Selective Access to the Melting Pot and the American Dream

Excerpts from the documentary video "Slavery by Another Name" and the article "Sundown Towns" by James Loewen in the newsletter Poverty & Race (Volume 14: Number 6) compiled by the Very Rev. Bob Scott

This month, in our exploration of the historical issues faced by people of color, we briefly look at the experience of Black people after the end of the Civil War. Slavery did not fully end in 1865; systems of forced labor continued in the United States from the late 1800s into the early 1900s. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery **except as punishment for a crime**, a loophole that was widely exploited. Southern states passed laws such as vagrancy statutes, allowing authorities to arrest Black men for minor or fabricated offenses. Misdemeanor crimes were reclassified as felonies.

Thousands of African American men were arrested, convicted, and leased to private companies through a system known as convict leasing. Industries involved included coal mining, lumber, farming, turpentine camps, and railroads. Employers paid local governments or sheriffs for prisoners' labor, creating financial incentives for arrests and convictions. Lessees were given wide latitude as to how they treated Black convicts.

Many men were forced into debt peonage, where alleged debts were used to justify indefinite forced labor. Prisoners were subjected to beatings, chaining, starvation, and torture, with little to no legal protection. When they were slaves, Black people had value to their owners. As leased property, they could be worked to death and then easily replaced. Death rates among leased convicts were extremely high (30% to 40% per year).

The entire documentary can be accessed via this link: **"Slavery by Another Name"**

Another way that Black people (and other minorities) were denied access to the American Dream was through a system called "Sundown Towns." Between 1863 and 1890, Black people moved freely around America. However, from 1890 to 1968, thousands of U.S. towns excluded Black people (and sometimes other racial/ethnic groups) from living in or remaining in their communities after sundown. They often posted signs at town limits with racist warnings like, "*Don't let the sun go down on you in ___.*"

The author identified hundreds of sundown towns in states like Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Oregon. In Illinois alone, he found 472 sundown towns among incorporated places with over 1,000 people. He estimated that thousands of such towns existed nationwide—possibly around 10,000—especially outside the traditional South. By 1970, more than half of all incorporated communities outside the traditional South probably excluded Black people.

Exclusion was carried out through formal policies, customs, and violence, not just by social norms. Some Western towns also excluded **Chinese Americans**, and a few towns targeted **Native Americans or Mexican Americans**. "Sundown suburbs" emerged later (roughly 1900–1968) where similar exclusion happened in suburban communities, often on a larger scale (for example, Glendale, CA).

If you would like to see a historical list of actual and alleged Sundown towns it can be accessed via this link: **Sundown Towns by U.S. State**

Sundown towns are a largely overlooked part of U.S. racial history, especially outside the South. Their pervasive nature reshapes our understanding of segregation and racial exclusion in American society—especially in the Midwest and West.

The article on Sundown towns can be accessed via this link: **Sundown Towns article**

This is only one of the many themes and stories explored in the Episcopal Church series called Sacred Ground. You can learn more about Sacred Ground and how to sign up for the entire series of sessions by using this link: **EDNC Beloved Community webpage**