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Lynn E. Nielsen  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## **A Review by Lynn E. Nielsen of *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, by James Loewen**

Part of the journal section "Reviews and Responses"

James Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Lynn E. Nielsen

In his highly researched and documented book, *Sundown Towns*, James Loewen details a sad narrative of American race relations by concluding, "Until we solve the problem of sundown neighborhoods and towns, we do not have a chance of solving America's race problem."

In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen uncovers the hidden underbelly of America's race relations by placing special focus on the untold story of sundown towns. The narrative of race in America, the story that most K-12 and college students learn, is a partial history, a narrative viewed most often through the lenses of guarded patriotism. Loewen, no friend of the typical American history textbook, challenges the mythology of progress which permeates many American history texts. These and other historical materials ignore the fact that sometimes social conditions grew worse over time rather than better. The story of sundown towns is a glaring example, a tale which casts a dark shadow over the myth of America's constant social progress.

Loewen's work, based upon careful scholarship and first-hand documentation in local libraries and historical societies, illustrates how national and local histories are inextricably linked. Local events such as the creation of a sundown town, when replicated county by county, and state by state, took on a national character. In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen finds and names the ghosts in the primary texts on which he basis his work. By careful examination of census data, he discovers and documents the steady disappearance of African Americans from rural areas across the country during the first third of the twentieth century.

What is a sundown town? It is a legal jurisdiction which keeps African Americans or other groups from living within its borders. It is a town that remains "all-White" on purpose. The term "sundown" defines when African Americans were to be out of town, thereby rendering the town "all-White." In detailing the sundown narrative, Loewen points to the "Nadir of race relations" as that period from 1890 to 1930 when conditions in America became worse rather than better for most Black citizens. The word "nadir," infrequently associated with race relations, suggests that the lowest point actually occurred in the first third of the twentieth century. This premise contradicts the trajectory of progress more frequently portrayed in American history texts.

In the version of history most Americans were taught, African Americans flew leap-frog from Dred Scott's bonds of slavery to the success of Bill Cosby with just a bit of clear-air turbulence between. This on-the-street version goes something like: *Until Abraham Lincoln became president, most Black people living in*

*America suffered in the bonds of slavery and racism; when the Civil War broke out, the evils of slavery were abolished; the slaves were then set free to live happy lives as free Americans; many chose to stay in the South but some came to populate northern cities where Black urban communities developed; despite racism in America, the lives of Black citizens got better and better over time; in the 1960s the Civil Rights Act continued to advance the rights of African Americans; while problems in the Black community still exist, most Black people have made continuous social progress from the Civil War to the present.*

In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen cuts through this myth with laser precision. Supported by careful documentation, he illuminates the lives of African Americans following the Civil War, painting a much more complex and textured picture which departs significantly from the pedestrian images of continuous progress. Following the Civil War and bolstered by the Republican Party's platform of racial equality, many veterans genuinely wished to welcome former slaves into their communities. These veterans fought the bloodiest war in America's history. They were invested in some level of social reinvention. If their social conscience wasn't perfect, many believed in the anti-slavery ideals and a conditional sense of equality with circumscribed social integration for former slaves. Thus, many African Americans were welcomed into cities and towns of the North in particular. While the Reconstruction period was specifically aimed at the old South, its currents extended north as well. According to Loewen, regions where the Republican Party dominated politics following the Civil War, enjoyed something of a "springtime of race relations." But in time, "spring" failed to welcome the bloom of summer. Instead, 1890 ushered in the winter of racism in America and the Nadir of racial relations as many African Americans were driven from rural areas to the protection provided by cities and larger towns.

How could race relations grow worse rather than better? In that year, the Republican Party's commitment to racial equity began to erode under the accumulating weight of social and political forces. In 1890, less than a third of Americans were old enough to remember the Civil War. The social idealism embraced by the war veterans sagged under the force of racist social and political winds which blew from coast to coast. Loewen fine-tunes this idea by pointing to three *Is* in particular which facilitated the change of mood—*Immigrants, Indian wars and Imperialism*. As vast numbers of *immigrants* began to flood the nation's ports, the Republican Party had difficulty gaining their trust because of its anti-Catholic and anti-alcohol platform. The *Indian wars* in the West only underscored the racial and cultural superiority of White Americans. If taking Indian lands was okay because they were not white was not it okay to deny the rights of African Americans because they also were not white? Further, American *imperialism* led to the domination of lands such as Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Cuba. As a result, Republicans had difficulty consistently supporting the rights of African American citizens when they failed to extend real self-government to peoples of dominated nations because of the alleged racial inferiority of their populations.

What followed was a dismantling of the progress in race relations achieved following the Civil War. The Jim Crow laws common in the South, were replicated in the North. For example, businesses in Boston, a hot bed of abolition a generation before, began to refuse the patronage of African American customers. But the reversal of equity didn't stop with the rise of Jim Crow laws in the North. In the decades following 1890 incidents of wholesale violent attack on African American communities by angry mobs of White citizens only escalated. For example, Whites in fifteen cities across the country including Seattle, WA, Akron, OH, Joplin, MO and Johnstown, PA tried to cleanse their cities of non-White populations through violent attacks. While these events were largely unsuccessful because of the size of the cities and the resulting unfavorable publicity, attacks in small towns were often effective. In Illinois for example, no

fewer than twenty small towns such as Lacon, Toluca and Virden became sundown through violent expulsion of their Black residents in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

These incidents coupled with Jim Crow laws ushered in the Great Retreat. As the welcoming winds of equity following the Civil War changed direction, African Americans found themselves migrating to the safety of Black communities within cities and larger towns. Whites often justified these attacks under the guise that they were ridding themselves of a criminal and problematic element in the community. But the attacks did not focus simply on criminals. Black citizens who were honest and industrious were often the first to be run off. It was after all, the successful and law-abiding Black person who most threatened to disrupt White hegemony. Loewen reports specific incidents where land owners, business persons and responsible citizens were attacked, shot, and killed because they were "successful" and they were Black.

These attacks were seldom well publicized nor were they routinely documented. As a result, the Great Retreat from small communities and rural areas to the cities has largely gone unreported in both national and local histories. Locally, the all-White populations who remained in sundown towns, had an ideological interest in suppressing the memory of Blacks living in their communities and an obvious reason to dispense with the embarrassing details of how they were driven off. On the national level, Loewen suggests that the Great Retreat seldom appears in the work of major social scientists and historians because of scant local documentation coupled with a strong interest on the part of historians to present a positive and optimistic narrative of American history.

These sins of omission become transparent for example, in the manner with which the story of the Underground Railroad has often been retold. Indiana for example, had many more sundown towns after 1890 than locations where escaping slaves could find refuge. Indiana's Underground Railroad towns aided slaves for approximately 15 years prior to the Civil War but many of its sundown towns thrived for over 100 years. Yet, the Underground Railroad is celebrated in local, state and national histories but the Great Retreat is invisible.

Census records, relatively easy to obtain, nakedly document the exodus of African Americans from rural areas during the Nadir. Loewen abundantly cites them. But other historical evidence documenting the expulsion of Blacks from communities during this time is more elusive and has to be coaxed into the light. Local historical societies for example, had little interest in preserving the road signs that were often posted at the city limits of sundown towns, warning African Americans to be out by dark. In other cases, documentation of racist activity in the community such as KKK material for example, was intentionally discarded from local historical archives.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, the factors which originally worked to create the Nadir-*Indian wars*, *immigration* and *imperialism*-became the shadows of its undoing in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and after. As more Blacks *migrated* to the cities of the North, they created concentrated areas where the Black vote became a viable political force. Second, as the *imperialism* of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries crumbled, highly visible people of color began leading self-governing nations around the world. The implication of these images was obvious. Third, *World War II* unmasked the racist and genocidal regime of Hitler. In short, Germany gave racism a bad name. Loewen points out that these events coupled with the Cold War that followed, worked to usher in the growth of equity in the 1950s that bloomed into the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Sundown towns were given a fatal blow after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Today, the sundown town is purportedly dead.

Loewen introduces the book with his visit to the town of Anna in southern Illinois. The year was 2001. Local residents of Anna reluctantly admitted that for many of its citizens, the town's name was an acronym for "Ain't No Niggers Allowed." Following a lynching in 1909, Anna became an all-White community as its Black residents were driven out by the force of fear. Anna continued to be all-White into the 21 st century and for all practical purposes, was still a sundown town when the book was published in 2005. Against this backdrop, Loewen invites his readers both Black and White, to remain inside the city limits after sundown. He not only invites them to remain but to gather together to celebrate the sunset, to watch the sun go down on a chapter of history which should never be repeated.

*Lynn E. Nielsen is a Professor of Education at the University of Northern Iowa*



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