**African American Communities in Central California**

"Grapes of Wrath" style images, combined with those of Mexican migrant farm workers and extensive fields of produce define California's Great Central Valley—the San Joaquin—in the minds of most people. Normally, when people discus the history of this region, they focus on the development of agribusiness, the railroad, or notable—usually white—figures involved in the early development of various towns, cities, and businesses, throughout the valley.

Not only is this valley one of the most productive agricultural regions, in the world, but it is home to one of the most diverse population on the planet, and each group has its own unique story. This paper will address one aspect of the history of African Americans in rural areas of the San Joaquin Valley.

Each February, articles in the Fresno Bee, the Visalia Times-Delta, or the Bakersfield Californian highlight early San Joaquin Valley African American "pioneers" like rancher Gabriel Moore or the Buffalo Soldiers in Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon National Parks.[1] However, with one notable exception, little, if any, attention has focused on African American communities in California's Great Central Valley. That exception, of course, is the ghost town of Allensworth, in Tulare County. However, this colony, started 100 years ago, in 1908, is only the best-known all-black community to have contributed to the development and growth of this area. In fact, Allensworth is just one of many such endeavors.

The bulk of recent scholarship dealing with African Americans in California has focused on the urban communities in the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California.[2] According

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[1] Guy Keeler, "Unearthing Broken History," *Fresno Bee*, November 26 2007. See also Lisa McEwen, "Buffalo Soldiers Recalled: They Patrolled Sequoia National Park More Than 100 Years Ago," *Fresno Bee*, February 8 2008.

[2] For more information about blacks in Southern California, see Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005)., Mark Morrall Dodge and Martin J. Schiesl, *City of Promise : Race & Historical Change in Los Angeles* (Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 2006)., and Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006). For more information about African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Northern California, see Lynn M. Hudson, *The Making Of "Mammy Pleasant": A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002)., Leigh Dana Johnsen, "Equal Rights and The "Heathen 'Chinee' ": Black Activism in San Francisco, 1865-

to the U. S. Census Bureau, the majority of African Americans, across the country, now live in urban areas.[3] The San Joaquin Valley reflects this national trend, with the large African American populations in Stockton, Fresno, and Bakersfield.[4]

Black urban roots run deep, in this valley. A twenty-three year old African American, named W. C. Patrick, owned one of the first barbershops, in Stockton, in 1851.[5] Over the course of the next few years, many African Americans contributed to the economy of that young city, including the owners of a saloon, an express wagon service, and a boarding house, along with a rancher, a hog dealer, carpenters, a wheelwright and mechanic, cooks and general laborers.[6] By 1854, blacks began purchasing residential and commercial lots in and around Stockton.[7] Within a year, two of Stockton's ten houses of worship were African American churches: both of which remain active, today.[8] By 1860, Stockton was home to between eighty and ninety free and enslaved blacks.[9]

However, the San Joaquin prides itself as a rural, agricultural area, far removed from California's urban centers. Therefore, to appreciate the history of African Americans in this region, it is important to examine the stories outside the urban areas, on the land, beyond the city limits.

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1875," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1980)., and Delores McBroome, *Parallel Communities: African Americans in California's East Bay 1850-1963* (Taylor & Francis, 1993).,

[3] The U. S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration, *Blacks* (Washington DC: Bureau of the Census, 1993).

[4] *U. S. Census Bureau* (accessed December, 2008) http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0627000.html and http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0614218.html.

[5] Frances Baltich, *Search for Safety: The Founding of Stockton's Black Community* (Stockton: Frances Baltich, 1982), 26-38.

[6] Ibid., 38-39.

[7] Ibid., 44-45.

[8] Ibid., 54.

[9] Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, Yale Western Americana Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 111. See also Baltich, 32. According to Baltich, slaves were still held by former owners as late as 1872.

Blacks have lived in this valley since the 1840s.[10] Labor agents recruited the first large wave of African American migrants to the Fresno area from the Carolinas, as early as 1888.[11] According to historian James N. Gregory, the largest migrations of African Americans into the Central Valley coincided with the Southern Exodus, which began in the 1910s and 1920s, and continued in successive waves through the 1960s.[12] Agricultural concerns recruited individuals and families, from the South. The largest numbers of African American laborers were recruited in the early decades of the twentieth century from Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana.[13] By 1920, however, Mexican migrants formed the largest single ethnic group working in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley, displacing many black fieldworkers.[14]

Subsequent waves of black migration paralleled those of Dust Bowl "Okies" and the exodus to fill manufacturing and farm jobs, during World War II. Although many who came to the State during the nineteen-forties headed to the Bay Area and Southern California for high paying manufacturing jobs, significant numbers of African Americans arrived in the agricultural valleys, including the San Joaquin. Unskilled workers and the poor competed with Mexican migrants and poor southern whites in the fields, while African Americans with resources and skills purchased rural land, settled in towns and cities, started businesses, or entered the workplace in a wide range of jobs.

However, new arrivals to the San Joaquin often encountered familiar vestiges of racism, in the form of Jim Crow, Sundown Towns, restrictive covenants, and the Ku Klux Klan. This is not surprising, considering the large number of southerners who had relocated to California. By

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[10] Catherine Rehart has suggested that Jacob Dodson, a servant of John C. Freemont's father-in-law, was the first African American in Fresno County prior to California becoming a state. Catherine Morison Rehart, *The Valley's Legends and Legacies*, vol. 7 (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press, Inc., 2006), 19.
[11] "Negro Labor," *Fresno Morning Republican*, July 20 1888.
[12] James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 11. and Jack Temple Kirby, "The Southern Exodus, 1910-1960: A Primer for Historians," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 4 (1983): 585-600.
[13] Kirby: 589-91.
[14] George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67.

1970, over a million and a half southern whites, and over half a million blacks from the south, lived in California: almost 12 percent of the state's population.[15] As elsewhere, these and other factors, contributed to the choices made by African Americans concerning where they lived and worked.

In some cases, this choice included self-segregated communities. Over time, several distinct types of black rural communities developed in the Central Valley. These included neighborhoods in the valley's cities and towns, and several all-black communities, including what I refer to as *colonies* and *townships*. My current research is focused upon these last two community types. Before looking more closely at these all-black communities, it is important to look, briefly, at some of the activities of African Americans in rural towns, throughout the region.

In many of the smaller towns, African Americans established businesses or secured employment. They participated, to varying degrees, in the economic and cultural growth of these mixed, although occasionally segregated communities. As an example, in 1890, the Fresno County community of Fowler began when Julia Bell, an African American from North Carolina, planted the first tree on her newly purchased town lot. From that simple beginning, a thriving African American community, including several black churches, grew in this small, integrated valley town.[16] Bell may have been among that first wave of almost four hundred contracted farm workers, who arrived, on the train, from the Carolinas, in 1888.[17]

Within ten years, Hanford resident Alex Anderson owned and operated the Seventh Street Stables—the largest livery stable in Central California. His was just one of several black

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[15] Gregory, 19.
[16] Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles - Berkeley: University of California Press, 1919), 151.
[17] "Negro Labor."

families that formed the base within that rural farming and railroad community where they lived among Anglos and a large Chinese population.[18]

In 1925, Frank Milner opened the Last Chance Barbershop, on South K Street, in Tulare. Two years later, Mary Francis King and Sara Richardson opened the Kings Café, on the same street.[19] These rural or small-town communities closely echo the development of African American neighborhoods and communities within the larger cities of the San Joaquin Valley.

In 1946, Sociologist Mozell C. Hill differentiated the foundations and structures of all-black communities in Oklahoma into three categories: "Utopian" communities, which were usually associated with a religious or political group, "Boom Towns," tied directly to the discovery of resources, and "Promoter's Enterprises," often established through the enterprise of businessmen or corporations.

Looking at Valley communities, the last one—the "Promoter's Enterprise"—would apply to Allensworth, while other all-black rural communities really did not fit into any of those three categories. Therefore, it became necessary to devise new, regionally specific classifications. The first of these, which I refer to as colonies, follow the model established by Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, and Col. Allen Allensworth. Singleton is best known for establishing successful colonies such as Nicodemus Kansas, and others.[20] These Exodusters sought to establish separate African American towns as safe havens where blacks could develop businesses, industries, schools, and organizations, free from outside influences. These efforts were highly organized by corporate entities that sought outside investment and attempted to oversee the promotion, construction, and development of these communities. Turn of the century boosterism, support by African American leaders and intellectuals, and the philosophies of thinkers as diverse as Booker

[18] Beasley, 153. Michael L. Smith, *The Edna Wade Project*(accessed March 2008); available from http://ednawadeproject.com/Overview.html.
[19] Smith, (accessed March 2008).
[20] For more about the African American townships developed by Benjamin Singleton, see Walter L. Fleming, ""Pap" Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus," *The American Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (1909). and Roy Garvin, "Benjamin, Or "Pap," Singleton and His Followers," *Journal of Negro History* 33, no. 1 (1948).

T Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey all contributed to these efforts.[21] The goal of the promoters of these towns was to build self-sufficient model communities.

The second form of African American communities that developed in the San Joaquin Valley I refer to as townships. Unlike the self-contained, planned communities envisioned by the promoters of colonies, townships grew organically near established towns. In most cases, these communities developed along stem family migration patterns, wherein early arrivals functioned as anchors and guides to family members, and occasionally neighbors and friends, who came to the area later. In almost every one of these townships one, or more, all-black, or predominately black churches were established early. Never intended to be self-sufficient, these rural settlements consisting of homes, businesses and churches each developed out of unique circumstances. Unlike self-contained colonies, these townships relied on existing services in nearby towns.

The earliest of these townships, the Bowles Colored Colony, four miles outside of Fowler, was established around 1900. Bowles, like many of the townships that followed, began life as little more than a collection of homes and small farmsteads. This small township, which still stands amid the farmland of Fresno County, has sustained, at one time or another, up to thirty African American families.[22]

As early as 1891, a group of businessmen from the Bay Area and Texas, formed the "Colored Colonization Association of Fresno County" with the sole purpose of accumulating $100,000 to invest in land for a black colony.[23] Although initial investors bought shares, it appears that little, if anything resulted from this early attempt to establish an all black community, in the Valley.

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[21] Lapp, 265. See also Lawrence B. de Graaf and others, *Seeking El Dorado : African Americans in California* (Los Angeles - Seattle: Autry Museum of Western Heritage ; University of Seattle Press, 2001), 156-157.
[22] Beasley, 152.
[23] "Articles of Incorporation of the Colored Colonization Association of Fresno County Filed in the Office of the County Clerk of Fresno County December 15, 1891," ed. County Clerk of Fresno County (1891).

Almost two decades later, in 1908, Col. Allensworth, and his supporters, establish the "California Colony and Home Promotion Association."[24] The resulting town of Allensworth counted among its residents Joshua Singleton, the son of "Pap" Singleton.[25] However, Allensworth did not exist in a vacuum. Various links between African Americans in other communities and Allensworth exist. In some cases, people relocated from Allensworth to older, more established towns. Between 1910 and 1924, several families moved from Allensworth to Tulare including members of the Smith, Carter, Washington, Archer, and Powell families.[26] Early leaders in Tulare's first African American Baptist Church relocated from Allensworth, in 1920. A year earlier, Lee Crane left Allensworth for Fowler for economic reasons. He desired to pursue truck farming, rather than concentrate on growing sugar beets, which was the focus of agricultural efforts, in the colony.[27]

Allensworth's boosterism contributed to the expansion of African American communities in other nearby towns. Many immigrants, after seeing the harsh conditions of the Westside of the Valley, in Allensworth, settled in nearby towns wherein they perceived better-established infrastructures and greater economic opportunities.

Allensworth is directly responsible for one of the longest-lived black townships, in the Valley. Due to a number of factors, Allensworth was never able to fulfill the dreams of the early pioneers. Without anticipated resources, such as water rights and regular railroad service, it became difficult for the fledgling community to develop. As of 1920, after almost ten years, the population of Allensworth never exceeded one hundred and fifty settlers.[28] By 1930, the population of Allensworth dropped to just forty-four.[29] Many settlers returned East. Others, as already mentioned, moved to nearby Valley towns. However, a handful remained on the land

[24] Beasley, 154.
[25] de Graaf and others, 156.
[26] Smith, (accessed).
[27] Beasley, 153.
[28] de Graaf and others, 156.
[29] Ibid.

adjacent to the Colony, forming the core of Teviston. After World War II, over thirty thousand Black Okies arrived in the San Joaquin Valley to participate in the production of cotton. About seven thousand of those migrants eventually settled in Tulare and Kings Counties—some of them in and around the township of Teviston, within sight of the Allensworth State Park. Over the years, many left for other parts of the state seeking work, while others, like many Allensworth residents before them, moved to nearby towns like Pixley, Tulare, and Hanford. A few of the old-timers remain, although Spanish-speaking farm laborers now dominate Teviston.[30]

In 1943, Sid and Olevia Cooksey, along with their adult son, Timothy, and their son-in-law "Doc" Wilson, arrived in California to work in the Bay Area shipyards. During their stay in the State, they purchased some farmland, outside the Central Valley town of Atwater.[31] At the close of the War, in 1945, Sid, Olevia and Timothy returned to the family farm, outside Fordyce, Arkansas. "Doc" and his wife, Edna (Cooksey) moved to the Atwater property where they began farming and raising their family. In 1946, as Klan activities intensified in Arkansas, Sid and Olevia, along with Timothy, his new wife Myrtle, and several other family members returned to California. They proceeded to build several additional homes on the property they purchased during the War.[32] Over the next decade, all of Sid and Olevia's six children, and their families moved to the family compound, known as Cookseyville, by local residents. They either built or moved in additional homes, to accommodate the expanding population. After 1956, with the arrival of the last remaining family members from Arkansas, Cookseyville eventually became home to around one hundred people and included a country market, and a nearby church, where Timothy Cooksey still serves as pastor.[33] Both Sid and Olevia were children of slaves.

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[30] Mark Arax, "The Black Okies: A Lost Tribe's Journey to a Land of Broken Promises," *Los Angeles Times* 2002.
[31] Allen Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).
[32] Timothy Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview," in *Cookseyville Oral History Project* (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 2007).
[33] Timothy still serves as pastor of the church. Several family members remain in the congregation, even though they now live in Atwater or other nearby communities.

Many of the third and fourth generation Cookseys, most of who grew up in Cookseyville, have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and other professionals.[34] In just a few generations, this small rural African American township took one family from slavery to the so-called "American Dream."

In addition to Teviston and Cookseyville, other, unique African American townships developed around the Valley. These include the Fresno County community of Lanare, just outside Riverdale; Fairmead, between Madera and Chowchilla; and South Dos Palos. Each of these townships, like Cookseyville relies on neighboring communities for basic amenities and services, and have, throughout their history, supported their own churches and small businesses.

One of the keys to understanding the development of townships is to identify the reason, or reasons, why each developed. In every case, they were built near an existing town. Although this fact contributed to the overall success and longevity of the community, it raises additional questions. Looking at the racial makeup or attitudes of the nearby town may provide some answers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Fairmead developed because of overt racism and exclusionary housing practices in Chowchilla and other nearby towns.[35]

There are similar reports about South Dos Palos and Lanare. In June, 2007, the "staff and faculty of the tiny Riverdale Christian Academy… tried to spoof the experiences of slavery in this country, some going so far as to adorn themselves in blackface makeup…"[36] Photos of the graduation celebration were published on the Internet. Captions on the posted photos included "The slaves served lemonade – it was a hoot!"[37] Another photo showed the return of a "runaway slave" by a white man wearing a New York Yankees Jersey. The photos have since been

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[34] Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."
[35] As of this writing, I am basing this strictly on the reports of several long-time residents of the Valley, all of whom knew of the all-black township of Fairmead. Additional research, including the recording of oral histories and archival research is planned to verify these stories.
[36] "No Place for Blackface," *Fresno Bee*, June 13 2007.
[37] "School's Portrayal of Blacks Protested," *Fresno Bee*, June 9 2007.

removed from the original website, however, they have been preserved at other sites.[38] Although this is just one recent incident, it may be indicative of racial attitudes within this rural town, just four miles east of the township of Lanare. None of those attending appeared offended by this graduation party, planned and executed by the adults in charge of this small Christian school, including at least one pastor. As with Fairmead and South Dos Palos, only additional research will determine if these are long-standing patterns of systemic racism, or an isolated incident.

Members of the Cooksey family downplay racism, in Atwater—until pressed for details. Many members of the family claim little direct impact of racism. However, when pressed, Timothy Cooksey admitted that he had been unable to secure a loan, from a local bank, for additional land until a white partner made the application.[39] Allen Cooksey cites several examples of male classmates indicating that he should "steer clear" of their sisters. When asked if it was personal or racial, he affirmed the latter.[40] The impact of racism on the development of these twentieth century townships requires further study.

The distinction between what I refer to as *colonies* and *townships* is significant in several ways. Colonies grew out of the period of the Exoduster and rest in that specific era in which the idea of a segregated community made sense to both blacks and whites. Generally, these projects are limited to the end of the nineteenth century and the earliest years of the twentieth. African Americans saw these communities as refuges where they could not only avoid clashes with the larger white population, but where they could build showcase communities to demonstrate what the "race" could accomplish without external interference. These highly organized communities,

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[38] Tate Hill, *Racism in Riverdale*(2007, accessed 2008); available from http://urbanknowledge.blogspot.com/2007/06/racism-in-riverdale.html. See also Carmen Van Kerckhove, *Riverdale Christian Academy Celebrates Graduation with a Blackface Party Mocking Slavery*(2007, accessed 2008); available from http://www.racialicious.com/2007/06/11/riverdale-christian-academy-celebrates-graduation-with-a-blackface-party-mocking-slavery/.

[39] Cooksey, "Timothy Cooksey Oral History Interview."

[40] Cooksey, "Allen Cooksey Oral History Interview."

like Allensworth, had lofty goals, which required time and resources to achieve. Any setback signaled failure for these planned communities.

Townships, on the other hand, just happened. No one planned Lanare. No one set goals at the founding of Fairmead. No stockholders or officers participated in the development of Cookseyville. Each of these townships grew out of specific needs and unique circumstances. Whereas, circumstances may have prevented Allensworth from fulfilling its promise, these rural enclaves have supported African American communities as large, or larger—for longer periods of time. Because townships took advantage of exiting services within the larger community, they were able to focus on other things, such as the family, work, and church. With nothing to prove, townships have fulfilled, in some ways, many of the promises of planned communities.

Allensworth, the best-known community of African Americans, in Central California began in 1908. Within the next decade, it grew to around one hundred and fifty residents, followed by a rapid decline, over the next twenty years. The land for Cookseyville, the smallest of the townships, was first purchased in 1943, with the bulk of its hundred residents arriving during the decade between 1946 and 1956. The population of Cookseyville remained at that level until the late seventies. During the decade of the 1980s, the population waned, as second-generation family members began to pass on, and members of the third and fourth generations left for jobs, marriages, and college.

These two communities—the first, a highly touted and revered colony; the second an organically grown, family township—developed at different times and places, under very different circumstances. Today, a State Park stands on the site of one community, while a few homes, some farmland, and a few empty lots are all that marks the existence of the other. My current research is focused on the history of these and other communities, in an on-going effort to develop a fuller picture of rural African American communities, in the San Joaquin Valley—especially those just beyond the city limits.

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