EXPECTING LITTLE MORE THAN a mysterious country with fascinating sights and mysterious customs, black novelist Richard Wright stepped from the ship at Takoradi in 1953 to view West Africa for the first time. Shocked, he stared at the people in disbelief—the workmen, traffic officers, policemen—all of them black. "The whole of life that met the eyes was black," he later wrote. Black towns were also black. "You should be here on Saturday night," a Boley resident responded to an inquiry concerning the community's social life in 1913. "This town is black; yes, literally black with people." And one of Mound Bayou's prominent leaders remembered that as a child everything there was black, "from the symbols of law and authority and the man who ran the bank down to the fellow who drove the road scraper." A settler departing the train at Mound Bayou or Boley for the first time no doubt felt a similar experience—suddenly to be among the majority in a world where everyone around him was black. Just as Wright had seen an occasional white face in Takoradi, a black-town visitor might have encountered a white person there on business. But
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whites looked strangely out of place in a community dedicated to isolation from them.

To attract settlers, promoters had pitched their appeal to black pride and economic self-help. Moreover, advertisements and editorials equated race progress with the success of the town-building venture. Capital and credit, however, generally determined business success, and the black town possessed little of either. Editors made much of the bank accounts of a handful of people in each community, such as the twenty-three men in Boley with at least $1,000 each in 1906, but leaders soon discovered that such meager sums were inadequate to serve a populace needing loans and jobs. As a consequence, Charles Banks, as did businessmen in other communities, pleaded with area residents to invest their capital. “What are you going to do with your surplus money?” Banks asked in a form letter mailed to Mound Bayou farmers in 1912. “Are you going to hide it about the house where fire or robber may consume it? Or, are you going to deposit it in a safe bank?” Although it was certainly a commendable effort to encourage savings among members of his race, Banks found that black farmers possessed little “surplus money.” Most, along with some of those living inside the town limits, survived part of each year on credit extended by white merchants in other communities.

During hard times, whites sometimes shut off credit. Farmers in and around Langston found it difficult to get loans in order to carry them through the spring and summer of 1895. Many suffered. In the fall, the cotton looked good and the yields from other crops exceeded previous expectations. By late September, A. J. Alston, editor of the Herald, claimed that Langston farmers were free of debt and would ask no one for help in the future. “How do you merchants around Guthrie who refused to let farmers have a dollars worth during the summer like this kind of noise?” Alston asked. Such claims of financial independence were usually short-lived. After enumerating a number of woes besetting his community in April, 1915, Charles Banks confided to
Booker T. Washington that in Mound Bayou "we are having the hardest time of our existence to get advances to make the crops, but," always the optimist, he added "this will be best in the end, as they will not owe it all when harvest time comes, as in the past."6

Both the high percentage of business failures and the rapid turnover in ownership attested to the scarcity of black-town capital and the unequal distribution of income. Residents in each community witnessed a succession of new firms, most of which lasted only a few months or years, along with what must have seemed like a constant procession of changing partnerships. From the very beginning, merchants felt the pressure to advance credit. But often overextended at the bank themselves and carrying too many customers on account, they faced quick annihilation should a crop failure strike area farmers. Few enjoyed the success of J. H. Mc-Riley, who operated a lumberyard in Boley from 1907 until the early 1920's. Most businessmen, like the five individuals who one after another attempted to establish a laundry in Boley, failed within five years. Even cotton ginning, which should have prospered because of the concentration of local farmers on the crop, sometimes faced serious problems. In 1905, the promoters of the Langston gin soon found the cost of obtaining water too serious an obstacle to overcome and ceased operations. As the town population stabilized or declined and the "boomer" spirit waned, the number of commercial firms remained constant or increased, thus pushing down the general economic prosperity of all. As late as 1925, long after the potential for growth had ceased, over twenty general mercantile stores competed for 3,500 customers inside Boley.7

Even the town newspaper, the very embodiment of booster optimism, found the lack of capital an insurmountable handicap. Like the more than sixty black weeklies published west of the Mississippi River by 1900, most black-town newspapers died in their infancy. Usually established by promoters to boom the community, most newspapers re-
quired periodic subsidies from local businessmen to continue printing. And during hard times, when financial support lagged and advertising fell off, presses sometimes remained idle for several months. Typical of most editors, A. J. Alston at Langston only worked on the Herald part time, depending instead upon his medical practice or other business investments for a steady income. To counteract the scarcity of money in that town, Arthur Tallman, the Nicodemus editor in July, 1886, agreed to take "all kinds of vegetables, young chickens or anything else that a christian printer can eat, on subscription at this office." As the crops matured during the fall of the same year, Hugh Lightfoot, the new editor of the Western Cyclone, extended Tallman's offer, agreeing to trade a one-year subscription for four bushels of corn. Despite such efforts, the turnover of editors equaled or exceeded that of other small businesses. And at least nine different editors directed the Boley Progress during the eleven years from its first issue to 1916.

The disintegration of the Mound Bayou economy in the fall of 1914 illustrated the precarious nature of most black-town business ventures and, given the scarcity of capital, their susceptibility to the fluctuations of the market. With Charles Banks as cashier, his business partner John W. Francis, president, and Isaiah T. Montgomery on the board of directors, the officers of the Bank of Mound Bayou hoped to guide the economic destiny of black farmers in Bolivar County, thereby freeing them from the control of white furnishing merchants. Beginning in 1904 with the formation of the bank and continuing for the next six years, Banks and his cohorts loaned money to Mound Bayou storekeepers and advanced crop loans to local farmers, most of whom concentrated on the production of cotton. On crop loans with town lots, land, or other property as collateral, the Bank of Mound Bayou normally charged 8 percent interest, a rate comparable to that of other banks in nearby communities. The demand for funds usually exceeded its supply. In July, 1910, Banks appealed to Booker T. Washington for help in arrang-
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ing “a loan of five thousand dollars on 90 days for us there. I find some matters very tight in our Southern Centers and Mound Bayou just now must not receive any serious set back.”12 Such loans were only temporary stopgaps. More capital was needed. Again the following year the Bank of Mound Bayou was overextended.

As the bank operated from year to year, sometimes teetering on the brink of disaster, Banks continued to promote the $100,000 Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company. Built by a black contractor using local laborers, the mill was designed to process the byproducts of the cotton grown by Yazoo Delta farmers. To construct the plant, purchase machinery, and buy raw material, Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck and Company agreed to take $25,000 of the $40,000 worth of mill bonds. B. B. Harvey, a white man who was also president of the Memphis Cotton Oil Company, took the remaining $15,000 in bonds. In turn, Harvey leased the mill for five years.

Thanks to Rosenwald and Harvey, the mill project was launched; but the sale of stock in the enterprise proved more difficult. Although some black fraternal organizations in Mississippi purchased shares, Charles Banks soon found it necessary to use the Bank of Mound Bayou to finance sales. He loaned money through the bank to buyers and then accepted their stock in the oil mill as security. The relationship was set. The Bank of Mound Bayou and the Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company were tied together, and pressure on one meant the possible failure of both. In time, the bank held one-half of the $80,000 worth of capital stock sold. Desperately searching for a way to unload it or to convert the stock into the cash needed for crop loans during the coming season, Banks wrote to Washington in February, 1914, asking him to help arrange a loan of $15,000 to $20,000 with the oil mill stock as collateral. Banks also sent George Mays, the mill’s financial agent, Isaiah Montgomery, and W. P. Kyle, a mill official, to Chicago where they visited black churches there in an attempt
to sell some of the mill stock held by the bank. On at least one occasion, Charles Graves, secretary to Julius Rosenwald, joined the trio in their sales campaign. Kyle, Montgomery, and Mays met some success; but in April, 1914, Kyle wrote to Emmett Scott in Alabama reporting that “frankly, the Bank is in a Hell of a fix.”

Disaster struck. In May, 1914, Banks wrote to Washington at Tuskegee pleading for help in salvaging the bank, and the following month the pair met with Rosenwald in Chicago who advanced an emergency loan of $5,000. By that time, Banks had succeeded in reducing the bank’s holdings of oil mill stock to $25,000. The crisis appeared to be over just as the bottom dropped out of the cotton market. The Bank of Mound Bayou had advanced loans to farmers on the prediction that cotton would be selling for from twelve to fifteen cents per pound and had accepted mortgages against houses, lots, and farms as security for the loans. As cotton prices fell, real estate values also declined, leaving the bank with no way to convert its holdings into cash. While Washington was in Boley, Oklahoma, to deliver an address there on August 22, he received a telegram from Banks advising him that the state examiners had just voted to close the Bank of Mound Bayou.

As the investigation of the bank’s affairs continued, rumors circulated up and down the Yazoo Delta of possible criminal charges against its officials. T. M. Henry, the state insurance commissioner, called for an audit of the Masonic Benefit Association of which Banks was treasurer. Some policyholders had charged Banks with mismanagement of funds; and, on September 10, 1914, the Enterprise at Cleveland, Mississippi, carried front-page headlines informing readers that “CHARLEY BANKS FLEES THE STATE, Wanted by Authorities for Alleged Fleecing of Colored Masonic Fraternity.” Earlier, the Vicksburg Herald had claimed that Banks had used Booker T. Washington to obtain a loan of $10,000 in Chicago to save the Bank of Mound Bayou, using only a small portion of the money for that pur-
pose, and that the Masonic Benefit Association faced unpaid death claims amounting to over $75,000. Banks responded, labeling the charges false. He was still in the state he said, and welcomed a full and impartial investigation of his actions. To help alleviate the plight of those who had invested in the Bank of Mound Bayou, many on his personal recommendation, Banks offered to exchange his own stock in the Mound Bayou Oil Mill and Manufacturing Company on a par basis for stock in the now defunct bank.16

The mill, however, was also in trouble. By the fall of 1914, Banks had begun to distrust Harvey and in early December of that year was attempting to force him out as lessee. In leasing the mill, Harvey had supposedly agreed to use the money from the $15,000 in bonds he had purchased to pay the debts outstanding against the plant and equipment. Harvey was to hold the Rosenwald bonds in trust. At the close of the first year of operation, Harvey evidently refused to submit to an audit or to present a financial statement; and Banks, Montgomery, and others were forced to pay the interest on the debt, taxes, and the insurance in order to protect the Rosenwald investment. During the second year, the mill ran only part time, and by January, 1915, it sat idle. On February 4, Banks wrote to Charles Graves, Rosenwald's secretary, accusing Harvey of embezzlement. Banks claimed that Harvey had illegally gained access to the Rosenwald bonds and had negotiated some of them. Banks assured Graves, however, that he now controlled the mill and that matters could be worked out.17

According to Banks, Harvey stayed out of Mississippi to avoid a summons, and his attorney later got a change of venue into federal court at Clarksdale. Thus, Harvey succeeded in extending the case well into the fall of 1915. Meanwhile, Banks received an offer from the Buckeye Cotton Oil Company, owned by Procter and Gamble and located in Greenwood, Mississippi, to lease the mill. Accepting the Buckeye proposal would have helped Banks financially, but he declined, telling Washington that signing the lease meant
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the complete loss of the mill’s racial identity. On September 30, Banks sent Washington more bad news. George Mays, a Tuskegee graduate and the mill’s financial officer, had sold stock in the enterprise under false pretenses and apparently had pocketed some of the money. Banks had been hiding Mays’ actions from the public for several months, hoping to solve the problem quietly. Now he asked Washington’s advice on the matter. What should he do? The Tuskegeean hoped that when confronted Mays would make restitution, but in the event that failed Banks should hold him accountable for his actions through the courts.18

As Banks attempted to force out Harvey during the spring and summer of 1915 and to get the oil mill running under his control, he struggled with Mississippi banking officials over the opening of another bank in the town. Prejudice hindered his efforts. With no competition from Mound Bayou, bankers in nearby communities increased interest charges on crop loans, dictated rental fees for land, and demanded that cotton be brought to their towns for ginning. Based on the losses suffered by creditors, the state bank examiners recommended that criminal charges be brought against Banks and the other directors. But the grand jury hearing the evidence found no basis for such action and voted to quash the indictment. Banks claimed that “designing White men” were trying to gain control of the oil mill as well as block the creation of a new bank in Mound Bayou. The first bank should never have been closed, he told Washington in March, 1915. The method of depreciation of values used by the state examiners would have forced any institution into insolvency. Since he knew how to handle the securities, Banks claimed that if left alone he would have weathered the storm and avoided failure. They would not listen. At first, the state demanded the total liquidation of the defunct bank before the issuance of a new charter, as Banks told Fred Moore, editor of the New York Age, “opposition they would not dare show against members of their race.” In order to take advantage of the movement of cotton,
Banks pushed to open the new bank by June. State officials, however, insisted upon a fully paid capital stock and a “surplus” of $2,000 before permitting the Mound Bayou State Bank to open its doors on October 21, 1915.

Although Charles Banks was neither a stockholder in the new institution nor one of its officers—apparently a concession to state banking authorities—he put up $11,000 of the $12,000 necessary to underwrite its opening. To aid those who had lost farms through mortgage foreclosures and sharecroppers who had failed to obtain credit, Banks developed two large plantations for their use while personally assuming $30,000 worth of liabilities inside Mound Bayou. If it became necessary in order to save the town’s economy, he vowed to Washington that he would sacrifice the remainder of his fortune. In late December, 1914, Banks mailed letters to Mound Bayou farmers trying to raise their spirits, encouraging them to remain on the land, and calling for a public meeting in the library building to discuss the general depression in agriculture and the low price of cotton.

On January 10, 1915, the day of the meeting, the oil mill sat idle, in time to be used as a community recreation hall and ballroom. The Bank of Mound Bayou had been closed since August, its directors faced possible criminal indictments, and the prospects for a new bank seemed dim. The psychological impact of the collapse of the bank and the oil mill permeated the town. Unable to pay their debts, collect outstanding accounts, or to extend more credit, a number of storekeepers had followed suit and closed their doors. Ironically, the very location of the meeting symbolized the failure of the Mound Bayou experiment. Since the town fathers had neglected to provide the necessary funds, the library donated by Andrew Carnegie stood in need of maintenance and contained no reading material. Rather than books, the building housed the Masonic Lodge. Perhaps to convince himself as much as Washington, Banks wrote the Tuskegeeian in March, 1915, assuring him that there was “nothing fundamentally the matter with Mound
Bayou and our efforts here except that in our efforts in making progress we counted too strongly upon the loyalty and support of our constituency and resources at our command and did not properly discount the chances for reverses and general depression." 21 Certainly the relationship between the oil mill and bank contributed to the catastrophe at Mound Bayou, but the decline of cotton prices which precipitated the collapse clearly indicated the basic weakness of the town's economy.

Although the settlers of Nicodemus battled the hot winds, insects, and inadequate rainfall endemic to the High Plains, most avoided one-crop agriculture. The other black towns were less fortunate. Langston, Clearview, and Boley, like Mound Bayou, were located in "cotton counties" in which most farmers depended upon the staple for a livelihood. The cotton depression of 1913 and 1914 marked the beginning of the end for Boley and Clearview as viable towns, and only the payroll of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University saved Langston. When cotton prices tumbled, businesses failed or merchants operated on a low margin or at a loss while carrying customers on credit during hard times. Some Okfuskee County farmers discussed the possibility of withholding the crop from market until prices improved, but lack of money prevented blacks living in the Clearview-Boley area from considering such an approach. 22

Even in the absence of falling prices and white discrimination, the black towns' concentration on cotton ensured their eventual failure. Unlike the cereals or livestock, cotton lacked the alternative uses leading to the formation and growth of subsidiary industries and the backward and forward linkages associated with internal development. As evidenced by the American South during much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cotton culture meant dependence upon outside capital, a shallow internal market, and the absence of diversification. As long as prices remained high, black-town bankers, storekeepers, and the farmers they served basked in prosperity, but a prosperity living
on borrowed time. Once locked into the vicious cycle of one-crop agriculture based on credit, the future held only the promise of eventual failure or perpetual stagnation. In 1904, cotton accounted for 75 percent of all the crops harvested by Mound Bayou farmers. In an anniversary booklet published thirty-three years later, a Mound Bayou leader admitted that the town would continue to "rise and fall with the favor of 'King Cotton.'" 23 Farther north, in Boley, a resident reported in 1924 that nearly all the farmers within a five or six mile radius still depended upon cotton for survival. 24

Furthermore, the hope of building a small agricultural service center with prospects for continued growth ran counter to the entire range of economic and social forces sweeping the country after 1865. The constant encroachment of a nationalizing market challenged the security and ingenuity of the businessmen in the stores along mainstreet in thousands of small communities. Commercial clubs and chambers of commerce struggled to counteract the increased mobility of consumers, the appeal of brand names, and the low prices and variety found in the pages of mail-order catalogs. As railroads corrected track-gauge differentials, transfer charges on goods shipped from urban to rural areas and from east to west declined. Town councils pleaded with local residents to support booster projects with money and votes to entice settlers, retain population, aid merchants, and attract manufacturers and railroads. At the same time, the lure of the big city beckoned to the young and the discontent, draining the vitality from the small town and shriveling the tax base necessary to fund new projects. Given such circumstances, any hope of survival or of delaying the inevitable depended upon fortuitous circumstances, keen perception, and the availability of capital. For every Dallas, Chicago, Minneapolis, or Tulsa that won out in the race for urban status, a multitude of small towns succumbed to the devastating onslaught of modernization. In such circumstances, the probability of success for any new community, black, white, or multiracial, seemed slight.
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Yet as late as 1912, Clearview town promoter James E. Thompson advised blacks to stop patronizing and investing in giant corporations and instead to put their money in small local firms which hired blacks. Except in a few isolated areas, as Thompson wrote, small factories of the residentiary type—woolen mills, wagon works, rope walks, canning and clothing plants, and a host of others—had already found it impossible to compete in price or quality with large companies enjoying economies of scale and serving the regional or national economy. Even if the capital had been available for their construction, tiny local firms could not compete in the larger market, and the black-town population lacked the necessary purchasing power to support them. Like the horse and buggy, they belonged to a previous age.

Since those living outside the community controlled the allocation of the revenue collected from taxes, white discrimination also weakened the black-town economy. Through a number of ruses—deliberately underestimating the number of pupils, failing to submit reports on time, reducing the length of the school term as an "economy measure"—or openly withholding funds, white officials forced residents to finance partially their own elementary schools or to form private ones to which parents paid to send their children. In the expenditure of money for road maintenance and bridge construction, county officials in both Bolivar and Okfuskee discriminated against Mound Bayou and Boley. In a July, 1914, speech delivered on Founders' Day, Isaiah T. Montgomery complained that although Mound Bayou citizens had paid $5,000 toward the principal and interest on a recently passed bond issue of $175,000, none of the money had gone for roads inside the colony. According to Montgomery, only three of the twenty-seven miles of roads in the settlement had been serviced by a grader. In Boley, people hoped for a bridge over the Canadian River, and, in April, 1909, the Progress urged its readers to support the bond issue for construction. Okfuskee County commissioners voted during July to spend the money elsewhere, however, and
Ernest D. Lynwood, the editor, warned them that the town would "remember this unkind cut in the future and govern her vote accordingly." 27

Other types of discrimination were more overt than the subtle manipulation of public money for a bridge or school. During the spring of 1909, C. R. Springer, Mound Bayou farm implement dealer, wrote to the Oliver Chilled Plow Works of South Bend, Indiana, seeking advertising brochures to distribute to local farmers. H. R. Beale, an Oliver official, wrote back informing Springer that the material "we send is very expensive and we do not think would be appreciated by the negro population in the Southern States, if, in fact, the larger portion of them could read the booklets at all." 28 Furious, Charles Banks responded to Beale, praising the progressiveness of Mound Bayou farmers. On a carbon copy of the letter forwarded to Booker T. Washington, Banks scribbled, "These people do not know as much about us [as James K.] Vardaman." 29

More serious, people living in Clearview and Boley found it difficult to find work or to rent land outside the immediate vicinity of each town. During 1911, when the white fear of black domination was at its height, some Okfuskee County whites attempted to block further immigration and to force blacks already living there into segregated communities where they would be unable to support themselves and would eventually leave.30 Organizing commercial clubs in eight school districts in and near Paden, several white farmers signed an oath pledging to "never rent, lease or sell any land in Okfuskee County to any person or persons of negro blood, or agent of theirs; unless the land be located more than one mile from a white or Indian resident . . . [and] to avoid the hiring of negro labor."31 Leaders hoped to expand the movement over the entire eastern one-half of Oklahoma.

Black-town politicians who ventured out into the county or state seeking public office also found discrimination awaiting them. Edward P. McCabe, former Nicodemus settler,
two-term auditor of Kansas, and promoter of Langston, saw his political career vanish with Oklahoma statehood in 1907. With Democratic control of the first Oklahoma state legislature, McCabe lost his position and in time his influence with prominent Republicans deteriorated. Although considered for several federal appointments, none of these materialized. Personal tragedy struck twice in succession. In 1907, his twenty-two-year-old daughter, Edwina, died, and the following year, Dimples, his younger daughter, lay dying in a Chicago hospital. In September, 1908, the Western Age at Langston carried a lengthy interview with McCabe just prior to his final departure from Oklahoma. In general, Oklahoma had been good to blacks, he said, but the new state had grown too fast and the race must become more independent in politics. Referring to his own career, McCabe was bitter over what he considered Republican betrayal, not expecting “when I really needed assistance that the men whom I have assisted to office of preferment for nineteen years would throw me down.” After a stop in Chicago to join his wife at the bedside of their daughter, McCabe was bound for Victoria, British Columbia, to start anew.

To be sure, McCabe was neither the first nor the last Oklahoma black to consider a Canadian exodus. To some blacks, western Canada held out the promise of fertile soil and freedom from the prejudice found in the United States. Viewed by local inhabitants as romantic curiosities, the few black pioneers scattered across the plains of the Canadian West prior to the turn of the century generally lived unmolested by whites. Canadian immigration officials, however, worried that increased racial strife in the United States might encourage a northward migration of blacks hoping to take advantage of Canada’s liberal homestead law. As early as 1899, the Immigration Branch of the Canadian Department of the Interior cautioned its agent stationed in Kansas City to avoid any promotion of black settlers into western Canada. Two hundred Oklahoma blacks arrived in Saskatchewan in the fall of 1909, triggering rumors of an
impending invasion from the south. While some leaders in the Canadian government searched for legal means to stop the "menace" at the border, the Immigration Branch dispatched William J. White, inspector of United States Agencies, to Oklahoma to study the situation. White remained in Oklahoma five days, visiting several black towns in the eastern half of the state. In his report, a blend of prejudice and misinformation, White found Oklahoma blacks immoral, lazy, and poverty-stricken, the result, he argued, of intermarriage between the Creeks and their former slaves. Blacks wished to remain in Oklahoma, he said, but white landowners supported by the railroads were encouraging them to leave. White advised the government at home to take steps to block their entrance into Canada. Ottawa hired G. W. Miller, a black minister, to stump eastern Oklahoma preaching against Canadian migration while the government officially used existing medical and character inspections at the border to reject potential black settlers.34

Families from Clearview made up the advance guard of the first group of Oklahoma blacks who entered Canada in early 1910. Hoping to escape Jim Crow laws, violence, and the impending grandfather clause, and to take up homesteads, a number of residents departed Clearview in late January.35 During the remainder of the year and throughout most of 1911, the Clearview editor and other town leaders desperately tried to halt the exodus before the population dwindled even further. In a March, 1911, issue, D. F. Whitaker of the Patriarch pleaded with readers to "cease to ramble here and yonder, and be content and," with a direct reference to a line from a famous Booker T. Washington speech, "'let down the buckets where we are.'" After reprinting an article from an Edmonton newspaper discussing prejudice against the race in Canada in April, 1911, Whitaker chided those still considering migration. Whether in the North, South, East, or West, he argued, blacks had to face up to discrimination and "if we must move, move to Negro towns, Negro colonies and concentrate our forces." L. W.
Warren, the new editor at Clearview, took up the same theme in September. "We hear the cry of Negroes 'I am going to Canada. I am going to Mexico. I am going to Africa. I am going, I am going, I don't know where.' All of this nonsense," Warren argued, created dissatisfaction. As late as October, the Patriarch still cautioned residents that "most colored people have NOT considered what it will cost them to break up and leave the United States. . . . You can not beat Oklahoma." 36

Clearview and Boley were doomed, however. Just as the Canadian mania appeared to subside, Alfred Charles Sam, an Akim chief from the Gold Coast, arrived in Okfuskee County in August, 1913, singing the praises of Africa as a home for American blacks. 37 Long before Oklahoma statehood, a number of colonization schemes had swept through the territory. During the 1890's, for example, James McNeal Turner, a bishop in the AME Church and an active participant in Georgia Reconstruction politics, visited Indian Territory on several occasions urging residents there to migrate to Africa. 38 And later, in 1908, George Washington, an aged black living in Okmulgee, called for a convention of blacks to organize an exodus to Liberia. Except for a few isolated groups, most had failed to follow such advice. To black-town citizens America was home and their earlier move from the South to Boley, Clearview, Langston, or the other towns was in no way a substitute for an African migration. 39 Therefore, as long as the towns remained viable communities with some prospects for future growth, promoters found it relatively easy to discredit those preaching migration. By 1914, however, with the black towns dying economically and with social ostracism and political disenfranchisement, Sam found audiences eager to listen. The extent to which they followed him indicates the degree of their frustration and their recognition that the black-town experiment had failed.

Sam, a short man whose soft voice and distinct accent elicited a feeling of sincerity, concentrated his efforts almost exclusively in rural areas and in small towns. Usually dressed
in American clothing, he captivated audiences in Clearview, Boley, and other communities with visions of a land that was “one long, sweet dream for negroes.” People living on the Gold Coast, Sam told them, could find diamonds washed up by a heavy rain, grow sugar cane as large as stovepipes, and enjoy the harvest from trees that bore bread. For the sum of $25, blacks could purchase one share of stock in the Akim Trading Company, Ltd., entitling its holder to passage to the African paradise. Even Sam must have marveled at the response. Oklahoma blacks were ready to leave. Despite Sam’s advice to the contrary, many people sold their farms, houses, town lots, and furniture and moved into two make-shift camps near Weleetka. By February, 1914, the six hundred residents of “North and South Gold Coast Camps” shivered through a severe Oklahoma winter, many in dilapidated tents without adequate food, clothing, or medicine. A Clearview doctor who went there to offer assistance in February found people in rags, children with no shoes, and outbreaks of typhoid and dysentery. Later, a smallpox epidemic broke out.

As the faithful in Weleetka endured the cold winds of an Oklahoma winter, Sam encountered a host of economic and legal problems. From the sale of Akim stock, he purchased a twenty-seven-year-old, iron-hulled passenger ship in New York planning to move it to Galveston, Texas, for its final departure from the United States. Needed repairs, Sam’s insistence upon an all-black crew, the purchase of supplies, including coal to power the vessel, and difficulty in obtaining papers delayed the initial move to Galveston for several months. As Sam and his lieutenants vacillated, most of those in the two camps at Weleetka began moving south to Galveston by train. In April, 1914, five hundred people had taken up residence in a tent city in MacGuire’s Park there.

After docking in Galveston harbor, Sam stalled while he and his agents sold more stock in order to buy supplies. Since the Liberia, as Sam had rechristened the ship, could
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hold only a small percentage of the company's stockholders, a representative delegation of only sixty made the first voyage on August 21. This group was to inspect the Gold Coast and return to report to those waiting in Galveston. It took three full months for the Liberia to reach Africa, only to be delayed even longer by British inspectors. Finally, on February 13, 1915, over eighteen months after Sam had first entered Okfuskee County, he and a few of his followers reached their final destination. Those who had made the journey found land available, but it was a country of strange customs and primitive agriculture, quite unlike farming near Clearview and Boley. As his debts continued to mount, Sam transferred the Liberia to a Canadian company, thereby ending any possibility that other investors would follow the original sixty. A handful of the pioneers followed Sam to Liberia where he later became a cocoa buyer. Most returned to the United States, destitute. Penniless and without hope, several of the campers in MacGuire's Park trekked back to Oklahoma.

Black-town leaders reacted quickly to try and counteract Sam's appeal to residents. In Clearview, he was none too subtly advised to leave the county as soon as possible; that failing, he was arrested in Boley for allegedly obtaining money under false pretenses. Officials found it impossible, however, to persuade any stockholders in the Akim Trading Company, Ltd., to testify against him. Personally thinking Sam a fraud and besieged with inquiries concerning the legitimacy of his operations and the extent to which the state government endorsed the movement, Oklahoma Governor Lee Cruce attempted to discover if the chief was in violation of any state law. After interviews with several black leaders and correspondence with various individuals, Cruce decided to drop the issue and suggested that the U.S. Post Office handle the matter. Some postal officials expressed doubts regarding the validity of some of his claims, but lacked sufficient evidence to charge Sam with using the mails to
defraud the public. Although harassed, Sam continued to attract followers and collect money.

Within a few weeks after Sam’s arrival in Okfuskee County, black-town leaders began their attack. Clearview town promoter James E. Thompson told a reporter for the Okemah Independent in August, 1913, that Sam was claiming that in West Africa “the old folks just sit around and drink whiskey and gin and have a good time.”42 In late September, Clearview editor A. R. Wheeler cautioned possible investors in the movement that Sam had given no security for “the ship that will never sail.”43 Wheeler wondered how people could be deluded into believing in a land where they could “just go along any old place and kick up candy yams” with their feet?44 Such sarcasm fell on deaf ears. Boley attorney W. S. Peters admitted that “the country negroes around Boley are as wildly excited over Chief Sam’s ‘back to Africa’ scheme as they are around Clearview.”45 And at the Patriarch, Wheeler lamented that “our people won’t listen,” preferring instead to follow the “great African Yam Eater.”46

Undaunted, Sam fought back. In October, 1913, he funded publication of the African Pioneer, published at Boley and edited by M. A. Sorrell, the justice of the peace there. According to its first issue, the newspaper would aid in informing those who wished to join Sam on his journey to Africa and would give the chief more time to devote to colonization. Sam stepped up operations in the fall, holding rallies in various rural communities, and on November 18 he staged a mass meeting at Clearview which netted over $12,000.47 The week before the Clearview rally, citizens of Boley who opposed Sam indirectly struck out at the movement by calling a public gathering to demand the resignation of Sorrell as justice of the peace. Charged with neglecting the duties of his office in order to work for Sam, Sorrell resigned but continued to edit the Pioneer. Fearing the outbreak of an epidemic, officials in Weleetka forced the closing of the two African camps near that town for health reasons.
Such actions, however, only seemed to increase the determination of Sam's supporters.

For months, bitterness toward Sam and those who had followed him lingered on in the black towns. The newspapers at Clearview and Boley seemed to delight in publishing each new report of a delay in the Liberia's departure schedule or the hardships encountered by the emigrants. "Strange, strange it is, that the Negro will go headlong into every scheme that comes along," chided the Clearview Patriarch in May, 1914, "we advance the old story that 'a fool and his money soon parts.'"\(^48\) When word reached Boley in July, 1915, that some members of Sam's party were starving and appealing for aid in the United States, George W. Perry, former editor of the Progress, advised readers there to "let them stand the pressure of their folly." Turning slightly poetic, Perry wondered what Sam's people would "want with money in that land of milk and honey?"\(^49\) The self-satisfaction of having predicted that Sam would fail offered black-town leaders little compensation for their loss. Boley and Clearview were dying.

Nicodemus' boom also ended abruptly. In March, 1887, the voters of Nicodemus Township approved the issuance of $16,000 worth of bonds to attract the Missouri Pacific Railroad to the community. Operating on assurances that the Missouri Pacific would build westward from Stockton through their town, Nicodemus leaders delayed action on making a similar proposal to the Union Pacific laying track into Graham County from the southeast. From spring through early fall, Nicodemus buzzed with excitement over the "prospect of two or more railroads in the next twelve months."\(^50\) As a Kansas autumn settled over Nicodemus, optimism turned to doubt—by spring to despair. "Nicodemus township stands ready and willing to vote $16,000 to the first railroad that will come through our town," proclaimed the editor of the Cyclone on April 1, 1888.\(^51\) None came.

The Missouri Pacific remained stalled at Stockton. Nicodemus' dream of a rail center connecting "the manu-
factories of Leavenworth and the coal fields of Colorado". Vanished as its citizens saw the Union Pacific track crews stay south of the river, missing their town by six miles. Bogue, once a railroad construction camp, soon blossomed into a full-fledged town, and many Nicodemus residents and businesses moved the six miles to the new community on the Union Pacific. Some leaders looked on in disbelief as a number of frame buildings were torn down in sections, loaded on wagons, and hauled to Bogue for reassembly. Even stone structures were moved, a block at a time. In December, 1888, one resident reported that a young doctor from the East planned to open a drug store in Nicodemus on January 1 "as soon as he can get a building, which is a hard matter as we have loaned all our vacant buildings to Bogue until the CBRR from Stockton is built to this place, which will be in the early spring."

As Cyclone editor J. E. Porter watched the town die, he talked to those who remained of the rebirth of Nicodemus and an even greater prosperity yet to come. There was no cause for alarm, Porter told them, and for every businessman presently deserting the town "we will get ten wide awake men next spring. Don't get frightened, hold on to your property and be ready to enjoy the real boom that will surely come." With that prediction, on September 7, 1888, the Nicodemus Cyclone ceased publication. Two months later, J. E. Porter opened a drug store in Bogue. The citizens of "Demus" slowly drifted away. In October, 1887, and again in February of the following year, the Cyclone editor had ridiculed those who might be considering an exodus to a foreign country. A few families did join one or another back-to-Africa movement, but most left Nicodemus to relocate in Hill City, Bogue, Stockton, or some other hamlet in Kansas. A few moved on to larger cities such as Denver or Chicago. In 1913, Sam Garland, an early Nicodemus pioneer and one of the town's wealthiest businessmen, led six other families to Colorado where they founded the Manzanola Colony near Rocky Ford.
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The unity among black-town classes, based almost entirely upon the success of the community, evaporated with the loss of leaders like S. Douglas Russell in Langston, Charles Banks in Mound Bayou, and Moses J. Jones in Boley. Years after the town had started to decline, a bank clerk in Boley saw "too much bickering between the merchants, farmers, and teachers. Some of the merchants try to act like they're better than the farmers, and the teachers try to stand off by themselves. This make the farmers and the teachers take their trade to Okemah, because they distrust and dislike the merchants." A Mound Bayou pioneer argued that "since [Isaiah] Montgomery and [Benjamin] Green died, there ain't been nobody here to help the common man. All of these here now will cut your throat for a dime." An early settler of Langston recalled that "in the good old days we really stuck together . . . [but] things sho has changed here now though. People ain't like they used to be. Everybody tryin' to be a politician and any old no good white trash can come in here and make a speech."

Indeed, "things" had changed. From a population of approximately six hundred in 1877, Nicodemus, Kansas, dwindled to less than two hundred by 1910. Poverty then settled over the town. A visitor there in 1918 found only two businesses in existence, one a restaurant with a "two-by-four counter, a box turned upside down for a table, and the rest of the fixtures of the same type." At the time, most of Nicodemus' sixty residents lived in dilapidated houses, few of which showed a sign of paint in recent years. The old men of the town ritually gathered at the post office around three o'clock every afternoon to talk over the happenings of the day while waiting for the mail to arrive. In 1939, a researcher for the Federal Writers' Project saw children playing "in the dusty streets before wooden or stone huts that contain only the bare necessities—often wooden chairs and a table, a stove and an iron bed." One tavern was all that remained of Nicodemus' once-proud business community, only the churches possessed electricity, and those wish-
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...ing to make a telephone call had to travel the six miles to Bogue. No stores remained in 1950, and three years later the government withdrew its post office there. The black haven on the Solomon had become almost a ghost town.64

As Nicodemus lay dying, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, fought to survive. Town leaders hoped that the opening of the Mound Bayou State Bank in October, 1915, would aid in a quick recovery from the depression hanging over the community following the collapse of the oil mill and the failure of the first bank. Advancing cotton prices during the World War I years heightened their optimism. Many Bolivar County blacks borrowed heavily in order to plant additional acreage. Unfortunately, agricultural prosperity failed to last, and by 1920, with cotton prices depressed well below an amount sufficient to cover the costs of production, many Mound Bayou residents lost homes, livestock, and farms. Several joined the exodus of southern blacks who moved to Chicago and other large cities in the North. Those who remained faced the prospect that whites might gain title to much of the land in the surrounding area. From 1920 to

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World War II, Mound Bayou’s population stabilized at approximately eight hundred. A fire in 1926 consumed several stores, and another in 1941 destroyed nearly all the original business district. In the latter year, black author J. Saunders Redding visited Mound Bayou and described it as a town more dead than alive. One resident told Redding that it was “mostly a town of old folks an’ folks getting old.”

Promoted by Edward P. McCabe as a gathering point for settlers from which to launch a much larger colonization scheme, Langston, Oklahoma, reached a peak population of approximately two thousand in 1891. Once McCabe’s plan for an all-black state collapsed, he abandoned the town, moved to Guthrie, and became active in Republican politics in the territory. Laid out twelve miles from the nearest railroad and primarily populated by poor sharecroppers from the South who had come in search of cheap land, Langston had little hope of building an economic base of sufficient size and depth to sustain growth and development. Although families moved in and out, usually to reduce the expenses of educating their children at the Colored Agricultural and Normal University, Langston’s population stayed at approximately three hundred people from 1900 through the Great Depression. The small amount of money brought in by five hundred students and the state appropriation to the university (proportionately less than that received by corresponding white institutions), kept the community alive. A few stores, catering to the needs of students, faculty, and people on nearby farms, constituted the town’s business community. When Ralph Tyler, organizer for Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Business League, visited Oklahoma in 1913 he by-passed Langston. Tyler had previously scheduled meetings with merchants there but canceled the engagement, writing to Washington that no harm had been done because there was “nothing at Langston but the school.” Ironically, Langston, perceived as the capital of a black state, lived on to serve a public institution created by whites to segregate the race.
Clearview, Oklahoma, remained what it had always been—a tiny agricultural service center lacking the capital and internal market necessary to diversify and grow. Grudgingly, Clearview always stood in the shadow of Boley, a much larger and more publicized community. Like most of the blacks living in Okfuskee County, the town's residents and nearby farmers remained tied to the credit cycle of one-crop agriculture. For a time it appeared that the arrival of James E. Thompson, a wealthy Anadarko coal mine operator, might breathe new life into the community, but Thompson quickly used Clearview and its newspaper to advertise his own real estate speculations. The Patriarchs of America, a fraternal organization founded by Thompson to induce the federal government to set aside land in the West for blacks, lasted only a few years. By early 1914, citizens had witnessed an earlier loss of population to Canada, farmers faced an unstable cotton market, and leaders looked on as Chief Alfred Sam tried to entice the remaining residents to Africa. By that time, Thompson had apparently abandoned all hope of developing the town further. In January of that year, he
advertised in the Patriarch that his Clearview Land Agency also held large tracts in Mexico and would help potential settlers relocate there. Older people, who made up much of Clearview's population of four hundred during the 1930's, could look to a future filled with more hard times and the continued decay of their town.  

The history of Boley, Oklahoma, since World War I offers an excellent case study of a dying community. Cotton failed completely as a cash crop after the mid-twenties, and although some farmers sought their salvation in the production of peanuts, most found the income inadequate to support a family. Boley merchants, totally dependent upon local farmers for their trade, struggled to remain in business. Residents complained of the high prices in Boley stores, the lack of credit, and the poor quality of merchandise offered for sale. Many traveled to neighboring towns to shop. As the agricultural depression of the early twenties intensified, another large segment of the population moved farther west. Many of those who stayed behind lost their farms and houses. As people left or were forced to sell their property, the com-

A street scene in Boley, 1974. Courtesy De Crockett.
The community tax base shriveled, putting additional pressure on the local government. The declining tax base only added to an already difficult problem. Since Boley's population was scattered over a wide geographic area, it made municipal services cost approximately twice as much as normally would have been the case. The Great Depression added more misery. In 1933, the county treasurer estimated that only a handful of people in Boley could afford to pay their taxes, and six years later the town declared bankruptcy. Much of the property in the community went on the auction block, and the locally owned telephone company was sold to whites. The Farmers and Merchants' managed to survive the 1920's only to be closed by the state banking commission in December, 1932. As if to complete the destruction, the Fort Smith and Western Railroad, so important in Boley's establishment and later growth, went into receivership in 1938 and its tracks through Okfuskee County were ripped up. Unable to find work, the young people of the town moved on to large cities. In a survey of sixty farm families living within an eight-mile radius of Boley in 1946, one investigator found that 81 percent were tenants. From a population of approximately five thousand in 1914, the town had declined to 574 in 1960. "Boley is the salvation of the Negro race," went one

The Fort Smith and Western depot, Boley, 1939. Courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library, Crockett 40.
line of a song composed by an early settler. Unfortunately, that would never be.70

As with most communities, large and small, past or present, a few people had derived the bulk of the benefits from the black towns' existence. Individuals like David Turner and Thomas Haynes in Boley, James E. Thompson in Clearview, Edward P. McCabe and S. Douglas Russell in Langston, and Charles Banks and Isaiah Montgomery in Mound Bayou, although perhaps committed to improving the plight of their race, used the town building venture to increase their own personal fortunes. To have expected them to have behaved otherwise would have ruled out the influence of their past socialization in an economic system geared toward individual competition rather than group cooperation. Like Montgomery, who moved from former slave to prosperous planter in a few short years, these men with capital to invest had arrived in each community during its formative stages. For them, economic mobility upward seemed relatively easy. But those who came later found mobility limited by the depth and extent of the local market, and as growth slowed and finally stopped, the black town offered few opportunities for economic advancement. In time, most black-town farmers could only hope that their children would be able to hold onto the land they had struggled to buy. Commenting on Mound Bayou in 1904, a resident of Bolivar County pointed out that by "the time a man gets 160 acres of this swamp land in a good state of cultivation, all the trees, roots and stumps taken up and burnt, he is ready to die."71

Utilizing the white belief in black inferiority and appealing to race pride, town promoters asked members of the race to join them in order to gain economic independence and enjoy the benefits of unrestrained freedom while proving to the dominant society that blacks were indeed capable of governing their own affairs. Leaders heralded each town as a practical solution to the race problem in America. Listing a variety of reasons, from the fear of nightriders to
the desire to own land, black people flocked to the new towns hoping at long last to find a haven from prejudice where individuals were judged on the basis of actions, not color. Quickly, however, the idea of a great racial experiment was lost in the cheap boosterism of town growth. Economic self-help and racial solidarity gave way to opening a new subdivision, building a canning factory, or speculating in town lots. With vested interests in booming the community, members of the black-town propertorial class concentrated much of their effort on solidifying their own leadership positions. Those who complained were ridiculed as traitors to the race. In time, the black town became an end in itself, primarily for the economic benefit of a few, rather than a temporary step toward ultimate integration into the mainstream of American life.

Concern with white interference in black-town affairs represented a consistent theme in the early development of each community. On more than one occasion, Montgomery, Banks, and others in Mound Bayou expressed the fear that whites were trying to control the bank or to confiscate the oil mill. Such feelings stemmed in part from a realistic evaluation of race relations in Mississippi at the time. Effectively disenfranchised by the time the town was incorporated, people inside Mound Bayou could behave as they wished, provided of course such behavior had only minimal impact on those living in neighboring white communities. If Mound Bayou had in any way seriously threatened to disrupt the status quo in the Yazoo Delta, whites would have no longer tolerated its existence. Thus, white and black alike clearly understood the limits of acceptable economic, social, and political behavior inside Mound Bayou, and the fact that the community remained unmolested indicates the extent to which leaders there consciously or subconsciously operated according to the dictates of the larger environment. More important, however, the legacy of slavery and the plantation tradition, so familiar to most citizens of the town, acted as a strong force subtly influencing the actions of
Mound Bayou residents. In other words, some of the restraints on people there were no doubt self-imposed. With the town surrounded by white communities who held to a belief that blacks were biologically inferior and thus incapable of caring for themselves, Mound Bayou citizens, very much a product of southern culture, placed more emphasis upon the cultural achievements of community leaders rather than upon the extent to which town growth and development had shown that blacks were capable of self-government. Geographically separated from southern mores, the citizens of Boley, Clearview, and Langston, on the other hand, stressed those events in their towns' histories which proved that race had no impact upon the ability to succeed.

Unlike the other four communities, Nicodemus never experienced complete physical separation from whites. Founded by white Kansas town promoter W. R. Hill, from the beginning Nicodemus contained a few white settlers, such as physician C. H. Newth. In its early years, blacks completely controlled the community, race relations appeared to be cordial, and some intermarriage took place. During its boom period from 1886 to 1888, whites moved in to invest in the town. From that point on, the possibility that Nicodemus would be a haven from white control ceased to be an issue. For a short time, Hill owned and controlled the Nicodemus newspaper, using it primarily for his own political purposes and to boost Hill City for the county seat. While under Hill's ownership, a succession of editors handpicked by him operated the business, and a casual reader of the Cyclone would never have detected that Nicodemus in any way differed from a hundred other struggling communities in northwestern Kansas. A. L. McPherson, a white man, opened a bank there in 1887 and whites also operated stores. As the town collapsed following its failure to attract a railroad, whites moved in to buy up surrounding farms. By the 1940's, whites owned a majority of all the sections of land in Nicodemus Township.78

Isolation from whites produced both positive and nega-
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tive results. Long before “black is beautiful” entered the American vernacular, black-town residents exhibited a strong sense of race pride. In home, church, and school, black-town youth were taught self-respect and the glorification of past racial accomplishments. “We are trying here,” boasted J. W. Covington, editor of the Mound Bayou Demonstrator in 1910, “to saturate them with a realization of the fact that the thrifty, intelligent, well-behaved negro does count.” To some extent it worked. Young people living in the three Oklahoma towns held both themselves and their race in much higher esteem than black youth living in mixed communities. To be sure, being proud of the fact you were black constituted the first step toward an identification of self and the fulfillment of individual dignity, but when combined with physical separation from whites it made black-town citizens rigidly hostile and defensive. Some residents seemed highly suspicious that whites were secretly envious of the successes of the community and were quietly laying plans to move in and destroy it at the first opportunity.

To the sensitive, the black town offered a social paradise with freedom to walk the streets without encountering the thousand subtle reminders of membership in a subordinate class. Also one need not fear that a look or gesture might be misinterpreted and bring down the physical wrath of whites. Each day the community blanketed the individual with a sense of well-being, and some who were born and grew up there became addicted to the environment. Within ten miles in any direction lay the outside world, and residents who ventured into it were often shocked and repelled by the realities of American life. Mound Bayou, said Benjamin A. Green, its mayor for twenty years, “gave us kids a sense of security and power and pride that colored kids don’t get anywhere else.” Outside the town, however, Green found that such feelings were not germane to the real situation. “I don’t know which is worse,” he wondered, commenting on the ultimate impact of Mound Bayou on its people, “cynicism, apathy, or a false sense of security?” Some who tried
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to leave the towns recoiled at the prejudice they encountered in other communities and returned. "I have been spoiled since living here," admitted one citizen of an Oklahoma black town, "and I just can't adjust myself when I am around white people."

As the dream of community success faded, the black town became a prison without walls for some of its people who had grown distrustful of whites and unable to live and work among them.

The black towns also failed to provide most of their citizens with the skills and industrial discipline necessary to re-enter the larger economy. Operating against the trends of the time—the commercialization of agriculture, a rural-urban migration, the growth of large corporations, and a nationalizing market—the black towns struggled against forces which brought thousands of white communities, unburdened with race prejudice, to their knees. Black-town businesses, nearly all oriented toward agricultural service, had to continue to grow in order to provide employment for each new generation of the family or to produce the capital for them to invest in other pursuits. Once black-town farmers could no longer afford to buy more land, the ability to retain their young people was limited by the number of times a farm could be divided and redivided and still provide income for grown children. The town experiment needed enormous amounts of capital, and as members of the race have since discovered, black capitalism required much more than sentimental loyalty and shallow slogans. Some promoters had hoped for the support, or at least the toleration, of whites. Once the towns competed with whites for the exploitation of resources, posed a threat in county politics, or insisted upon an equitable division of public revenue, white patience vanished. At that point, a vicious cycle developed—blacks unified to demand their rights, whites retaliated, prompting more black unity, and on and on.

Before the town-building venture could provide a meaningful and lasting experience, leaders and citizens alike had to come to grips with the basic question of what it meant to
be a black person living in America and how their community fit into that relationship. Black pride should have led to a serious search for self-definition. But adopting most of the values and social structures of the larger society created insurmountable contradictions. Promoters committed a serious blunder by using the white belief in black inferiority as a means to attract settlers and to hold them. All minorities face the danger of internalizing the prejudices against them; and blacks, in trying to prove their equality, found themselves in a defensive position that was both self-defeating and psychologically damaging. Each individual failure reinforced white prejudices; each individual success was considered atypical of the race.

Promoters and settlers missed or ignored the inherent contradictions in attempting to remain in the country, withdrawing from the larger society, and yet trying to copy most of its values. Few groups have succeeded by attempting to duplicate the ideas and methods of their oppressor, and the end result had to be a second-rate copy of the original. It was naïve for blacks to believe that isolation from whites represented a viable solution to the race problem in America. Even Isaiah T. Montgomery, the most articulate and idealistic of the promoters, evidently failed to recognize the dichotomy in his own actions. As he supported disenfranchisement of his race on the floor of the Mississippi Constitutional Convention, he apparently never asked himself how blacks could be expected to govern themselves inside Mound Bayou if they were incapable of voting in the state. At Langston, S. Douglas Russell never seemed to comprehend what black vote-splitting between the two major parties really meant. If black votes were divided equally, they had no impact on the election; then going to the polls constituted a meaningless charade.

Not all those who lived in the black town were economically and psychologically trapped. A few leaders practiced leadership roles there and acquired skills that might have been unavailable to them in larger biracial communities.
D. J. Wallace in Langston, Blanche K. Bruce in Mound Bayou, Abram T. Hall in Nicodemus, and others moved on to neighboring communities or to urban areas to become successful doctors, journalists, lawyers, educators, politicians, and businessmen. For a brief period, perhaps only a few years, even those who left penniless and broken took with them worthwhile experiences from their years in a black town. Many had enjoyed freedom and personal dignity for the first time. More important, they had discovered for themselves they could make it on their own without the aid or control of whites. Were they better off to have owned property, voted, and determined their own destiny and lose it all than to have never known the frustration, sorrow, and bitterness of such an experience? “Well, they were better off and didn’t know it,” argued LuLu Sadler Craig, whose ex-slave parents brought her to Nicodemus at the age of ten. “They were better off because they could rest if they felt like it and they could go to sleep if they wanted to. They were better off and they learned how to find a way of making a living, which had all been planned for them before.”

Long after the towns had passed into obscurity, crowds of people, many of whom had traveled from other states, gathered each fall on the streets of Mound Bayou or at Scruggs Grove near Nicodemus to renew old acquaintances, pay tribute to the town’s founder, recall a more glorious past, and perhaps to dream of a future in which the promises of American life might some day correspond to its realities. Yes, the black towns died, but dreams die hard, and none harder than those of the poor and downtrodden when they focus on improving their station in life.