

Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Vincent, Stephen. "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism." *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 108-109.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1103>

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Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism, by James Loewen. New York: New Press, 2005. x, 562 pp. Table, maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$17.00 paper.

Reviewer Stephen Vincent lives in Iowa City. He is the author of *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765–1900* (1999).

Provocative and engaging, *Sundown Towns* grabs its readers by the jugular and forces them to think long and hard about northern whites' treatment of African Americans. The heart of the discussion centers on what the author deems the phenomenon's nadir from 1890 to 1930. At bottom, this is a very important book, one that deserves to be read—and mulled over—by the general public and scholars alike.

With a barrage of evidence, largely anecdotal but also drawn from interviews, memoirs, newspapers, and statistical analyses, Loewen overwhelms his readers with an irrefutable assertion: northerners, especially those in the Midwest, have long discouraged if not prevented blacks from settling in their midst. These efforts have taken countless forms, including blatant posted signs, most prevalent in southern parts of the Midwest, warning blacks to leave their locality by sundown. The implicit threat of violence was unmistakable.

Sundown notices, however, were (and remain) merely the slightest tip of a very large iceberg, seemingly as prevalent in Iowa as in other northern states. Loewen observes, for example, that white Iowans twice rejected referendums to give its extremely small African American population voting rights in the mid-nineteenth century, only agreeing on a third attempt; that the number of Iowa counties with 10 or more African Americans decreased from 38 in 1890 to 28 in 1930; and that evidence points to strong efforts at exclusion in a swath of Iowa counties along the Missouri border.

Attempts to dissuade blacks have taken both obvious and subtle forms over the years. Most have been informal: planned housing communities have routinely refused to sell homes to non-whites; African Americans were barred from better-paying jobs; white-driven riots and lynchings sent clear messages; and African Americans were barred or discouraged from attending schools with whites. In addition, blacks on high school sports teams have been subjected to open, flagrantly racist taunts; African Americans seldom found restaurants, hotels, and gas stations that would take their business, in essence preventing long-distance travel; police profiled and arrested blacks at an alarming rate; newspapers simply ignored anti-black behavior; and African Americans have long been invisible to local historians.

Loewen emphasizes not just the pattern but the impact of sundown towns on all concerned. Even today most residents of all-white

towns have a limited grasp of black society, and are far more likely to display racist tendencies than those in integrated settings. They also tend to view all-white communities as “natural” or, alternatively, believe that keeping out African Americans is a “right” they deserve. While failing to see their communities’ actions as racist, they are all too quick to blame African Americans for white-engendered difficulties.

African Americans, in turn, often share extremely negative stereotypes of whites as a deceitful, ruthless people. They feel ill at ease in white communities, themselves adding to the nation’s racial polarization by refusing to settle amidst slights and unequal treatment. Sundown towns’ stress on white supremacy also often takes a psychological toll on African Americans. Residential segregation, meanwhile, virtually guarantees that blacks will receive inferior access to the health care, education, and public services most Americans take for granted. Segregation also prevents the social networking that often paves the way to better-paying jobs.

Loewen proposes to encourage integration through a variety of strategies. First, whites can learn more about the racial history of their communities, bring down barriers of denial, and try to reconcile racial differences. Local communities might voluntarily make efforts to integrate their institutions, particularly those tied to education. And, finally, governments at varying levels might pass a hypothetical Residents Rights Act, modeled in varying degrees on the monitoring and financial incentives associated with the Voting Rights and Clean Air acts.

Sundown Towns does suffer at times from a tendency to oversimplify complex dynamics. For example, Loewen’s discussion of the declining presence of African Americans in rural settings after 1890 overlooks the general exodus of relatively poor farm families due to consolidation and declining incomes. Perhaps black farmers, typically poorer than most, simply saw the handwriting on the wall and moved to more promising, industry-based towns? That was certainly the case in the rural African American communities I have studied.

Compared to historians, sociologist Loewen similarly gives far less stress to the Great Migration of southern blacks to northern cities to seek lower-level industrial jobs from 1914 to 1970. As the concentration of African Americans steadily increased, so did the friction with whites that was directly at the heart of many of the injustices Loewen describes. Far greater emphasis on the Migration’s mixed impact on blacks and its tendency to bring out the worst in whites would add a greater element of complexity—and meaning—to the patterns Loewen so thoroughly documents. Still, this provocative, engaging book deserves to be read—and acted upon—by readers at all levels.