ABSTRACT

KERN COUNTY: CALIFORNIA'S DEEP SOUTH

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Sometimes the best way to understand a place as diverse as California is to examine big picture topics such as major historical figures and movements. However, much can be learned by studying localized topics. One example is Kern County, at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. As early as 1884, large-scale agricultural concerns owned by men who had come to the area from the American South recruited African Americans for fieldwork, especially in the newly developed cotton culture of Central California. Recreating the plantation climate of the South established a long-standing tradition of racism and exclusion, which, in many ways, continues, today, throughout the region. Using archival material, interviews, and other primary sources, this paper examines the history of Kern County's exclusionary past, including issues of agricultural labor through the first half of the twentieth century, sundown policies and restrictive covenants, the Ku Klux Klan, racial violence, and other forms of overt, systemic, and on-going racism, as a case study. An abbreviated version of this paper was originally presented in March of 2011, at the *Critical Ethnic Studies and the Future of Genocide* conference at the University of California, Riverside.

Kern County: California's Deep South

James N. Gregory claimed that sixty percent of Central California residents can trace their origins to the South.[1] Geographer James J. Parsons poetically described parts of the San Joaquin Valley as "a land of chicken-fried steaks, biscuits and gravy, okra, greens, and black-eyed peas... the land of drag racing, southern country music, and religious revivals."[2] No place in California is more Southern than Kern County. By Southern, in this context, I mean not only does Kern County reflect southern cultural food and music, but also the long-standing traditions of Jim Crow and other racist manifestations of Southern culture. Although other parts of Central California have experienced incidents of racism, segregation, and racial violence, since the nineteenth century not another county has so consistently exhibited these attitudes and actions to the degree evident in Kern County. That said, it is important to note that not every resident of Kern County—in fact probably not even a majority of county residents—share these attitudes or act out in racist ways. As Rory McViegh and David Sikkink suggested in 2005, in relation to membership in White supremacist groups:

> [O]nly a small portion of Americans respond to racist frames by joining a White separatist organization… Yet racist organizations do not need mass support. They only need to recruit enough activists from the larger community to engage in racist activities.[3]

Likewise, only a sufficient number of people in Kern County need to promote and participate in these activities to provide the backdrop that relocates this corner of Central California to the American South.

Kern County's Southern roots run deep. Local chroniclers reported that

[1] James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 125.
[2] James J. Parsons, "A Geographer Looks at the San Joaquin Valley," *Geographical Review* 76, no. 4 (1986): 377.
[3] Rory McVeigh and David Sikkink, "Organized Racism and the Stranger," *Sociological Forum* 20, no. 4 (2005): 505.

> Kern County was largely settled by people of the border states, many of them coming from Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas, who gave the county in its early days a very strong complexion of sympathy with the Confederate cause… Much of Kern County was settled by people of the South who left there at the close of the Civil War.[4]

One of the earliest crops grown in the Valley, and one that would eventually turn out to be extremely profitable, was cotton.[5] Harvey Skiles, a former southerner, may have planted the earliest stand of cotton on Kern Island (site of the modern city of Bakersfield) as early as 1862.[6] In 1865, Solomon and Philo Jewett initiated one of the earliest commercial attempts to grow cotton in Kern County. Using seed imported from Tennessee and Mexico, the first crop was ginned on-site with the resulting cotton fibers sent to a mill in Oakland.[7] An "experienced superintendent from the South" supervised Chinese farm laborers for the Jewette brother's cotton operations [8] Although this early venture into cotton culture produced a commercial crop, the supply of cheap, efficient labor remained a problem. In 1871, farmers planted a thousand acres of cotton in Kern County, however, the crop suffered from "high production costs and a labor shortage."[9] Some of these Southern planters had their own ideas about farm labor, as evident in the 1872 report of the California State Agriculture Society, which stated:

> California was naturally a cotton-raising state. Indeed, if California had not been admitted to the Union as a free state, there can be no doubt that long ere now we would have had large numbers of cotton plantations, worked by slaves brought here from the Southern States by men who were able to discover the superior advantages of our soil and climate for cotton culture.[10]

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[4] Arthur Crites, *Pioneer Days in Kern County* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1957), 36,57.
[5] The Bakersfield Californian, "Kern County among First in State to Commence Cotton Growing," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, September 25, 1919 1919.
[6] Annie R. Mitchell, *The Way It Was: The Colorful History of Tulare County* (Fresno, CA: Valley Publishers, 1976).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] California State Agriculture Society, *Transactions of the California State Agriculture Society* (1872).

Howell & Sons farms claimed they could produce cotton comparable to any grow in Georgia with just one application of irrigation water.[11] By 1881, several other planters experimented with cotton production in Kern County, however, labor issues continued to plague farmers who planted this labor-intensive crop.[12]

Almost sixty black laborers, from Memphis, arrived on the train in Bakersfield in March of 1884.[13] Their employers, Kentuckian James Haggin and William "Billie" Carr, had experimented with cotton for four or five years by this point.[14] A Kern County Californian article remarked that when some of the newly transplanted farm workers attempted to walk away from their contracts they were "promptly arrested by Mr. Carr's agents and held against his return".[15] A second trainload of approximately two hundred immigrants arrived in June. These workers, according to local press reports, were more acceptable than the earlier arrivals:

> They are a superior lot to those who came first and we shall be surprised if they are not only well satisfied themselves, but give satisfaction. They have with them a clergyman and physician, of their own race…[16]

By November of that year, over three hundred southern African Americans were working in the Kern County cotton fields that were part of the more than three hundred thousand acres owned by Haggin, Carr, and fellow Kentuckian Lloyd Tevis (one of the richest men in California and Haggin's brother-in-law).[17] F. W. Ownbey, on behalf of these Kern County planters, traveled to the South to recruit additional blacks, specifically to replace Chinese workers in the fields. The New York Times reported:

> Haggin and Tevis… have tried the plan of employing negroes on their farms instead of Chinamen… A lot of cotton was successfully raised the past year as an

[11] Kern County Californian, "Our Cotton Crop," *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881 1881.
[12] Mitchell.
[13] Kern County Californian, "Colored Immigrants," *Kern County Californian*, November 22, 1884 1884.
[14] Kern County Californian, "More Cotton Growers," *Kern County Californian*, November 12, 1881 1881.
[15] Kern County Californian, "Our Cotton Crop."
[16] Kern County Californian, "Colored Immigrants."
[17] Kern County Californian, "Editorial," *Kern County Californian*, March 22, 1884 1884.

> experiment. Mr. Ownbey says that since the success of the negro plan he expects a great many California planters to adopt it, and thus drive out the Chinamen, who cause more trouble than they are worth.[18]

It was reported in the local press that Ownbey, as well as his employers, Haggin and Carr, felt that African American labor would insure a successful conversion to Cotton Culture in Kern County, and eliminate the reliance on Chinese labor. He stated "There are thousands of colored men in the South who would be glad to come out here and work for $15 a month and their board."[19]

Seeking as many as ten thousand workers to pick cotton and fruit crops, Ownsbey allegedly transported up to eleven hundred blacks from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Four hundred African Americans left Columbia, South Carolina for Kern County in 1884.[20] Another seventy blacks left Charlotte, North Carolina in January 1886 with a promise of a monthly salary of twelve dollars.[21] Haggin & Carr financed four shipments of African Americans from the South to Kern County. The final party included over one hundred and thirty families.[22] The initial cotton experiment failed. It would be decades before the crop was commercially profitable. Nevertheless, many of these early black families, along with others recruited elsewhere, participated in the development of Central California over the last one hundred and twenty-five years.

Unfortunately, one name followed the migration of both black and white southerners: Jim Crow. In 1908, an article in the *Bakersfield Californian* praised Thomas F. Dixon's book *The Clansman*, and the subsequent play:

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[18] New York Times, "Negroes Replacing Chinamen," *New York Times*, November 14, 1884 1884.
[19] Kern County Californian, "Colored Immigrants."
[20] Cleveland Gazette, "Colored Labor for California," *Cleveland Gazette*, November 29, 1884 1884; New York Times, "Carloads of Negroes Emigrate," *New York Times*, December 4, 1884 1884.
[21] New York Times, "Negroes Going to California," *New York Times*, January 17, 1886 1886.
[22] Wallace Melvin Morgan, *History of Kern County, California, with Biographical Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with Its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present* (Los Angeles, Cal.,: Historic record company, 1914).

> One effect… has been to make the south conscious of its own greatness… [M]en and women of southern descent view the deeds of their fathers during the reconstruction period, and they are proud of the record... The peace and prosperity of the present are founded on the heroic labors of the Ku Klux Klan… that resisted the… measures by which it was sought to reduce the south… The play is true to historical conditions although the details are imaginatively conceived…[23]

In another section of the same paper another story covered the vain protests of local black leaders against the presentation of the play. A. A. Burleigh, minister at the local African Methodist Episcopal church stated that the play (like the books upon which it was based) "was calculated to stir up a strong feeling of race prejudice… The drama will call up all the old race hatreds here, as it has done elsewhere…" Four days before the play was to open, a large group of local African American citizens gathered at the A.M.E Church to discuss the play. The following day, several black leaders presented city officials with a petition requesting that the performance be forbidden. The City Attorney commented that the Opera House management firm paid the city a license that allowed them to freely book any act in the Opera House, and the rest of the city council agreed that they could not prevent the play from being presented.[24]

W. D. Griffith's movie version, *The Birth of a Nation,* ran at the Bakersfield Opera House in October 1916, with a return showing at Grogg's Theatre, in December.[25] This time, there were no reports in local papers protesting the showing of the film or denouncing the content. This was also the same year that it was announced that Kern county schools were preparing to celebrate the birth of Robert E. Lee. According to the newspaper "…the life story of

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[23] The Bakersfield Californian, "The Clansman Next Week," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, November 17, 1908 1908.
[24] The Bakersfield Californian, "Colored Citizens Voice Their Protest To "The Clansman"," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, November 17, 1908 1908.
[25] The Bakersfield Californian, "'the Clansman' at Grogg's Theatre for the Last Time Tonight," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, December 7, 1916 1916; The Bakersfield Californian, ""The Clansman" At Grogg's Theatre for Today and Tomorrow Only," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, December 6, 1916 1916.

the confederate general will be told and talks will be made dealing with his character and the inspiration which may be gained from a study of his life."[26]

The Birth of a Nation masterfully distorted the history of the reconstruction years and supported many of the claims of the neo-Confederates. As such, in Kern County, as in places as diverse as Indianapolis and Annapolis, economic conditions combined with the propaganda of the film led to the birth of the Second Ku Klux Klan.

During the third decade of the twentieth century increased urbanization and industrialization, combined with large-scale agricultural production and a massive increase in the extraction industries, caused change in almost every sector of the economy in Kern County. This meant an increase of white males arriving and settling amid the oil fields of the South and the Southwest sectors of the County. The oil companies only hired whites to work their oilfields, thereby creating segregated communities with few women, and no minorities. Due to the remote nature of some of these outposts, it was cheaper, at one point, to buy beer in Taft than it was to buy water: "beer brawls, and bordellos kept Taft busy."[27] Despite the wild-west nature of the settlement, by 1922, Taft began morphing into a real town with churches, schools and traditional businesses, including pool halls, cigar stores, tennis courts and a dance hall.[28] However, the 1920s was also a time when the United States experienced the accelerated use of unskilled labor by industry (meaning fewer jobs for so-called skilled labor), severe shortages of agricultural labor, and high protective tariffs that worsened the post-war depression. These conditions ultimately led to a new national resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan following the example laid out

[26] The Bakersfield Californian, "Will Celebrate Birthday of Robert E. Lee," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, January 13, 1916 1916.
[27] Gerald Haslam, *The Other California: The Great Central Valley in Life and Letters* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1999), 125.
[28] Gary Roldan, "Activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Kern and Los Angeles Counties, California, During the 1920s" (MA Thesis, California State University, Fresno, 1996), 41-42.

in Griffith's movie.[29] Someone who believed himself entitled to jobs and status while feeling those things threatened by some mysterious usurping other—in this case blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and Catholics—was susceptible to a message that reinforced his status as superior, while providing scapegoats for his failure to live up to his expectations. In the early 1920s, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan were enrolling new members across the country (and in Kern County) to address these same ills. Shifting the focus away from blacks (alone) to all those groups that they considered less American than themselves, and acquiring a moral façade that rejected divorce, vice, and gambling, the new Klan set itself up as an extra legal force within communities from Indiana to Indio. In Kern County, the Klan made major inroads in Bakersfield (and surrounding Oildale), in Tehachapi, at Kern River, and in Taft.[30]

In 1921, the Klan in Taft issued a public warning to those it deemed undesirable:

> First, last and only warning to gamblers, gunmen, bootleggers, loafers, lawbreakers of every class and description… We are sworn to preserve the sanctity of the home, the virtue of our wives, mothers and daughter, and we mean to do just that. We stand squarely back of law and order… We demand that the town of Taft and the county of Kern be made clean, and that happiness and welfare be safeguarded. No law-abiding citizen need fear our coming, but he who defies the law and common decency will do well to change his course
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> Lawbreakers, you cannot escape us. We know who you are, what you are, and where you are. Change your ways this hour lest you be stricken as with lightening from the sky… We have given you fair warning. Beware![31]

On October 27th of that year, Taft physician, Dwight Mason was taken from his home to a local baseball park where, in front of thirty people, including Mason's estranged wife, hooded men hanged him until he lost consciousness. Revived, he was flogged with ropes and assaulted

[29] Rory McVeigh, "Structured Ingnorance and Organized Racism in the United States," *Social Forces* 82, no. 3 (2004): 897.
[30] Roldan, 60.
[31] The Bakersfield Californian, "Ku Klux Is Probed in Kern County; Whippings, Tarring Are Reported in West Side," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, February 2, 1921 1922.

with a revolver.[32] Apparently, the fact that Mason had filed for divorce offended the sensibilities of the local Klan and it was decided to make an example of him to anyone who threatened the "sanctity of the home".[33] On January 29th, the following year, local bootlegger, Eli Andrews was dragged from his Taft taxi, beaten, and tarred and feathered, before being turned loose, "blindfolded on the streets of Taft".[34] By March, the Klan set its sights on local prostitution. Over the course of a few days two suspected brothels were attacked by robed and hooded riders. One madame was given twenty-four hours to leave town. She left without any protesting. Many locals were thrilled with the efforts of the Klan to control what was seen by many as a blight on their community.[35] In that same month, the Klan threatened a local gambler (and oilman). Oscar Richardson quickly sold his Taft home, at a loss, and left the oil fields of Kern County.[36]

While prostitutes and gamblers were being dealt with in Taft, the Klan in Bakersfield was also active. In late March, four men in Klan regalia robbed and beat Bakersfield taxi driver Clyde Richey, who they believed to be a "menace to young girls and boys."[37] George Pettye, who ran a small Bakersfield restaurant was taken at gunpoint from his home by robed men. Driven to a rural location near the small town of Maricopa, he was beaten with ropes. He was told to remain in Bakersfield but that a "certain girl" had just twenty-four hours to get out of town.[38]

Ultimately, using membership lists provided by the Los Angeles District Attorney taken from the Klan's Southern California offices and witness testimony several people were arrested and convicted in relation to some of these assaults. However, in association with the investigations in the Southland, these membership lists also proved embarrassing to a number of

[32] The Bakersfield Californian, "Vitelle's Fate Hangs with Jury: Attorneys Close Case Late This Afternoon," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, June 29, 1922 1922.
[33] Bakersfield Californian, "Ku Klux Is Probed in Kern County; Whippings, Tarring Are Reported in West Side."
[34] Ibid.
[35] Roldan, 61.
[36] Ibid., 62.
[37] Bakersfield Californian, "Ku Klux Is Probed in Kern County; Whippings, Tarring Are Reported in West Side."
[38] WIlliam Rintoul, *Oildorado: Boom Times on the West Side* (Fresno: Valley Publishers, 1978), 26.

well placed Kern County politicians and businessmen. In addition to waiters, oil workers, and other blue collar workers, among those on the Klan's membership roles were: Stanley Abel, the chairman of the Kern County Board of Supervisors (and resident of Taft); W. E. McFadden, Bakersfield City Treasurer; Herbert Hearle, Taft City Trustee; the Right Reverend Vandyke Todd; Bakersfield fireman Earl Howe, C. Z. Vanderhock, Bakersfield banker, J. H. Baldwin, public accountant from Taft.[39] For several months after these revelations, throughout Kern County, factions supporting and condemning the Invisible Empire continued to demonstrate. Some prominent members publically withdrew their support, or recanted their membership, and the National organization officially disbanded all of the Klan groups in Kern County. Within a year, the Klan left the front pages of the newspapers, although occasional activities were reported throughout the remainder of the decade and well into the 1930s in Kern, Tulare, and Fresno Counties.

In 1937, George Boone, a twenty-three year old African American from Wasco was arrested for attempted robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, intent to commit murder, burglary, and burglary with intent to commit rape. According to press accounts after some bad luck at a Wasco card game Boone stabbed a white card player, robbed the dying man of thirty dollars and attempted to steal a automobile. Unable to get the car to start, he then broke into a nearby home where, as the front page story reported, "Boone… fell upon the little [ten year old] girl in an attempted criminal attack". He then broke into another home and a local creamery. Between the robbery and the break-ins, Boone stole a total of about forty dollars. An angry mob gathered around the Wasco lockup threatening to lynch the young African American. No evidence was ever presented that Boone actually attempted to sexually assault the young girl. However, the best way to instigate a lynching in the 1930s was to claim a rape had occurred. Officials moved

[39] Ibid., 70-71.

the suspect from Wasco to the main county jail in Bakersfield, thus preventing the mob from hanging him.[40] Although the Ku Klux Klan remained active throughout the thirties, in Kern County (and neighboring Tulare County, as well), it is unclear if this lynching was organized by the Klan. It would be safe, however, to assume that Klan members and supporters were among those in the lynch mob.

Much of Kern County's contemporary Southern-ness can be traced to the large influx of southerners from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and elsewhere during the years of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Although the County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution banning the book *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 from all county libraries and schools in an attempt to appease large farmers, the Southern Pacific Railroad, Bank of America and Standard Oil, it is that book, or the movie, starting Henry Fonda, that represents Okies to people around the world.[41] Although Black Okies are rarely included in the story of Dust Bowl migration to Kern County, they represented a significant percentage of the newcomers to the Valley. However, as would continue to be the case, black Okies often remained on the fringes. On August 16th, 1932, a *Bakersfield Californian* article describes a so-called race riot at a farm labor camp wherein four armed whites attacked a number of African American migrants. Jack Hunter, wanted for murder in Arizona, Clarence Becker, and two other white men, held several blacks at gunpoint, threatening to kill them:

> When police arrived at the riot scene in the "jungle" district the white men threw three revolvers into the canal which runs nearby. The colored denizens of the underbrush area stripped and dived for the guns. They were retrieved and will be

[40] The Bakersfield Californian, "Knife Robbery, Attack on Girl among Charges: Angry Crowd Surrounds Wasco Jail; Threats of Hanging Heard," *Bakersfield, Californiain, The*, October 18, 1937 1937.
[41] Tim Kapell, "Trampling Out: Kern County's Ban on the Grapes of Wrath," *California History* 61, no. 3 (1982).

> used as evidence to against Hunter… Becker [said] they were about the "shoot the stuffings" out of the negroes… when the officers arrived.[42]

The description of the African American victims as the "colored denizens of the underbrush" apparently sums up the view many residents of Bakersfield and its environs had of blacks in 1932.

Times were tough for those, black and white, who arrived in Kern County during the Depression and Dustbowl years. M. C. Long reported that her father…

> …had to walk… about ten miles to stand in a long line and receive food that the government gave to us. We got oatmeal and sometimes we even got cornmeal. The white people always got all the best food even if we was there before they were, they'd give it to them anyways. The food always had weevils in it but my father used to say "it ain't nothin' but meat," It really didn't matter anyways. We had to eat it or else we'd a starved to death.[43]

African American migrant children attended a segregated school, which mysteriously burned down in 1937.[44] Over the course of the next two decades, white Okies, through assimilation, marriage, and hard work, managed to move into the mainstream of Kern County culture. African Americans remained on the fringes in segregated neighborhoods. One of the poorest of these neighborhoods, which originally grew a few miles to the south and east of Bakersfield, was known as Cottonwood.

Bakersfield's South High School opened for the academic year of 1957-58.[45] When it opened, the school included the neighborhood known as Cottonwood within its district boundaries. The freshman class from nearby (and predominately white) Bakersfield High picked the school colors and mascots for the new school. The students named the varsity teams for the new school the "Rebels," the junior varsity teams the "Raiders," and the frosh teams the

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[42] The Bakersfield Californian, "Police Quell Race Riot in Transient Camp," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, August 16, 1932 1932.
[43] M. C. Long, "My Hungry Childhood," in *An Oral History of the 1930's American Depression: Vol 4 - The Black Experience*, ed. Charolotte Long (Bakersfield: West High School, 1991).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Felilx Doligosa Jr., "Rebel Yell: It's Good to Be Back," *Bakersfield Californian*, September 29, 2007 2007.

"Riders."[46] Of course, these are direct references to the Army of the Confederacy, and two of the many terms associated, from their earliest incarnations, with the Ku Klux Klan. The new school's mascots received the monikers of Johnny and Jody Reb, and the school colors were North Carolina Blue and grey.[47] While the title of the student paper was the "Rebel Yell," the name of yearbook was the "Merrimac."[48] The Stars and Bars, or the confederate battle flag, was frequently used (banners, marching flags, emblems, and other items used to generate and maintain school spirit) until Principal Don Murfin campaigned to end its use in 1968.[49] The school's current website shows African American cheerleaders at football games cheering for their black, white, and Hispanic classmates on teams still named for the Army of the South and the Ku Klux Klan.[50]

Those communities that grew up in the oil fields of Kern County have a long tradition of hostility toward non-whites. During the oil-bonanza in the early part of the twentieth century, major oil companies only hired white workers. Taft, which sits atop the Midway-Sunset Oilfield, was known as "a virulently racist place… and African Americans were especially despised."[51] Whether *de facto* or *de jure* the "*unwritten law* against the presence of African Americans after sundown" in this Kern County community "was widely, and frequently

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[46] Ibid.
[47] These notes were collected for Dr. Loewen's book on Sundown Towns and include numerous correspondence from emails, letters, and phone calls. Generally, these informants asked that their identity be protected. My agreement with Dr. Loewen, for access to these files, requires that I honor these requests. Throughout this text, if I use any of the notes from this file, I will simply cite them as having come from Loewen, except in those cases where I have been in contact with the original informant, through Loewen. James W. Loewen, "Research Notes for Sundown Towns: California File," (2007).
[48] Ibid.
[49] Doligosa Jr.
[50] South High, "South High School Web Site" http://www.khsd.k12.ca.us/south/Special%20Features/Fiftieth/Game%20time.htm (accessed October 23 2007).
[51] Taken from an email from Dennis Smith. Loewen.Used with permission from both Mr. Smith and Dr. Loewen.

proclaimed."[52] Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) reported a sundown sign, at the city limits of Taft, in the 1930s.[53]

Author, Gerald Haslam described growing up in Taft:

> While some "No colored allowed" signs are reported to have been posted, the town's reputation was enough to discourage most nonwhites. It was accepted during my youth that no Negro should allow himself to be found in Taft after dusk, and everyone talked about, but no one ever saw, a sign—"Nigger don't let the sun set on you here"—that was supposed to have been posted on the city limits.[54]

Even if Haslam could not verify the existence of the "sundown" sign, he did acknowledge the reputation that his hometown held among African Americans. Some residents of Taft made little secret about their preference as to the racial makeup of their community. In 1941, Taft School Board member Henry Barness, proposed that with the possibility of African American soldiers being posted to Gardner Field, just outside the city, that "the school system be prepared to protest such additions to the population."[55] That same year, Taft mayor H. H. Bell told Congressman A. J. Elliott of Tulare, "…we had never had any Negro residents in Taft… we would prefer that only white soldiers be sent here."[56] However, Mayor Bell's requests were ignored and black soldiers were sent to Taft for training.[57]

In the spring of 1966, newspapers across the country reported the news that, like its Southern California counterpart—Watts—Bakersfield's Lakeview district had erupted the day before into full-scale race riots.[58] The riot broke out after white police officers, investigating a

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Olen Cole Jr., *The African-American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Gainseville FL: University Press of Florida, 1999).
[54] Haslam.
[55] The Bakersfield Californian, "Board Says Taft Man Should Be Awarded Job," *Bakersfield Californian*, June 10, 1941 1941.
[56] Fresno Bee, "Negro Soldiers Will Be Sent to Taft Air Base," *Fresno Bee*, June 15, 1941 1941.
[57] Bakersfield Californian, "Board Says Taft Man Should Be Awarded Job."
[58] The Tribune Wire Services, "Police Quell Bakersfield Riot," *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1966 1966; The United Press International, "Bakersfield Race Riot," *Arizona Republic*, May 23, 1966 1966; The United Press International,

fender-bender accident between two local black drivers, were pelted by rocks and bottles thrown by young male African Americans.[59] The group of angry black youths was reported to have included anywhere from fifty to two hundred people.[60] A Chicago paper reported that "Teen-agers threw rocks and bottles, set fires in trash barrels, and *prowled the side-walks*".[61] Between one hundred and twenty-five and one hundred and fifty Bakersfield Police officers, Kern County Sheriff's deputies, and California Highway Patrolmen descended on the southeast Bakersfield neighborhood in an evening that included a small fire at the entrance of the bar of the Lakeview Inn. An additional fire was apparently started when two white men threw a Molotov cocktail against the side of the local fire station from a passing car.[62]

Police barricaded a small section of the area's commercial district. Seventeen year old Theodore Robertson was shot in the leg by a police officer who claimed that the youth had attempted to hit him with a bottle. One firefighter, one police officer and, one deputy were struck by bottles and rocks.[63] Also injured was a white cab driver whose cab suffered some damage when a brick broke the windscreen.[64] The so-called riot broke up when many of the youths were "rounded up and sent to their homes," and as many as twenty adults and eighteen juveniles were arrested on a variety of charges.[65]

The violence continued the next day—a Monday—despite the fact that approximately fifty state, county, and local law enforcement officers patrolled neighborhood streets armed with shotguns. Throughout the day, over thirty-five people were arrested. On that second day of

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"Negroes Storm Police in Bakersfield after Mishap," *Humboldt Standard*, May 23, 1966 1966; The United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield," *San Mateo Times and Daily News Leader*, May 23, 1966 1966.

[59] United Press International, "Bakersfield Race Riot."

[60] United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield."

[61] Emphasis added. Tribune Wire Services.

[62] United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield."

[63] Tribune Wire Services.

[64] United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield."

[65] Tribune Wire Services; United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield."

unrest a group of young blacks attacked a junior high school bus, smashing the windows with bottles, bricks, and rocks. The majority of the children on the bus were from the neighborhood.[66] That evening several fires, all assumed to be the result of Molotov cocktails, erupted across the district. According to the *Hayward Daily Review,* police officials implied that these firebombings, unlike the earlier ones, were committed by blacks against blacks. No witnesses were reported to have seen the perpetrators of the Monday bombings, although witnesses of the Sunday night bombings indicated that whites had thrown those bombs.[67]

Unrest continued throughout the week. By the time it ended, more small fires had been set, another resident had been shot, and Molotov cocktails continued to be thrown at local structures (at least seven were reported on the evening on the fifth day of the tensions).[68] One day before the so-called riots began, a large group of African American leaders and community members had met in California Park, within walking distance of the disturbance, to discuss dissatisfaction with recent actions by the Bakersfield City Council.[69]

Through the middle of the 1950s, Taft Junior College was a football powerhouse. Like many small communities, football acquired religious proportions and winning teams at the small local community college stood at the center of civic pride. However, by 1965, the oil industry mechanized requiring fewer workers and the population of Taft dwindled. As the town became smaller, so did the number of possible recruits for the college football team. To remain competitive, the college sought athletes from outside the area—many of whom were black. For a decade, tensions rose within the town as any integration between the African American athletes

[66] The Associated Press, "School Bus Attacked," *Independent*, May 24, 1966 1966.
[67] The United Press International, "Calm Follows Negro Riot," *Daily Review*, May 24, 1966 1966.
[68] Don Hastings, "In Review: The West," *Independent Press-Telegram*1966.
[69] United Press International, "Race Riot at Bakersfield."

and the white townspeople proved to be unattainable.[70] On May 25, 1975, over the Memorial Day weekend, these tensions boiled over. Several carloads of whites attacked three black students, all members of the football team, walking across the college campus. In the fight, one of the armed white attackers, who was later charged with attempted murder, was shot. The three students who were initially attacked testified that "Taft police would not come to their aid" at the time of the initial attacks[71] Grand Jury testimony later revealed that police did respond to the initial attacks when a local white businessman, Weldon Jones, reported a disturbance. The police after they "broke up the fracas, warning the participants to go home," did not prevent the carloads of white youths from following the three students back to their apartment. At least a dozen locals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven were waiting outside the apartment when the students attempted to make their way to the campus. A fight ensued.[72]

By the early evening, sixty whites stormed the dormitory with chants of "Kill the niggers!" When white college students came to the aid of the African American students, the fracas became *townies* against college students. Local police eventually freed the trapped black students and transported them to Bakersfield.[73] Depending on who's telling the story, the thirteen young men—the entire black population of Taft—were either escorted or "run out of town."[74] By August, the major Kern County newspaper, the Bakersfield Californian, was calling the incident a "race riot" and claimed that "the 13 black students… were escorted out of Taft for their own safety and the peace and quiet of that western Kern city following the disturbances."[75]

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[70] Gerald Haslam, "Oil Town Rumble: The Young Men of Taft," *The Nation*, September 13 1975.
[71] The United Press International, "State to Probe Racial Clashes," *Long Beach Independent/Press-Telegram*, August 4, 1975 1975.
[72] The Bakersfield Californian, "Grand Jury Probes Race Riot: 8 Taft Witnesses Testify," *Bakersfield Californian*, August 7, 1975 1975.
[73] Haslam, "Oil Town Rumble: The Young Men of Taft."
[74] John Davidson, "Taft Boycott Demand," *Oakland Tribune*, July 3, 1975 1975.
[75] Bakersfield Californian, "Grand Jury Probes Race Riot: 8 Taft Witnesses Testify."

For days, locals terrorized college students and physically attacked Denis McCall, the editor of the local newspaper. [76] Taft oilworker, Rick Riddick, wielding a tire iron attacked the editor on the streets of Taft. He was later fined two hundred and fifty dollars and placed on probation.

Statewide, black leaders called for investigations by the FBI, the Department of Justice, and the Governor's office.[77] In June, the Justice Department sent two investigators to Taft.[78] Officials of California's Communist Party spoke out against the failure of the Justice Department to act, and other groups called for a variety of actions, including a protest march through the streets of Taft—which never materialized—and African American leaders called for a boycott of Taft College.[79] When no federal charges were ever filed, the State Attorney General, Eville J. Younger, launched what he called a "full-scale investigation."[80] The Bakersfield Californian reported that a Taft college official stated that the local "high school dropouts," as he referred to them…

> …sweat all day in the fields and come home to see these black kids playing football and getting a free education. They were outclassed in their own town and they couldn't take it.[81]

Not one of the black athletes was on a scholarship, although most did have work-study jobs that helped pay for their education.[82] Several reports stated that some of the black athletes had "gone out on dates with Taft girls and this apparently *riled* the townspeople".[83]

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[76] The Bakersfield Californian, "State Communist Party Hits Taft Racial Turmoil," *Bakersfield Californian*, June 24, 1975 1975; Haslam, "Oil Town Rumble: The Young Men of Taft."
[77] Davidson.
[78] The Associated Press, "Probe by Justice Dept. Set on Racial Discord in Taft," *Long Beach Independant/Press Telegram*, June 13, 1975 1975.
[79] Bakersfield Californian, "State Communist Party Hits Taft Racial Turmoil."
[80] United Press International, "State to Probe Racial Clashes."
[81] Bakersfield Californian, "Grand Jury Probes Race Riot: 8 Taft Witnesses Testify."
[82] Ibid.
[83] Emphasis added.

Just as African Americans are concentrated in the Cottonwood/Mayfield/Sunset district, Oildale, one of Bakersfield's largest suburbs, has a long tradition as an all-white community that is unfriendly toward African Americans.[84] Various reports describe the sign that stood on the bridge across the Kern River between Oildale and Bakersfield that read a variation of "Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Set on You in Oildale" as recently as the 1960s.[85] Unconfirmed reports suggests that a similar sign was spray painted on the same bridge as recently as the late 1990s.[86]

When asked for information about the old sign on the bridge, one email correspondent offered the following:

> Oildale was DEFINATELY a "sundown town." I'm 27 years old and a 3rd generation "oakie."[sp] …My father… often commented on the sign, and my buddy's father commented that the sign should still be up. He had a gun target with the shadow of a running black man as the bullseye. …Oildale is still "sundown" unofficially. I surely never see any blacks venture in. And the Klan and casual racist culture still abound... It's as if the rebs won… raising generations of neo Jim Crowe racists.[87]

In 1981, three Ku Klux Klan members—Jonathan Sund, Stanley Hurley, and Dale Gibson were arrested for burning a cross on the front lawn of a black family in the Kern County town of Boron.[88] One Bakersfield resident wrote that:

> As a child growing up I always knew that it was dangerous for me, a brown skinned person to ever venture north of the Kern River. Once, when I was in middle school I had a white best friend who's family moved north of the river. On one Saturday morning while we were driving down the main street to her home, we passed Standard Jr. High and there was a rally of the KKK taking place on the front lawn of the school… This was in 1987. [89]

[84] Loewen.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Los Angeles Times, "The Southland," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1981 1981.
[89] Loewen.

In the early 1990s, black motorists were attacked on the streets of Oildale by whites hurling racial slurs and epithets.[90] According to the 2000 census, Oildale's population of close to thirty thousand people included just ninety-seven African Americans.[91]

Young adults at a 2006 Kottonmouth Kings concert were seen giving the Nazi SS hand sign, or hand flash (the Nazi salute). When asked, they indicated that it was popular among Oildale youth and a symbol of White Power.[92] This familiar, almost casual, expression by teens and young adults in Oildale is indicative of that town's long, well-known, racist history. Oildale is currently home to at least two white supremacist groups: The Oildale Peckerwoods and the Nazi Lowriders. Both groups are associated with the prison gangs the Aryan Brotherhood and Public Enemy No. 1.[93]

In June of 2009, two members of the Peckerwoods were convicted of a hate crime in an incident involving attacks on Hispanics in a local park. According to eyewitnesses, four skinheads initiated the attack that hospitalized three of the victims while yelling racial epithets and white supremacist slogans. This was at least the third attack in Hart Park, near the Kern River, that summer.[94] One month later, twenty-eight year old Aaron Mark Duggan, a Bakersfield white supremacist, was convicted of attempted manslaughter, and found guilty of a hate crime after an attack on a Korean man in Southern California. Duggan yelled the words "White Power"

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[90] Mark Evans, "Kern County Town Struggling to Overcome Its Racist Image," *Los Angeles Times, The*, August 9, 1992 1992.
[91] The U. S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration, "U. S. Census Bureau" http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0627000.html (accessed February 2007).
[92] Matt Munoz, "Live! Kotonmouth Kings at the Dome!", Bakotopia http://www.bakotopia.com/home/ViewPost/18693 (accessed October 23, 2007 2007).
[93] The Anti-Defamation League, "California White Supremacist Sentenced for Attempted Manslaughter" http://www.adl.org/learn/extremism_in_the_news/White_Supremacy/duggan.htm?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_the_News (accessed March 3, 2011 2011); The Anti-Defamation League, "Racist Skinheads Sentenced for Hate Crime in California" http://www.adl.org/learn/extremism_in_the_news/White_Supremacy/oildale+peckerwoods.htm?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_the_News (accessed March 3, 2011 2011).
[94] Anti-Defamation League, "Racist Skinheads Sentenced for Hate Crime in California"; The Bakersfield Californian, "Racial Attack by Kern River," *Bakersfield Californian, The*, June 1, 2009 2009.

as he stabbed his victim in the face and torso.[95] In 2006, the Peckerwoods struck again. This time, they kicked down the door of an Oildale African American woman, held her at gunpoint, and stabbed her neighbor while yelling racial slurs.[96]

However, some parts of Kern County may be overcoming their traditional white supremacist attitudes and image. In 2002, after a public outcry, the Kern County Fair removed the performers known as "Prussian Blue" from their roster.[97] This group, supported by former Klan leader, David Duke, was known for their songs promoting white supremacy and so-called *White Nationalism*.[98] In 2007, the mother of the then fourteen year-old twin performers announced, "…that Bakersfield was not *white* enough, so she sold her home…"[99] The family moved to Kalispell Montana. When local residents passed out fliers protesting the family's white supremacist views, they received threatening letters from out-of-state organizations and had their names, home addresses, and phone numbers published on various websites.[100]

There are racist elements in practically every community. However, they appear to be stronger in some areas than others. It would be to simple to say that Kern County's long history of racial problems are simply the result of the large percentage of residents who can trace their roots to the American South. Although that ultimately may provide the foundation for these on-going issues, as McVeigh and Sikkink have pointed out:

> [T]he extent to which racist framing resonates with a community's White residents depends heavily on the degree of spatial and social distance separating

[95] Anti-Defamation League, "California White Supremacist Sentenced for Attempted Manslaughter".
[96] ABC KERO 23, "Teen Arrested in Oildale Hate Crime", KERO 23 http://www.turnto23.com/news/9417808/detail.html (accessed March 4, 2011 2011).
[97] ABC News Primetime, "Young Singers Spread Racist Hate: Duo Considered the Olsen Twins of the White Nationalist Movement", ABC News http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/Story?id=1231684&page=1 (accessed October 23, 2007 2007).
[98] Jen Abbate, "Teen Rockers Promote White Supremacy," *Inteligencer*, February 22, 2007 2007; The Gleaner, "Can't Possibly Be True," *Gleaner, The*, December 3, 2005 2005; Primetime.
[99] Primetime.
[100] Bill Redeker, "Town Tells White Separatist Singers "No Hate Here"", ABC News www.abcnews.com (accessed February 28, 2008 2011).

> White and non-White populations… where patterns of structural differentiation constrain members of racial and ethinc minority groups to the social position of "the stranger"… a social position that is defined by distance.[101]

Kern County has one of the longest standing African American communities in the San Joaquin Valley. There have been blacks living in Bakersfield since at least 1880.[102] However, there are pockets in the county where blacks did not live. Taft, a company town built by oil companies refused to hire non-whites—making the small oil town all-white except during World War II, and again, during the mid-1970s when the college sought out African American athletes. *Grapes of Wrath* Okies who chose to live apart from non-whites and who, to some degree, maintain the status quo, populated the unincorporated areas of Oildale, north of Bakersfield. In both cases, people living in these all-white communities viewed people of color as that other, or *the stranger*, who are more "likely to be victims of stereotypes and potentially victims of discrimination and violence."[103] Both of these blue-collar communities, originally built on the edge of the oilfields, share similar histories regarding race relations: exclusively, or almost exclusively, white in a county with a relatively significant black and growing Hispanic population. Members of these town have a history that is separate from and in proximity to persons of color. This identification of non-White minorities as the *stranger*, combined with strong Southern cultural ties, contributes to Kern County's designation as California's Deep South.

[101] McVeigh and Sikkink, "Organized Racism and the Stranger."
[102] Diane Ogden, "History of Blacks in Bakersfield" (Bakersfield State College, 1973), 1.
[103] McVeigh and Sikkink, "Organized Racism and the Stranger," 501.

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