**Ongoing and Future Research Areas**

**Regarding Sundown Towns**

Because there were thousands of sundown towns and suburbs in the United States, we have not been able to confirm them all. The sheer extent of the problem needs study. The first urgent need is for researchers to confirm (or disconfirm) probable sundown towns. These are communities that were overwhelmingly white for decades, but they cannot be considered sundown towns, absent evidence that they kept out Black (or other) groups. One of the best ways to confirm or disconfirm sundown towns is by interviewing old folks, but they keep dying. So we need researchers to do thorough detailed interviews with them as soon as possible. See the small paper [“How To Confirm Sundown Towns.”](https://dev-loewen-wordpress.pantheonsite.io/sundown-towns/research-teach-sundown-towns/how-to-confirm-sundown-towns/)

Next, we need to map sundown towns and see whether there was a “contagion” of them. For example, several counties in N. Georgia went sundown, one after another, around 1910. Possibly several counties in N. Missouri and S. Iowa, on either side of the state line, did so too. Maybe the entire “Thumb” of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, most of the Panhandle of Texas, and other multi-county areas did also. Again, research is needed.

Ongoing, we hope this website helps to nurture a genre of "sundown studies," because much more remains to be investigated. Several theoretical questions need more research. Here are some examples:

• What is the moment-by-moment process by which a town went sundown? Social psychologists have long studied crowd psychology and how a crowd becomes a mob. As towns decided to drive out all their African Americans, and sometimes as they decided not to, whites went through a process of testing the norms. How did the white population realize it had a consensus to evict or prohibit African Americans (or others)? Was there dissent? What did those who opposed the move do? What did African Americans or other minorities themselves do?

• Why did some towns go sundown and others not? Do additional examples bear out Loewen’s contention that towns and counties in the North that supported Democratic candidates in the late 1850s were more likely to go sundown after 1890?

• Which ethnic groups were most racist? Which least? Why? Is Loewen’s inference correct, that mono-ethnic towns were more likely than multiethnic towns to keep out African Americans?

• What role did different social classes play in prompting a community to expel or keep out African Americans? Unions? Corporations? Were women a force for tolerance, compared to men? Or did they desire to "protect" the home by keeping the community exclusive? Or did gender make little difference?

• The opposite of sundown towns also merits study: what differentiates communities that refused to go all-white? In some parts of the United States, towns that allowed African Americans to live in them were much rarer than sundown towns. This was the case in the Ozarks, the Cumberlands, much of the Midwest, and most suburban rings. What explains the exceptions, the biracial towns in these areas? More confirmation is needed as to their politics, ideology, ethnic makeup, and social structural characteristics like occupations. Case studies of the moment-by-moment process by which towns refused to go all-white, though hard to do (because no news was made, in a way), are just as important as studies of the sundown process. What explains Du Quoin, for instance, a biracial town in Southern Illinois surrounded by sundown towns in every direction? Tiny Sigel in Central Illinois, population about 350, nestled between the sundown towns of Neoga and Effingham, has had no African American residents for decades, but there, according to an African American man who spent many years in the area, African Americans "were allowed to go to taverns and have fun and 'cut up' just like anyone else." Why did Sigel treat blacks humanely, even at night, when African Americans could not safely walk the streets of Neoga and Effingham even during the day? Then there is Pasco, located between Kennewick and Richland in southeastern Washington. Richland was the town the federal government built to house workers at the Hanford atomic plant, and it limited residence to whites only. According to Ernie de la Bretonne, who has lived in the Tri-Cities since 1944, "There was a sign on the Kennewick side of the Green Bridge into Kennewick from Pasco that said: 'N-----s, don't let the sun set on your head.'" African Americans could live safely only in Pasco. So what explains Pasco? [Ruby B. Goodwin, *It's Good To Be Black* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953); Michelle Tate, manuscript, 10/2002; Eric Wetterling, "An interview with Ernie de la Bretonne," 5/4/1997, "The Tri-Cities," users.owt.com/rpeto/wet/tri-cities.html, 10/8/2002.]

• Paired comparisons of sundown and biracial or multiracial towns might reveal not only about what caused towns to go sundown, but also what resulted from that historical decision. Pana and Danville were both mining towns in Central Illinois, for example. In Pana, white miners defeated black strikebreakers in 1898, driving all African Americans out of town. [Whites exempted one family, as noted in *Sundown Towns*.] Pana remained sundown for decades, perhaps to this day. In Danville, white miners lost their strike in 1886-87; thereafter, they had to work alongside black strikebreakers. According to historian Ronald Lewis, the African Americans were accepted reasonably well; we think they joined the union. While Danville has had racial problems, its race relations are far better than Pana's. Danville renamed Main Street "Martin Luther King Drive," built a small "Martin Luther King Park" near its downtown, and commissioned a bust of King for it; Pana would never consider such gestures. What are the implications for white young people in the two towns? [Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America* (Lexington: UP of KY, 1987), 87.]

• What are the implications of sundown policies for economic growth? In 1900, Pana had 5,530 residents, compared to 16,354 in Danville. By 1990, Danville's population had doubled to 33,828, while Pana remained stuck at 5,796. Were Pana's sundown policies or the mindset behind them partly responsible for its stagnation? Certainly there were other factors. Danville is a county seat; Pana is not. Danville is now on an interstate highway; Pana is not. But race relations has also played a role. The Quaker Oats Company "conditioned the location of a plant in Danville" on Danville's enacting an open-housing ordinance, according to Michael Danielson (*The Politics of Exclusion*, NY: Columbia UP, 1976), 146). Presumably Quaker and companies like it would not consider Pana, and Pana probably would not consider passing such an ordinance, unless it were merely pro forma.] On the other hand, comparing other pairs, like Salem (sundown) to Centralia (not sundown), might lead to different conclusions, because Centralia has not outstripped Salem. Comparisons like these could be drawn usefully all across the United States. Portfolio illustration #32 in *Sundown Towns*, for example, shows 34 small towns in Indiana. In 1970, all of them may have been sundown towns, but by 2000, eight of these now 33 [Unincorporated Smith Valley had disappeared from the census in the interim.] towns had two or more black households. Those eight averaged 1,412 people in 1970, just 2% more than the 1,385 average for the other 26 towns. By 2000, the differences were substantial: the towns with blacks averaged 4,258 in total population, more than twice the average (2,064) of the towns that still had just one black household or none at all. [Of course, there is a chicken-and-egg problem: the growing towns may have attracted African Americans while the stagnating towns did not, or keeping blacks out may be an element and cause of stagnation, or both. Careful study might reveal when each town let in African Americans and when it grew, shedding light on this question.]

• Another possible causal link between race and economics runs in the opposite direction: all-white towns, especially in suburbia and in vacation and retirement areas, can draw more affluent residents. Chronologically careful investigations of this relationship would be time well spent.

• Did many towns in an area go sundown at once? Was a sort of contagion involved? "Keeping up with the Joneses?" Portfolio #13 tells of an "Anti-Negro Crusade" along the Ohio River in Indiana in 1901, apparently leading to many sundown towns there. We need to know much more about this and other infectious anti-black movements, such as "Give 'em Springfield" after the 1908 attempt to drive all African Americans out of Springfield, Illinois. Investigating contagion requires dating when each town or county drove out its black population, looking for a pattern, then seeing if sources exist to help establish links between nearby expulsions.

• Similarly, was there a geographic and chronological pattern in the passing of ordinances?

• Why do white supremacists locate in sundown towns? Are their expectations of a supportive environment met?

• What prompted sundown towns to relent? How did a given town open to African Americans (or others) successfully? If social scientists or historians tell how various sundown towns desegregated, that might provide a blueprint of do's and don’t’s for other towns that still exclude. [John Gehm, *Bringing it Home* (Chicago: Chicago Review P, 1984), provides the fullest account we know of the desegregation of an independent sundown town. Several accounts describe the desegregation of sundown suburbs, including Oak Park.]

• What role (if any) did students play? Did they really cause Appleton, Wisconsin, for example, to accept African American residents? In turn, what or who prompted Appleton to adopt the ABC Program, admitting black students to Appleton's high schools? Has Darien, Connecticut, been "softened" by its ABC students? Darien did have 13 households with at least one black householder as of the 2000 census, so it may have cracked as a sundown town. [In 1998, however, Darien residents still confirmed the complete absence of black householders in most neighborhoods of their town.]

• Can you confirm (or disconfirm) the regional differences in sundown towns: that the Deep South has few, the Far West had the most diverse collection (against Native, Mexican, and Chinese Americans, as well as Jewish and African Americans), that the Far West and the suburban South have gotten past sundown policies more than other regions, etc. How are sundown towns different in the Far West, where Mexican or Chinese Americans were often the most numerous minorities, compared to the Midwest or Northeast?

• What difference do sundown towns make today to the children who live in them? Are graduates of Danville High School, for example, more likely to attend multiracial colleges like the University of Illinois, compared to graduates of Pana High School? Do Pana students score higher on prejudice scales?

• These last questions suggest other present-oriented issues to investigate: What about biracial children or adopted black children in (otherwise) sundown towns. How do they identify, racially? How are they seen by their classmates? Do they do well in high school? Are they more likely than their classmates to leave town after graduation? Was Loewen’s impression correct that such children are fairly common products of the rebellion of young white women against sundown town bigotry?

• What are the effects of gated communities on their residents? On children's attitudes? On topics like social class? Gated communities may impact on child culture itself: does gating curtail playing with other children? Is adult facilitation required for kids to get together (except on-line)? Or have children found ways around the fences and walls designed to signify status and keep out intruders?

• We also need more research on the continuing white flight from already heavily white cities like Champaign/Urbana, Illinois, and Joplin, Missouri, to sundown towns and exurbs. What are the reasons whites give? Is it simply racism? A feeling of the cities being out of control? [More than 80% white, and surrounded by all-white communities, Champaign/Urbana and Joplin can never go black; property values are not really threatened; so this white flight may truly be motivated by sheer racism.

If you work on any of these topics about sundown towns please email [us](mailto:publichistorysites@gmail.com?subject=Sundown%20Towns).