams of pure artesian water, negroes will begin to make this their residence home . . . there will be an atmosphere in which to raise their children and a social status for their wives and daughters very much to their liking. 108

Ironically, within five years Banks would see his beautiful dream of contentment and success turn to a hideous nightmare of frustration and failure.

154