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Review of *The Black Towns* By Norman L. Crockett

Lawrence H. Larsen

University of Missouri-Kansas City

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The Black Towns. By Norman L. Crockett. Lawrence, Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xv + 244 pp. \$14.00.

In the fifty years after the Civil War, black leaders founded some sixty predominantly black communities in the United States. Most were located in the rural South or on the central Great Plains. Most failed within a short time, leaving behind shattered dreams and few, if any, remains. Norman L. Crockett examines five of these communities in his new book, *The Black Towns*: Nicodemus in Kansas, Mound Bayou in Mississippi, and Langston, Clearview, and Boley in Oklahoma.

Crockett, who says that studies of fragmentary records indicate that these towns were fairly typical, believes that the rhetoric and behavior of black town-dwellers, isolated from day-to-day involvement with white society, provide a microcosm of black attitudes toward American life. "The black-town ideology, in

large part formulated and expounded by promoters, sought to combine economic self-help and moral uplift with an intense pride in race, while at the same time encouraging an active role in county and state politics," he states. "Unlike those who migrated thousands of miles to Africa, some people who entered the towns as settlers saw the community as a temporary expedient. Integration with the mainstream of American life constituted their ultimate goal" (pp. xiii-xiv).

Black leaders built the towns for various purposes. A white speculator helped black ministers plat Nicodemus in 1879 to provide a haven for blacks seeking refuge outside the South. Followers of Booker T. Washington established Mound Bayou in 1887 as a place to carry out his ideas. The promoter who established Langston in 1891 envisioned it as the capital of an all-black state. The founders of Clearview in 1903 and Boley in 1904 had grandiose plans of self-segregation. Whatever the motivating factors, there were unexpected results. Town building imbued residents with a high degree of racial pride and placed them squarely in the American urban booster tradition. A Nicodemus editor put it bluntly in 1887: "Boom! Boom!! BOOM!!!" Black town propagandists, just as their white counterparts elsewhere, predicted that within a few years their village would become a great metropolis located in pastoral gardens. In the end, none of the towns came close to achieving such aims. Langston survived because it managed to obtain a black state agricultural college. The rest faded into obscurity. The most obvious reasons for their failure were evident: a combination of white resentment, a failure to obtain large quantities of outside capital, and an inability to develop hinterlands. "Promoters and settlers," Crockett writes, "missed or ignored the inherent contradictions in attempting to remain in the country, withdrawing from the larger society, and yet trying to copy most of its values" (p. 187).

The black towns never had any appreciable impact on American urban life. They were just five more of the tens of thousands of town pro-

motions in the United States that died young or achieved only limited progress. They were unique only in that their founders were black. An interesting aspect is that there were no attempts at innovation. While there was much talk about establishing a new basis for society, the methods the blacks employed were the same as those used all across the nation by white speculators. Human greed quickly overshadowed idealistic considerations. The reasons are open to speculation, but Crockett's analysis seems to place black separatists in the mainstream of American town speculation. This well-written and carefully researched monograph is a welcome addition to western black and urban history.

LAWRENCE H. LARSEN
Department of History
University of Missouri-Kansas City