

THE SUNDOWN TOWN NEWS

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To Do GIS Mapping of Sundown Towns

More than thirty years ago, the U.S. Census became aware of GIS

— Geographical Information

Systems — and started to tag census data with geographic information. (For that matter, earlier census data come with geographic information — street address, town, etc.) Today social scientists, marketers, and historians can use this information to map variables spatially. One of the easiest variables to map is residence by race.

Mapping residence by race is a great way to do sundown town research. To be sure, when studying a specific town, one does not need map data. The census table for the town that gives household information by race will do. Then, having learned that a given town was all white or almost all white for decades,

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RAPID RACIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN TWO FORMER SUNDOWN TOWNS

Faranak Miraftab

Beardstown, Illinois, and nearby Rushville have gone through an extraordinary social transformation in their recent histories. Through perceived or real threat of violence, both towns kept themselves almost all-white during most of the 20th century. Elders recall only a few non-whites who lived in the area. They recall each town having a black male cook who worked and lived at the local hotel but were noted seldom to have left the premises. They also recall two non-white children growing up in Beardstown: a biracial boy whose black father did not live with the

family, and a black girl adopted by a local white family. The presence of Mexicans in the area, as locals recall, was limited to one woman married to a white local and one large twelve-member family related to her. The devout Catholic, had escaped religious persecution and settled his family in Beardstown in 1920. Strong believers in cultural and linguistic assimilation, they never spoke Spanish at home. Even their mother, an introvert homemaker of darker complexion who seldom wandered out of the house, struggled but kept

Summary of Population Census Data for Beardstown, Cass County and Rushville, Schuyler County, Illinois, 1890-2000

PLACE	RACE	1890	1920	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Beardstown	TOTAL	5,226	7,111	6,080	6,294	6,222	6,338	5,270	5,766
	WHITE	5,226	7,111	6,079	6,290	6,210	6,312	5,221**	4,650**
	BLACK			1	1	1	1	1	28
	HISPANIC						50	31	1,032
Cass County	TOTAL	15,963	17,896	15,097	14,539	14,219	15,084	13,437	13,695
	WHITE	15,962	17,896	15,090	14,528	14,197	15,026	13,334**	12,346**
	BLACK	1*		3	2	5	12	16	39
	HISPANIC						78	56	1,162
Rushville	TOTAL			2,682	2,819	3,300	3,348	3,229	3,212
	WHITE			2,680	2,819	3,298	3,343	3,216**	3,181**
	BLACK			1				2	2
	HISPANIC						16	2	15
Schuyler County	TOTAL	16,013	13,285	9,613	8,746	8,135	8,365	7,498	7,189
	WHITE	16,003	13,285	9,607	8,739	8,118	8,346	7,474**	7,090**
	BLACK	10*			1			2	16
	HISPANIC						27	7	39

* = "colored," including Chinese, Japanese, and 'civilized Indians' as well as African Americans.

** = Non-Hispanic whites; before 1990 most Hispanics were included under W.

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English as their home language.

Oral histories recorded in the 1960s and 1970s indicate sundown signs were posted in the area that implied African Americans could not spend the night or reside in the community. For example, a black man who had lived in a neighboring town recalled a sign warning, "Read and run, Mr. Nigger"; he could not get a hotel room for the evenings when he worked in Beardstown during the late 1920's and 1930's.¹

A white male resident of Beardstown recalled a sign that said, "Don't let the sun set on you in this man's town."² The Census data for 1890 to 2000 summarized in Table 1, confirms the overwhelming absence of populations other than whites – in particular the absence of blacks in the two towns through the 1980s.

Rivals in school sports, Beardstown and Rushville have intertwined pasts and presents in respect to their economy and their changing social and racial composition. In the economically stressful decade of the 1980s, both communities struggled to create employment opportunities for their local residents. Rushville pursued the prison-industrial complex to choose their community for building a high security prison for sex offenders. Beardstown wooed the multi-national Cargill with lucrative tax benefits to locate its hog slaughter and

packing plant there. It was the latter industry and its heavy reliance on immigrant labor that changed the racial composition of these two sundown towns.

Since 1990 the local demographic shift, particularly in Beardstown, has been astonishing, both in its extent (3500% from 1990 to 2000) and in the diversity of the new population. Today more than 30% of Beardstown's estimated 7,000 people are immigrants of diverse racial and cultural origins. Nearly 10% of Rushville's 3,000 are non-whites, mainly French speaking West Africans. In Beardstown the new population includes two dominant linguistic groups. Spanish speaking immigrants, predominantly from Mexico but also Central America and more recently Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, number about 2,500. This population started to arrive in the early 1990s. The other linguistic immigrant group in the area started arriving in 2003: French speaking West African predominantly from Togo but also from Burkina Faso, Senegal, Guinea, Benin, and Congo. They first settled in Rushville but have increasingly moved to Beardstown to be closer to work. Overall, about 350 West Africans live in the two towns.

In some ways the demographic change in this rural heartland that houses a slaughtering and meat packing plant is not unique.

The meat industry has acted as racial diversification agent for many small towns in the Midwest. Because its workers have the highest rate of injury and illness of all manufacturing jobs, coupled with lower than average wages, it is not surprising that meat packing relies on immigrant and minority workers.³ The meat packing industry's restructuring and its reliance on rural industrialization strategies have brought minority populations to rural destination in great numbers.

In Beardstown and Rushville, however, this ethnic and racial diversification is taking place in former sundown towns. The sudden surge of a very diverse population into the extreme homogeneity as found in sundown towns produces complex social and spatial interactions that call for closer examination. Although established residents have not moved from the homes where generations of their ancestors lived, they feel they have, because the neighborhood and community around them has changed so dramatically. As one local said, "It is amazing how, when people here were afraid to go to the world, the world came to them" (interview, 2009).

This essay offers insight into how long-time residents see their sundown towns' history of racial prejudice and exclusion; and how their historically constituted perspective influences their outlook and the kind of

responses they make to the newcomers. The stories I have collected in the field bring to light old residents' different interpretations of the sundown town history of Beardstown and Rushville. That new population makeup not only estranges the older residents, but also seduces them, with its new cultures, languages, foods, public celebrations, and activities.

In recent years, both communities experienced transformation in their racial composition owing to Cargill's immigrant labor recruitment. While Beardstown has received a diverse Latino and African immigrant population; Rushville has received mainly French speaking West Africans, who mainly express their positive reception by the local Rushville community. Insight into some recent tensions might help to explain this.

In 1996, Beardstown experienced a social explosion when a Mexican shot a local white and ran away. In the aftermath, Anglos set a Mexican tavern on fire and burned a six-foot-tall cross in the main plaza. Some Mexicans thought of moving to other nearby towns like Rushville. But when the first Mexican family tried to buy a house in Rushville in the late 1990s, their house, still undergoing closing procedures, was burnt down. This violent incident succeeded in deterring Mexicans from moving to Rushville.

West African immigrants

were recruited for work at the local Beardstown plant only in the early 2000s. Not knowing of the recent or the older incidents of racist hatred in the area, they did not feel inhibited from pursuing accommodation in either of the two towns. Cargill's Human Resources Office, however, remembering the earlier violent incidents in Beardstown, tried to avoid the risk of upsetting the local dynamics again by gently steering the new West African recruits to Rushville. Dividing workers geographically was also compatible with the much documented corporate interest in labor force segmentation.

Aware of the violent incidents of the late 1990s, and concerned with the fate that might await these black newcomers, a group of Rushville residents, mostly organized through local churches, actively organized a warm welcome to the West Africans. For example, one West African interviewee recalls his frustration during the first week of residence in Rushville: coming back from a morning shift at the plant, his sleep was frequently interrupted by local residents knocking at his mobile home door to welcome and offer him baked cookies and goods! A small but active group of locals played an important role in making easier the entrance of the black newcomers to this former sundown town. The high education⁴ of the

African immigrants to the area and their linguistic differentiation (speaking French), also played important roles in the tolerance West Africans received in the two towns. While negative stereotypes about African Americans persist in locals' narratives, West Africans are differentiated as the "better blacks." Local whites makes statements such as, "They are black *but* they are nice," or "They are black *but* they are very educated, they speak French."

Against this sketchy backdrop I will now turn to five vignettes. In each, long term residents of Beardstown and Rushville remember encounters with the "other" in formerly all-white town. Each story exemplifies a kind of reaction to the towns' sundown pasts. I will close the paper by highlighting the complexity in emergent local responses to rapid racial demographic shift in former sundown towns.

That's just the way it was (62 years old white male, interviewed in 2008):

There were no blacks in town; they could not stay in town. Everyone knew that. Even someone like the great world champion Jessie Owens had to leave town at night. I remember it was in 1960 or so, when Jessie Owens was brought in to talk at the town's high school athletic banquet. It was a huge deal but I recall after the event he had to go to Jacksonville to spend the

night there. That's just the way it was.

Violence (65 years old male, interview 2008):

I remember [in about 1960] when a family [in Browning] that likes to fight brought in a bunch of Negroes to paint barns. And the Negroes stayed in town in a hotel over here. And they hung around the bars, they'd get off work and they'd go to the bars. And they'd get fairly loud and they could be obnoxious. And the Hams [people from Browning] told them they should be moving along, and that this wasn't a good place for them. . . . [This] erupted into a great big battle. . . . the police tried to keep them apart. . . . They chased the black guys all the way across the park and into the hotel. And the cop got inside the door and wouldn't let [anyone] . . . in. And the black boys went upstairs, crawled out on the porch, jumped off in the alley, and got in their trucks and rode away. And I don't know where they went, but they didn't come back.

Curiosity (56 years old male, interview 2009):

It was perhaps 1968 that the Beardstown high school basketball team had a game against East St. Louis high school. The East St Louis team was an all-black team. I mean all players, cheer girls, cheer leaders, they were all black – coming to Beardstown, an all-white town! I vividly remember that day. The gym was packed full. The whole town

was there; not one seat was left empty. It was mostly for curiosity to see black people. There were no blacks living here. We did not have blacks in Beardstown. The only blacks who came to town were the ones that were athletic figures. What I remember most vividly is the party after the game. One of the high school teachers invited all players and cheer leaders on both sides to his house for a party before they left town on their bus. I was not a player but I went along. I recall how curious I was to see them close by. They put the music on and people started dancing. The most amazing experience for me was dancing with a black girl. I am not proud of how I used to think back then. I was not better than others. A lot of our prejudice was for not knowing any better.

Understanding others' fear (65 years old male, interview 2008):

One night [in the 1940s] I was working at the gas station in Rushville. It was about time to close and an old black preacher had got off a bus and wandered down the street, looking around. The bus went off and left him. And the town was pretty much closed up, no stores open, nothing. And he was going to Macomb to a revival, and Macomb's thirty miles away. So he came down to the filling station, and I don't know what he expected, the poor old man was just terrified, he was really scared. It was

probably eleven o'clock, ten o'clock at least. And here he was, stranded out there, and I said, "You know, nobody's going to bother you." "Yes, but what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do?" And I said, "Well, I close up in about twenty minutes, and I'll take you to Macomb." And he couldn't believe that. . . . I mean, he just expected I think that I was gonna take a tire iron, hit him on the head and throw him in the. . . . I mean, he was just terrified. So I took him to Macomb, took him to the church, and everybody was out in the front, and I was just gonna let him out, and he said, "Oh, well you wait a minute, we're gonna pay you." And I said, "I don't want any pay." But they took up a little collection to give me money for the gas. But I think the little towns around are always misrepresented as being racist because I think mainly there just was . . . [pause] you had to go to a bigger town.

Denial (65 years old male, interview 2008):

We were a river town. There was always black people associated with the barges going up and down the river. So, some of them would get tired of working, probably, and drop off and stay here. They would stay in the local hotel [Park Hotel, which no longer is in existence]. It was a beautiful hotel, but finally just one night, the whole side of it fell right out in the street. Park Hotel used to have a black cook who stayed at the hotel.

. . . They always said, well, you know, that they didn't allow blacks in town. . . . [But in reality] there was no opportunity for them. There was nothing there for them to do. . . . Even if they would have come in and got a job, there was no entertainment for them. The type of entertainment that they liked didn't exist. . . . Rushville also had a black cook [at its Hotel] who slept at the hotel [in Rushville]. But, you know, he never wandered around town. There was really nobody there for him to associate with. . . . Today, there's quite a few [blacks] out there working at the plant, but they live in Jacksonville or they live in Macomb. You know their culture, no matter what you say, is different than ours. Hispanic culture is different, everybody's culture is different. You have your own culture. But there is no culture here that the black can . . . [pause], he can come in and if he goes to a bar, nobody's going to throw him out, but there's no other blacks in there. It's uncomfortable for him. Unless a white friend would take him in. But he can go to Jacksonville or he can go to Macomb, and that's what they're doing. They're driving here from Jacksonville. . . . so I think it was more a lack of opportunity for them than it was being just racist and saying, "You can't come in here."

Appreciation (90 years old female, interview 2008):

I feel like I'm living in a different world. I do, because I have people from Africa living in that house across the alley and I had Mexicans living next door and another family living in the other house. They are nice people, very nice people, very helpful. . . . [I feel the change because] I turn around, I see at one time, no darkies, like black people, dare come to Beardstown. They just weren't wanted here, but now you see them in church, you got a lot of them coming into our church, Catholic Church, and they, they're dressed in their native clothes, some of them are beautiful, just lovely to look at. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, how do they, how do they dress so beautiful!" . . . They see you doing something and they say "can I help you?" They are very nice. . . . [But] you know I just grew up here, you never saw dark skinned people, never, and now it looks different, very different. In fact, I've learned a lot, it's wonderful to see other cultures, how they do things; see we were never around anything that was different. . . . Blacks couldn't stay here overnight. . . . When I was little you didn't see any black people. We knew that blacks could not come here and if they did they disappeared. We heard all this. A friend of mine saw as a child a black being hung in a neighboring town. Her father took her to watch. Can you believe this! A little

child taken to watch that! So . . . I think I'm living in a different world and I really feel that way because things are changing so fast. But there are other people who don't want to live in a different world. . . . I also should tell you, now that my granddaughter has a black boyfriend . . . I get a funny feeling, some kind of a connection with the black people. I mean maybe because I feel for them, you know I think it's so cruel to treat people different because of their skin color and mother used say their blood is as red as yours. . . There's no difference; she would tell us that, you know. It's weird I think, it's kinda of scary. Perhaps it is blood, because she is with him so I feel different. It's a feeling I can't explain.

The narratives above reveal the range of interpretations offered on their community's racial history by the residents who have lived through Beardstown's and Rushville's pasts. The range is broad. Some deny their deliberate racially prejudiced local practices: "There was just nothing for blacks to do here." Others would normalize it by seeing it as an unquestionable matter of fact: "That is just the way things were." But these stories also tell of other sentiments. We see curiosity for example, in watching the black basketball players and dancing with a black cheerleader. We see

understanding of the “others” fear that motivates a man like the gas station attendant to reach out.

Today in the encounters between established residents of Beardstown and Rushville with the incoming immigrant population we can see reactions ranging from hatred and violence to curiosity and accommodation. How local white residents and the Hispanic and West African immigrants negotiate the process of change is influenced by many forces and factors, not all explored in this short contribution. The nature of the meat packing industry, the gender, household composition, language, education and social status of the newcomers prior to migration; and the inter-racial dynamics among the immigrant populations are not explored here. Rather, this essay has aimed to highlight the importance of local racial history.

That history influences the established residents’ encounters with the new immigrant population in complex and even surprising ways. Ironically, the sundown town history of Beardstown and Rushville may lead to a greater spatial integration of new immigrants of color in rapidly multi-culturalizing small towns. Since spatial exclusion of the “other” was implemented at the scale of the entire town, not within it, the absence of pre-existing racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods

may contribute to its current spatial integration of immigrants with established residents.⁵ Thus to assume that the established residents’ attitude in this process is only one of angst for change and resentment of the newcomers is too simplistic. The past plays a complex role in affecting how established residents negotiate the process of rapid racial and cultural change in their former sundown towns. For some this racial history fuels hostility against the immigrant newcomers. For others – who want a more tolerant community – it motivates a greater accommodation of the immigrant newcomers. The memory of racist practices and attitudes can indeed result in a greater appreciation of change and prompt a small but active and vocal group of residents to act as social brokers of this transition process and facilitate peaceful openings in their community. The violence by which sundown towns were produced does not allow many of the old residents to stay on the fence or “indifferent” to the processes of change. They know too well what the alternative might look like.

In short, established residents of former sundown towns like Beardstown and Rushville, think about the racial exclusivity of their not-so-long-ago-past with nostalgia *and* fear. Some, like the mayor of Beardstown, would openly wish the immigrants away

and the “good old days” back. Others, like the mayor of Rushville, react quite differently. In a public meeting, he thanked the West African immigrants for choosing Rushville as their new home and said “You have given the single most important opportunity to this community — one that I did not have when growing up. ... I have seen what racial divisions do to communities. This is a wonderful opportunity you have given this community!” □

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Rapid Racial and Cultural Change in Two Former Sundown Towns

Endnotes:

¹ Oral history, 1975, transcribed by state university staff.

² Oral history, 1972, transcribed by state university staff.

³ The rate of injuries or illness for meat packing industry is 20 vs. 8.1 per 100 full time workers for all U.S. manufacturing jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). In 2005, meat packing wages averaged \$11.47, 30% lower than the average for all U.S. manufacturing jobs \$16.77 an hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Workers at meat packing industries are 42% Hispanic, 20% African American, and 32% white (US Government Accountability Office report, 2005).

⁴ A 2007-08 survey conducted among West Africans in

Rushville and Beardstown indicated that 54% of respondents (32 of 59) had college educations or more. This is reflected in interviews I have conducted with West Africans currently employed at Cargill's local plant who include a judge, sociology professor, vet doctor, mechanical engineer, accountant, and lawyer.

⁵ With Eileen Diaz McConnell, I explore this theme in "Sundown Town to 'Mexican Town': Newcomers, Old Timers, and Housing in Small Town America," *Rural Sociology* (forthcoming) and "Multiculturalizing Rural Towns: Insights for Inclusive Planning." *International Planning Studies* 13_#4 (2008), 343-60. □

"GIS" *cont. from page 1*

the researcher goes to the town to interview older residents, look up newspaper stories, etc., to ascertain if the community had a formal or informal policy of keeping out African Americans.

But mapping can be useful even when studying just one community. What if African Americans live at the edge of town, for example, just the city limits? In itself, that suggests (but does not prove) a policy to keep them out. When studying larger cities, mapping can immediately show all-white neighborhoods, even as large as, say, La Jolla, California, which is not legally a city but part of San Diego and for decades kept out not only African Americans but also Jews.

Mapping is crucial when studying whether larger areas were sundown. We still need a good GIS map of the Ozarks, for example, using 1990 data (easily available in GIS form). Even better would be such a map using earlier data, which may be available in GIS form. Then on-site researchers can investigate whether the boundaries that appear between areas where African Americans lived and areas where they did not were lines of prohibition.

Below is a list of some places that would particularly benefit from GIS mapping. If any reader knows how to use this technology and would like to make one or more of these maps, or would be willing to mentor a student interested in doing so, please email Jim Loewen immediately at jloewen@uvm.edu.

Some Areas Needing GIS Mapping of Residence by Race

AL: Sand Hill and environs (large V-shape from Birmingham NW and NE to the corners of the state)
AR (and MO and eastern OK): the Ozarks
AR (and MO) northeastern AR: just below the Boot Heel of MO
CA: Bay Area
CA: Los Angeles metropolitan area south through Orange County to San Diego
CA: entire state, for Chinese Americans, c.1870-1910

CT: SW corner (NYC suburbs)
FL: Atlantic and Gulf coasts (beach communities)
GA: Appalachia (large V-shape from Forsyth County NW and NE to the corners of the state)
IL: Chicago suburbs
IL: Illinois River from at least LaSalle/Peru to its mouth
IL: western part of state, from St. Louis north to the Quad Cities — under-researched until now
IL: Southern Illinois, from Route 40 (I70) to Cairo — very researched but needs good map
IN: entire state
IA: entire state
KS: entire state
KY: Cumberland Plateau
MD: Baltimore suburbs (c.1960)
MA: Boston suburbs (c.1960)
MI: Thumb
MI: Upper Peninsula
MI: Detroit suburbs (c.1960 vs. 2000 would be very interesting)
MO (and AR and eastern OK): Ozarks
MO: the Iowa line
MO: St. Louis suburbs
NJ: suburbs of NYC and Newark
NY: Long Island
NY: Westchester County
NC: Appalachia (far western counties)
OH: entire state
OH: Cleveland suburbs
OH: Cincinnati suburbs
OK: Panhandle
OR: entire state
PA: anthracite river valleys

PA: Philadelphia suburbs
TN: Cumberland Plateau
TX: Panhandle
TX: large area in North Texas from Killeen through Waxahachie to OK (excluding Waco, Dallas, and Fort Worth) and west to Throckmorton and Fredericksburg
VA: Appalachia (far western counties)
WA: entire state
WI: eastern Wisconsin (Milwaukee north to the Door Peninsula and west to Shawano and Wausau and back down to the IL line.

Please note: by saying "entire state" I do not imply that the entire state kept out African Americans. If that were true, there would be no reason to map it! Rather, mapping may reveal interesting patterns, implying that certain counties, river valleys, etc., were closed to African Americans, while other areas — perhaps differing religiously or on a different railroad line — allowed black residents.

In addition to the above suggestions, several other entire states could usefully be mapped, from Idaho to West Virginia, especially if done using data before 1990. So could almost any metropolitan area. Whatever interests you! ☐

NEXT ISSUE: A review of the important new book, The Integration Debate: Competing Futures for American Cities, edited by Chester Hartman and Gregory Squires."

EXPULSIONS, RIOTS, AND LYNCHINGS REMEMBERED: A DISSERTATION ON THE COMMEMORATION OF RACIAL VIOLENCE

I write to let this newsletter's readers know of a project that may be of interest, as well as to invite readers to contact me to contribute to the project. My dissertation research (Sociology, UNC-Chapel Hill) asks why it is that some incidents of mass racial violence in the U.S. have in the last few decades become objects of commemoration or redress efforts, while many other incidents that seem quite similar have not. I consider incidents that took place between 1877 and 1954 in which one or more African Americans were killed by whites (including expulsions, lynchings, and "race riots").

I have identified about 25 cases of recent commemorative resurgence, and further drawn a random sample of 50 of the 3,000 or so other incidents that made the national papers when they occurred, in order to compare commemorated and non-commemorated cases. For each case, I have collected data on a wide array of factors that may impact the rise of commemorative projects. Present-day factors I am examining include a city's population size, racial makeup, economic profile, geographic location, and level of prior civil rights-related activism, while incident features of interest

include the number of people killed, the scope of media attention at the time, and more. Of course, while some of the factors shaping commemoration are likely "structural," groups or individuals may launch commemorative efforts in a wide array of contexts, so the final part of the project focuses on individual commemorative actors, using interviews to get at the motivations and strategies of those involved in these projects from a micro-level perspective.

If you believe I might gain something from speaking with you, please contact me at rajesh@unc.edu or (919) 265-7030. The incidents between 1877 and 1954 with at least one death that I am aware of at least some recent commemorative effort around are: Rosewood, Tulsa, Wilmington, Atlanta, Moore's Ford GA, Springfield IL, Duluth MN, Forsyth County GA, Newnan GA, Waco TX, Pierce City MO, Watkinsville GA, Annapolis, Springfield MO, Abbeville SC, Live Oak FL, Chattanooga, East St Louis IL, Valdosta GA, Elaine AR, Omaha, Ocoee FL, Price UT, Harrison AR, and Butler GA. I would love to speak with you if you have participated in or are knowledgeable about one of these projects, or know of others I should consider. Thanks for your attention!

-Raj Ghoshal