

several dozen slaves, such as C. C. Clay of Jackson County who had 71 slaves.

But why did former slaves of other North Alabama counties form deep-rooted communities complete with churches, schools, and cemeteries at or nearby the plantations that enslaved them for generations while the tri-counties of DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall lack such landmarks in the 20th century and today? Seeing as the history of this tri-county area began the same as the rest of North Alabama, it appears that sometime in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the community of color left the area. Some of the loss of population can be attributed to the Great Migration and the Great Depression, but some of it may be due to racial expulsion. According to Elliot Jaspin, journalist and Pulitzer Prize winning author of "Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America," racial expulsions were not always accompanied by large riots or lynchings. A pattern of subtler forcing out of unwanted people took place quietly across the South.

It can be difficult, to nearly impossible, to find evidence of conscious efforts to purge a county of people of color, however, Jaspin's years of research through newspapers and local documents revealed that purges can be indicated by the African American population disappearing while the white population holds its numbers or continues to grow or if the number of African American families remains small after a sudden collapse of the population. Some areas of the tri-counties may fit this description. What rings truest when trying to determine if racial expulsion is the cause of the lack of African Americans in the area is what Jaspin describes as "an archipelago of white or virtually all-white counties...[where] blacks remain all but absent...even when neighboring counties have sizable black populations." This certainly describes DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall counties whose African American communities and community markers are all but nonexistent.

Communities that expelled people of color or were created with specific restrictions excluding them are known as "sundown towns." According



(Left) Crowd in the Courtroom in Decatur, 1934 (Morgan County Archives)

to author James W. Loewen, such towns were common between 1890 and 1968, not just in the South but across the nation. Like Jaspin, Loewen refers to the history of racial explosion as "hidden" in his book, "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism." In the introduction, he states that "most Americans have no idea such towns or counties exist...historians omit the fact intentionally, knowing that it would reflect badly on their communities if publicized abroad." Loewen continues an online database of America's sundown towns which has an entry for Arab, Marshall County and Sand Mountain, a region covering parts of the tri-county area. According to his research and recent oral history, a threatening sign stating Arab was a sundown town was posted as recently as the 1990s and such signs remain in place in parts of Sand Mountain.

Creating and maintaining sundown towns through jurisdiction, violence, and repression of civil rights is deliberate and taxing on a community. Jaspin describes how some purges were not considered complete or successful such as Dothan, Alabama where African Americans were driven out of the town but not the county, or in Lincoln County, Nebraska where people were expelled but eventually returned. At least

in one case in Humphreys, Tennessee, the white community sought farmland owned by African Americans and succeeded in running them off their land, but not the entire county's population. When considering African American landowners and racial expulsion, there are two things to take into account. For one, landowners may be more invested in staying in one place, but their landownership makes them vulnerable as they may be perceived as a threat. On the other hand, landowners were probably the only people in a community of color with the means to leave if so needed or wished. Sharecroppers and tenants often suffered in debt peonage and were not financially able to pick up and move somewhere more favorable.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to know why people of color did not settle or stay in the tri-county area. Oftentimes there is no known historical documentation as to what happened to the population of color; how or if they were driven from their homes. More often than not, racial expulsions were not well planned and orchestrated affairs designed by the Ku Klux Klan or executed on a national scale, but rather a general aligning of the larger community sometimes fueled by stressful events. One such racially charged event was the accusation of rape and subsequent trials of the Scottsboro Boys. The initial events and the years of trials that focused on race uncovered many injustices in local, state, and federal law but also set many members of the white community on edge. While North Alabama appears to be separate from other parts of the state better known for segregation and civil unrest such as Birmingham, Montgomery, and the Black Belt, it is no stranger to these things. Ms. Peggy Allen Towns documents in her book, "Scottsboro Unmasked: Decatur's Story," fiery crosses burned on the front lawns of prominent people of color during the trial. Such displays of terror and harassment were fairly commonplace through to the 1960s at least.