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School playground in Boley, Oklahoma, 1922

Boley

(An Exclusively Negro
Town in Oklahoma)

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ONLY those who have had many points in contact with the Negro population of Oklahoma can know the significance that is attached to this little Negro town — the largest of its kind in America; and only the person who has lived there, being, at the same time, a close observer, can have anything like an adequate comprehension of the several aspects that this village presents.

The writer is not discussing the several aspects of this little Negro town for the purpose of proving anything concerning racial development, but he aims merely to point out some of the social and economic factors which act as causative forces in the development of exclusively Negro towns, and to indicate some of the commendable possibilities of the Negro in America. Any other of the many Negro towns could just as well have been taken but Boley was selected because the writer has spent four years there; and consequently knows more about it in detail than he does about any of the others. A casual study of the origin and development of the others has led him to the opinion that similar social forces have given rise to them all.

Boley, Oklahoma, as intimated above, is not the only town in the United States which is wholly owned and controlled by colored people. There are seventy or more of these little towns scattered throughout the South, with one found here and there in the North and West. These vary in size from a population of 3500 to 50 or less. The following table will give the reader an idea of the distribution of these exclusively Negro towns in the United States:

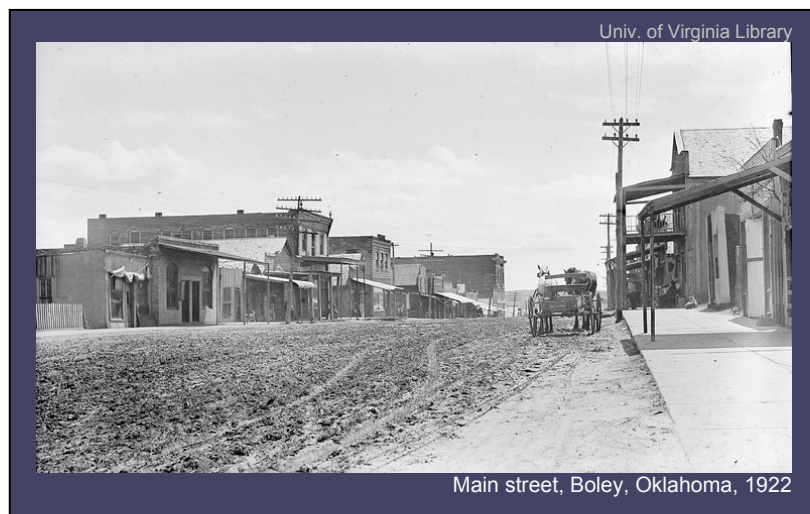
State	No. of Towns	Largest Town	Population
Alabama	6	Plateau	1500
Arkansas	2	_____	_____
California	4	_____	_____
Florida	1	Eatonville	200
Georgia	6	Cannonville	200
Illinois	2	Leroy	3000
Kansas	1	Nicodemus	300
Kentucky	1	_____	_____
Maryland	2	_____	_____
Michigan	2	_____	_____
Mississippi	3	Mound Bayou	700
New Jersey	3	Gouldtown	250
New Mexico	1	_____	_____
North Carolina	3	_____	_____
Oklahoma	14	Boley	3500
Tennessee	2	_____	_____
Texas	7	Oldham	300
Virginia	5	Hare Valley	500
West Virginia	1	Institute	600

Several observations are possible from the above table and certain questions may be answered by it. In the first place, all the Negro towns are not located in the South, — the North and West furnishing some twelve or more. In the second place, Oklahoma has twice as many Negro towns as any other state. For this there is a reason which lies in racial psychology. The birth of these towns in any section is simply an adverse side of race prejudice and the injustices and hatreds engendered by it. The towns themselves are an evidence of a race consciousness and of the development of one aspect of race pride in the midst of an unconquerable prejudice — the process in this case leads on to deliberate isolation from the dominating group. Negroes in the South are the worst sufferers. The more they recede from their slave status and become accommodated to real American life, the greater are their aspirations. But in the face of rigid social and economic barriers they seek territorial isolation where they may satisfy their aspirations for higher development. When as a race, they become conscious of the fact that life in immediate contact with the southern whites simply means a limitation of his freedom, he then seeks a place where he might be as free as possible from such handicaps. Out of such a situation arose most, if not all, our exclusively Negro towns.

Boley is located near the center of the state on the Fort Smith and Western railroad. More definitely stated, it is in the north central part of Okfuskee County, which is in the western part of what was formerly, Old Indian Territory before statehood [1907]. It is a fertile spot of soil about six miles north of the North Canadian River, and surrounded by a densely settled farming community. These farms, for a radius of five or six miles about the town, are owned and operated by Negroes, with the exception of a few white farmers dotted here and there. The elevation of the townsite is sufficiently high to give a very healthful climate.

The history of the town as far as it is known has never been written. Bits of history have been acquired by talking with those persons who have lived in Boley since its founding. A little more than twenty years ago a little group of Negroes in the state of Texas went to Oklahoma seeking freedom of living. Soon after their arrival in Oklahoma they became acquainted with a philanthropic white man who donated them a townsite, which later took the name of its donor, Mr. Boley. This little town soon began to be populated with Negroes from several southern states, especially Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Georgia. The guiding hand in the early history of Boley was Mr. Tom Hayes.

Its growth was phenomenal. Within a few years, there were several hundred inhabitants. It was a practically new idea to the Negroes west of the Mississippi; it was the realization of a dream of a haven for Negroes. The town was advertised by various means, chief among which were booster trips by representatives who were interested in the growth of Boley. Another factor which might have caused the growth of the town was the rapid influx of farmers who settled near the town and who made Boley their trading point. These stimulated the growth of mercantile establishments. Even the casual observer may discern that the growth of the business life of the town has been out of proportion to the growth of the population upon which the life of the businesses depends. The business section occupies more than three blocks; and it is reasonable to assume that the establishments cannot find support in the 3500 persons, many of whom are farmers who raise the major portion of their necessities.



The town is laboring under one rather peculiar disadvantage — with a population of about 3500 Boley has been scattered over an expanse of territory large enough for a town with a population of

10,000. This has worked an economic hardship upon the municipality in that it has made lights, water, pavements and sewers cost more than three times as much as it should cost a town of that size.

The problem of self government offers an interesting study. Some of the citizens of this village never knew what suffrage was until they went there from various sections of the South. Being free for the first time to exercise their suffrage, they have carried it beyond its usual



province. One of the Baptist churches, by virtue of its large membership, is always certain of a successful candidate in political campaigns. Every office to be filled in larger towns of the state claims the interest of Boley's politicians. Elections and campaigns are always spirited. Boley's weekly news journal has its pages almost completely monopolized by office-seekers and campaign managers. Near the close of campaigns, political mass meetings are held, at which time opposing candidates discuss the life history of each other to the prospective voters, sometimes almost coming to blows.

The two major political parties — Republican and Democratic — are strongly represented. Needless to say, this situation gave rise to a more intense political struggle than Boley had ever witnessed. To most of the Negroes from the South, *Democrat* and *race prejudice* are synonymous terms. He reasons thus: The South is practically a solid Democratic machine, and it is in this section that the Negro received the most brutal and unjust treatment. Therefore, any Negro who allies himself with the Democratic party simply approves the way in which southern whites treat Negroes. To many of them it is sacrilegious for a Negro to vote a Democratic ticket. This, of course, is used by the Republicans for propaganda in their campaigns. The presence and activity of Negro Democrats in Boley may be accounted for by the fact that the county in which Boley is located is primarily Democratic, and some of the Negro lawyers, who are also leaders, have found it advantageous to ally themselves with the dominant political party for the return in privileges to them in their practice in the county courts. This has led, however, to certain peculiar practices, an example of which is given. Before a person is allowed to vote in Oklahoma he must present a registration certificate at the polls. Boley maintains its own voting precincts for local, state, and national elections. Since the county is Democratic, Negroes have been placed in charge of the elections and the registration of voters. This gives one faction an advantage in the political control of the town. In order to maintain such control, a large number of those who would vote a Republican ticket have been totally disfranchised. As the disfranchised agreed to register as Democrats, they were given their suffrage.

The results of such political strife might be easily inferred. Several cases of ambushing have been traced indirectly to political differences between, men of opposing parties. The disfranchised group carried their case to the Federal Court in November, 1924; and the judge ordered those in charge to cause all Negroes to be registered. The ultimate result of such a move was a near riot between white people of the county and Negroes of the town.

Boley, like towns, generally where political interests eclipse the interests of the citizens, has some faulty sides to its administration. But, on the whole, the reasonably fair way in which these Negroes

handle their affairs tells without a question that Negroes are capable of self-government. Bond issues are passed for civic improvement; and the revenue is utilized with an efficiency that is commendable.

The economic life of the town is another point of interest. Almost the entire support of Boley is by the farmlife surrounding the village. As was mentioned above, nearly all the farmers around Boley for a radius of five or six miles are Negroes. The staple crop is cotton. This means that there are years when the farmers do not have any money to spend, due to the uncertainty of cotton crops. The farmers, for the most part, being of the dependent class, must seek credit from the merchants until their crops are made. Whenever there is a failure in the cotton crops, the merchants, who are almost wholly dependent upon the farmer for an income, operate at a loss. From 1920 to 1924 most of the mercantile establishments struggled between economic life and death because of successive failures of crops. The fact that these proprietors have been able to keep their businesses alive is argument sufficient that the business ability of the Negroes should no longer be a question.

Occupational opportunities, aside from farming, are not numerous. Only a negligible number may find employment there. The municipal pay-roll contains the names of the town marshall, a few street workers, and five or six employees of the electric light and power plant. The city judge and the city clerk receive a small salary for their services, not intended to compensate them fully.

With the exception of saleswomen in stores the field of labor is closed to women. The mercantile establishments are usually of such sizes that they offer little or no employment to persons outside of the family circle. The only factories which afford employment are three cotton gins. Those who are familiar with cotton production know that these factories can operate but three months in the year, at the longest. That means that even the scarce amount of employment afforded male employees is not sufficient to safeguard a yearly livelihood.

Commercial activities are an outstanding feature of the town. Altho it appears that there are more business establishments than can be adequately supported by a town of its size, there are a few men and women in the town who operate and expand their businesses in a manner that is a credit, not only to Negroes, but to business methods generally. But along with these are many who engage in businesses of various kinds with such limited capital and such poor commercial acumen that they lower the general commercial standard of the town. There are more than twenty general mercantile establishments, but the larger portion of them are business establishments in name only. It would really be better for the economic life of the town if several of these establishments did not exist. In addition to the general mercantile stores there are two grocery stores, one hardware store and three dry goods stores.

The community is well provided with financial institutions. There has been in existence, ever since the town was well under way, a state bank very efficiently managed. This little institution with a capital stock of \$25,000.00 has commanded such a phenomenal volume of business that it has made its principal stockholders financially independent. During the four years (1920-1924) when scores of banks in Oklahoma were forced to close their door because of business depression, this bank continued its business and has been adjudged one of the strongest banks in Okfuskee County. The survival of this institution is due to the keen economic point of view of its president.

About five years ago the Comptroller of Currency at Washington issued a charter for a National Bank to be established at Boley. This little town has the distinction of having the first Negro National Bank in America, her charter having been issued some seven days before the Negroes of Chicago received theirs. A careful study of the growth of this bank over the five years of its existence leads to the opinion that it is a profitable institution. The volume of commercial papers handled as well as the other collateral would amaze anyone who thinks that Negroes do not know the technique of banking. Deposits, last fall, ranged very high, as high as \$15,000.00 on some week-end days.

There are factors that make for and against educational opportunities at Boley. The fact that Boley is an independent school district gives it the legal right to float its own bonds for school buildings and vote

its own taxes for the support and maintenance of its school. "Later Boley" does not, seem to have made use of this privilege; for from the standpoint of buildings and equipments the town has not made a notable step forward in ten or twelve years. The buildings which were adequate and commodious twelve years ago may possibly be unequal to the situation at present. Ten years ago, the school population of Boley was approximately 300; today it is more than 600. In spite of the growing lack of interest in the educational aspect of the town, it still maintains one of the best high schools in the state. It has required a struggle, however, to keep it up to a reasonable standard. Primarily a farming town, and the staple crop being cotton, the relation between cotton farming and poor school attendance is evident. Many of the children of the nearby farm homes come to town; and a large portion of them are able to go only

about half the school term. Some of the residents of the town are farmers who keep their children out of school during the harvest season. Almost without exception, the attendance of girls is much more regular than that of boys, which condition makes for a wholesale dropping out of school by the boys before they reach the seventh grade, only a very negligible amount of them remaining to complete a high school course.

Beyond question, the most interesting aspect of Boley is its social situation. The population of the town is, in the language of Dr. Edward Cary Hayes, "a personal group". The fact that the social instincts operate very effectively in a personal group may account for the fact that there has never been much crime among this group of Negroes who have access to almost absolute freedom of living.

It was stated in the outset that the one thing that led to the establishment of Boley was the desire for territorial isolation. Around this situation, these Negroes have built a strong body of ideas and sentiments concerning the dominant white group which is not over-favorable. The writer has in his possession a copy of a song that was composed by an early citizen of Boley, and which embodies the spirit of the group. This piece of music is "Respectfully dedicated to Hon. T. M. Haynes (solver of race problems.)" Some of the words of the song are: "Be courageous, brother, and forget the past — the great and mighty problem



Okfuskee County High School, Boley, Oklahoma, 1922



Oklahoma Normal and Industrial School (private school), Boley, Oklahoma, 1922

of the race has been solved at last. Boley is the salvation of the Negro race.” These words are not offered for the music they contain, but for the spirit of the race that they embody.

There is, really, an over-developed pride of race. This has led to uncomfortable fears and suspicions that white people envy the success of Boley and that secret plans are laid to destroy it. This idea has in turn reinforced their defense attitude.

White people are not allowed to own property in this town. They are allowed to come there for trading purposes, and may stay over night, but that must be the extent of their visit in the village. Whenever it becomes necessary for a white person to remain overnight, he does so with great anxiety unless he is familiar with the situation. The writer recalls an incident when a white salesman who had finished his business for the day with Negro merchants, asked a Negro youth if there was a hotel for white people in the town. The lad replied with a great deal of sarcasm, “We don’t practice segregation here. If you want to stay here over night, you’ll have to stay where everybody else stays. There’s a hotel on the corner over there, one block east and a half a block south is another, either one of them will accommodate you.”

The institutional life of the town is fairly well developed. Like most Negro communities, Boley is over-churched. This means poor ministry, and consequently, a lifeless religious environment. There are approximately 13 churches in the town, which is another way of saying that the membership of the various churches is too small for efficient church-life. The failure of the church to keep pace with modern Christian movements has resulted in the almost complete desertion of the church by the young people.

Like most small towns, Boley tends to commercialize its amusements. The social engineers of the town seem to have lost sight of the relation between plenty and wholesome amusements for young people and a normal social life. There is a movie theater which is operated once a week; but the majority of the pictures shown are of the Wild West type, underworld pictures, and thrilling serial shows. As it might be expected, many colored productions are featured.

Aside from the picture shows a highly commercialized baseball team is maintained; however, this is a sport of the summer months only.

The most fruitful professional field appears to be that of law. The pride of races so highly developed there gives both the criminal lawyer and the civil lawyer many clients among his own race group. What is true of the law profession is also true of the field of medicine. At least seven practicing physicians are trying to thrive on this meagre population. With few exceptions, these men of professions adhere very closely to the ethics of their professions.

As was stated at the outset, there is no pretense of an exhaustive report of the many aspects of this little Negro town in the West; nor has all been said of the phases mentioned that might be said. The attempt has been merely to present a sufficient amount of representative and rounded information concerning life in such a settlement, for students of social psychology of race and of human behavior generally, to utilize the information in the interpretation of similar or related social situations.

The project of exclusively Negro towns does undoubtedly offer an outlet for repressions and wounded race pride; for the independent development of institutions and the acquirement of a certain amount of wealth. Along with these, however, go other factors that are negative and dangerous. The isolation from the main currents of progress registers in a certain retardation; it also tends to build up a rigidly hostile defense attitude toward the traditional oppressor which does not always contribute to the inter-racial peace.
