

Report on Benton, Illinois, as Sundown Town

James W. Loewen

September 9, 2012

re Harry Huddleston v. City of Alton, et al.

Qualifications

I hold an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University, with specialization in race relations. Since graduate school, I have appeared as an expert witness (testifying in court, giving depositions, writing reports, etc.) in fifty to a hundred cases. Many of these were in federal court; many involved civil rights, voting rights, etc. My first two cases, in Wilkinson and Yazoo counties, Mississippi, for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law back in 1968 and 1969, treated overwhelmingly white juries that sat in judgement of African American defendants. My c.v., which I append, lists and describes most of the cases in which I appeared since then, as well as other aspects of my professional life and qualifications. My website, <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/sundowntowns.php>, maintained by the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois, is the "go-to" website for researchers of sundown towns across the United States. I would also note that last month the American Sociological Association gave me the Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award "for research, teaching, and service in the tradition" of these three distinguished African American sociologists. Also, kindly note that Sundown Towns was named Outstanding Book for 2005 by the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Tolerance.

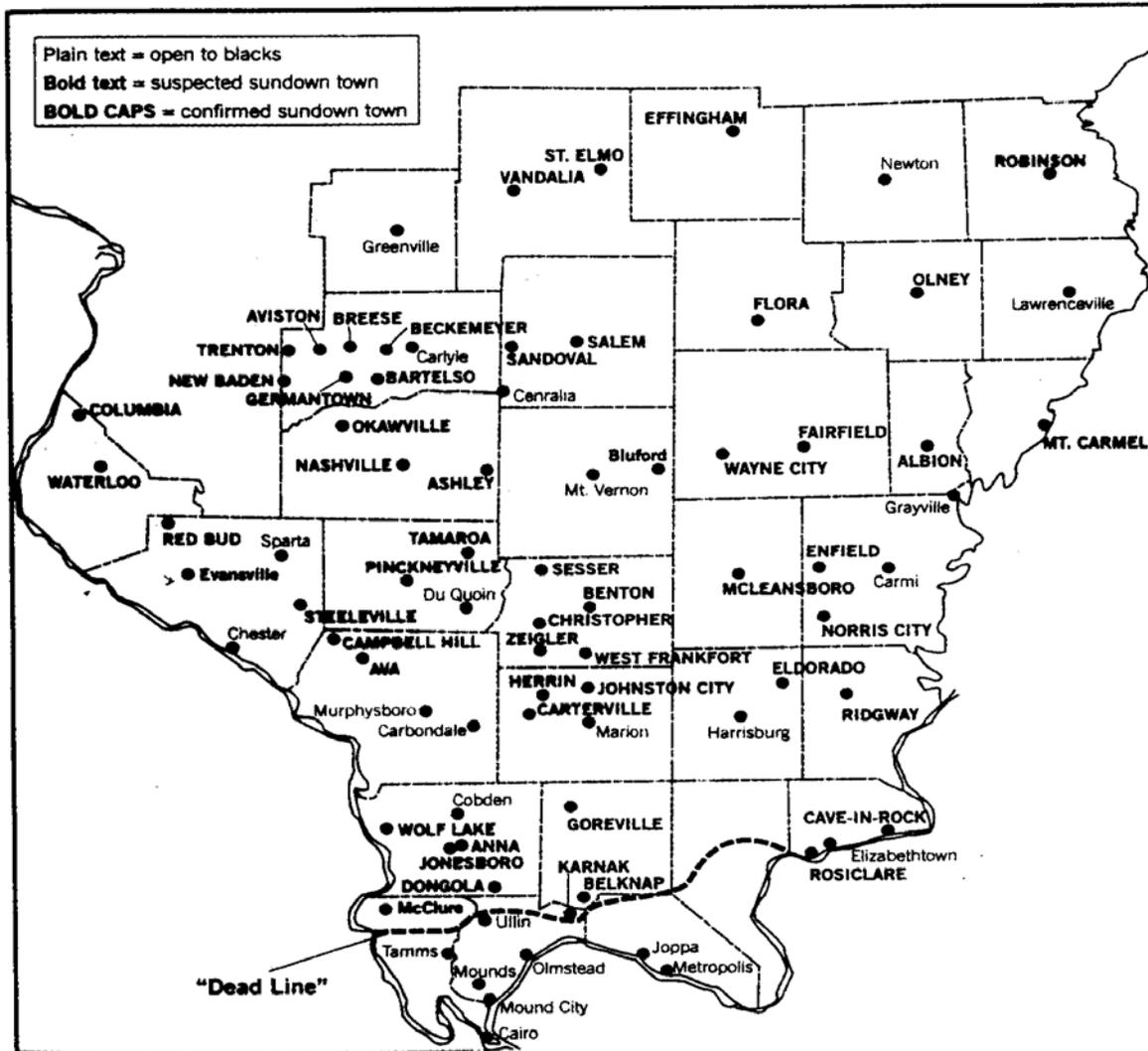
Background on Sundown Towns

Many people do not realize that after 1890, race relations worsened across the United States, not just in the South. Historians call this period, 1890-1940, the "Nadir of Race Relations." In these years, white racism rose to its all-time high in the U.S. Lynchings also rose to their all-time high. Most public accommodations, even in Northern cities, closed to African Americans.

During this era, many places across the North became "sundown towns." A sundown town is a community that for years was — some still are — "all-white" on purpose.¹ Between 1999 and 2004 I researched this subject full time and have continued my research since then. The interactive map at my website, <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/content.php?file=sundowntowns-whitemap.html>, displays information I have collected about sundown towns across the United States. Most people are surprised to learn that most sundown towns are in the North. The traditional South segregated African Americans to one side of town but hardly drove them out.

Map 1 within Sundown Towns (p. 63) shows 80 communities in Southern Illinois, including Benton. Each had at least one factory in 1952, so researcher Charles Colby included it in his map, "Fig. 27, Centers of Manufacturing in Southern Illinois," in a book he published on that topic in 1954. Using his map in my book avoided any chance that readers might think I included only towns that met my needs and proved my point. Then I set about the task of investigating the racial past of every town on his map. Some were easy: the census showed that Mt. Vernon, Carbondale, and Marion, for example, had many African American households in all recent decades. They could not be all-white on purpose because they were not all-white. The same was true for all towns in the southernmost tier of counties, which resemble the traditional South in their race relations history. Most communities on the map above its "Dead Line," however, were "all-white" in census after census.

¹I put "all-white" in quotation marks because certain exceptions have always been allowed: institutions, live-in servants, and sometimes one (or rarely two) exceptional person or family, clearly marked as the exception. See Chapter 10, "Exceptions to the Sundown Rule," in Sundown Towns (NY: New Press, 2005).



Map 1. Sundown Towns in Southern Illinois (modified from Fig. 27, "Centers of Manufacturing in Southern Illinois," by Charles Colby)

Such census figures do not prove that they were "all-white" on purpose, of course. Proving that required evidence. So I went in person to most of the communities on the map, including Benton, or talked with their residents or former residents. As well, I examined old community and county histories, newspaper files, and other sources. In all, I confirmed 55 of the 80 towns on Colby's map as having driven out or kept out African Americans at some point in their past. Most then remained all-white until at least 1990. Some still are.

History of Benton and Franklin County Regarding Race Relations

Probably Benton and Franklin County were not always sundown communities. Early in the nineteenth century, white residents of Franklin County had been unusual for their interest in slavery. In 1818, despite the Northwest Ordinance, incorporated into the Illinois state constitution, Franklin County had 15 slaves and 52 free Negroes.

In 1824, some white politicians made a major effort to convert Illinois into a slave state. Voters elected legislators, two thirds of whom voted for Illinois to change its constitution to allow slavery. Having passed the legislature, the measure was then put to the electorate. Governor Edward Coles usually gets credit for stopping the movement; it received only about 45% of the vote. Franklin County voted for slavery, however, 170 to 113.²

A generation after that measure died, most Southern Illinois residents then backed John A. Logan in his efforts to pass a "Black Code" in Illinois. Logan succeeded, making it almost impossible for African Americans to come into the state and unpleasant for them when they did.

In 1860 Franklin County voted overwhelmingly for Stephen A. Douglas, 1,391 vs. 228 for Abraham Lincoln. My research has shown that towns that went for Douglas were much more likely to go sundown half a century later. Neither Benton nor Franklin County are very different from most of Southern Illinois. Indeed, most towns north of the "Dead Line" in Map 1 were sundown towns.

²Winifred M. Henson, "History of Franklin County, IL" (Colorado State College of Education, MA Thesis, 1942), 96, 99.

The "Dead Line" got its name from the assertion that African Americans would be dead if caught after dark north of the line, unless they lived in one of the few interracial communities like Du Quoin or Mt. Vernon.

Benton as Sundown Town

Unlike some other Southern Illinois towns, African Americans may never have been welcome in Benton after the Civil War. The U.S. Census shows no African Americans in Benton in the nineteenth century, one in 1900, five in 1910, and just two in 1920. On July 26, 1923, "Negroes Are Threatened," a page one story in the Benton Republican, told how a note on the kitchen floor of the Franklin Hotel warned "the colored help" to leave town. "[T]he darkies left at once, with the result that the hotel was helpless and Mr. Ross was forced to close down his dining rooms Monday." The paper continued,

Benton has never been very friendly to colored people making their homes here, but [sic] have never been partial before as to where they would permit them to work and where they would not be permitted to work. As to who the colored folks were mostly interfered with [sic], we haven't learned, but no reports have been received as to objections to other colored help in town.

I suspect that these workers may have lived in basement rooms in the hotel. When discovered, this triggered white objections. Other "colored help in town" may have commuted from Mount Vernon, Du Quoin, or tiny black hamlets allowed to exist in Williamson County to the south. Thus they would not have violated the sundown rule. The phrase "Benton has never been very friendly to colored people making their homes here" implies that Benton had been a sundown community before 1923. It now resumed that status. The 1930 census showed no African Americans in Benton.

According to one of my best sources, in some years Benton had a sign at its city limits. Probably it said, "Nigger / Don't Let The Sun Go Down On You In Benton."³ Signs are not required

³Email from former minister in Benton, 3/5/2007. I consider him a reliable source

to be a sundown town. Indeed, most sundown towns did not have signs, including many in Southern Illinois, but many did, probably including Benton.

Also during the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan became a major factor in Benton and Franklin County. On June 14, 1923, more than 6,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan met two miles northwest of Benton and inducted 550 new members. The Klan in Franklin and Williamson counties then engaged in a series of actions, mostly against gangsters and Catholics, that historian Paul Angle says got the name "KKK War."⁴ A former Benton resident wrote me that his grandfather was a Kleagle in the Klan; it continued to be "very active in Benton through at least the 1950's." Benton had other KKK rallies in the late 1990s, now targeting African Americans, of course.

After 1923, white residents maintained Benton as a sundown town by resorting to violence repeatedly. For example, residents and former residents have told me of at least two occasions in which African Americans tried to buy or build homes in Benton or its "suburb," West City, only to have the houses burned. One incident happened in the early 1960s, another around 1986. Other incidents were milder but still serious to the people involved. For example, in the mid-1960s, a Benton resident died and family members from around the Midwest came to the funeral. One family from the Chicago area brought along their maid and her husband — both African Americans — to help out. According to my source, "On the day of the funeral, while the family was at the service, the maid was fixing a brunch and the husband was mowing the lawn. Someone fired a shotgun at him and told him to get out of town or he'd be shot. I understand they left immediately."

In October, 2002, the chief federal judge for Southern Illinois, G. Patrick Murphy, confirmed that Benton was then a sundown town. He tried to keep the new federal courthouse from being built in Benton. "I think it is fundamentally wrong to send the resources of the federal government,

because he is very aware that residents of many towns claim that their towns had signs when they did not. He correctly labels such reports "racist braggadocio." "The only places I am sure there were such signs are Anna and Benton," he wrote. I have confirmed Anna independently and think he is correct about Benton.

⁴Paul Angle, Bloody Williamson (NY: Knopf, 1952).

particularly in regard to the court system, to a community that is not diverse and is not enthusiastic about letting our employees participate fully in community life," said Murphy.⁵

Thus there can be no doubt that Benton was a sundown town. I also confirmed that all other communities in Franklin County on Colby's map were sundown towns — Christopher, Sasser, West Frankfort, and Ziegler. In the minds of Benton residents, this pattern might make Benton's policy seem "natural," "the way things should be," "like every other town around here."

Second-Generation Sundown Town Problems

Possibly Benton no longer is a classic sundown town. In 1990, it still housed only two African Americans, according to the census, and probably not a single black household. Although the 2000 census found twenty African Americans in Benton, seventeen were male, mostly between 18 and 44, surely temporary residents connected with some institution. The 2000 census listed only one black household, and in 2001 and 2002, several Benton residents told me they thought Benton had no black households. The 2010 census shows 31 African Americans, but household data are not yet available.

Even if a handful of black households do now live in Benton, "recovering" sundown towns usually show second-generation sundown town problems, and Benton is no exception. Such problems include:

- an all-white or almost all-white teaching staffs in the public schools;
- a white curriculum giving little attention to black authors, composers, artists, etc.;
- an all-white or almost all-white police force with attendant issues such as "DWB" ("Driving While Black") harassment; and
- residents who simply are not used to seeing African Americans in their churches, restaurants, sports venues, etc., hence react as if they (the African Americans) are out of place.

⁵"Judge Wants Courthouse Built In More Diverse Community," Coles County Daily Times Courier, 10/11/2002.

I have not made a systematic study of Benton in these regards. However, I have found evidence of continuing or second-generation sundown town problems in Benton. (I use both terms, "continuing" and "second-generation," because I cannot say at present whether Benton continues to be a sundown town.) For example, when I did a radio program in June, 2009, about sundown towns in Illinois, an older white woman who spoke with considerable authority phoned to say that homes in Franklin and Williamson counties were burned as recently as the 1970s and `80s because they had black visitors. In the mid-1980s in Benton, white teenagers threw eggs and shouted "nigger" at African Americans who drove through town after dark. In 1992, the one African American student in Benton High School, a girl in the junior class, accepted an invitation from a white football player to the junior/senior prom. According to Robert Nimitz, who teaches American history in the school, "She was ostracized by the students from then on." She stuck it out for the rest of the school year; her family then moved. In about 1998, whites burned a cross on the lawn of an elderly resident of Benton because he had a black physical therapist from another town work on him in his home. In the late 1990s, Benton students put graffiti on the bus from visiting Carbondale High School, a nearby interracial school, according to a 2000 Carbondale graduate, and some Benton basketball players shouted "nigger" at Carbondale's African American players.⁶

Such continuing incidents may only be performed by what I call the "2% thug minority." Almost every town has such a minority, not just sundown towns. In sundown towns, however, these thug minorities can and do imagine that they act with the blessing of the community and in its interest. After all, they are only maintaining long-standing community policy.

Such incidents also maintain Benton's reputation, particularly in the black communities of Southern Illinois and St. Louis. This reputation then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: African Americans know not even to stop in Benton, let alone stay there overnight, so of course they will

⁶I do not know if these gestures have continued because I have not made a point of gathering data about Benton since my book came out in 2004.

not try to move to Benton. Thus past actions help maintain Benton as a sundown town even absent any continuing actions. Consider this report, sent me by a tourist in Benton in 2005:

I also remember visiting a friend in a neighboring town called Benton. In this town City hall was positioned directly off of the town square. At city hall, there still stands a platform and a noose. The first time I drove past it my friend said "that is where they used to hang all of the blacks." I never realized that that was probably the gathering place for lynchings. The fact that the noose is still displayed, I feel is a direct display of racism.

Many residents of Benton know that this hanging platform and noose are on display as relics of the last public hanging in Illinois. The person hung was white. The story is all wrong. Nevertheless, it contributes to Benton's reputation as a sundown town.

Communities can take steps to get over having been sundown towns. I suggest a three-step program:

— Admit it. We did this.

— Apologize. We did this, and it was wrong, and we're sorry.

— And state, "and we don't do it any more," and that last step requires "teeth." Benton could have taken these steps or others to counter its reputation. So far as I can tell, Benton has not taken any steps, not even the first. Its entry in Wikipedia, for example, tells at length of George Harrison's inconsequential 1963 visit to Benton, but never mentions that Benton was a sundown town. In 2002, the mayor of Benton, Patricia Bauer, made her position clear: "We are a very small community, and I don't apologize for Benton's racial makeup."⁷ Her comments imply that she is not ready to take even the first step and certainly not the second.

Other sundown towns in the Benton part of the Southern Judicial District share Benton's history. In some of them, I have unearthed specific dates when towns expelled their African

⁷---, "Judge Wants Courthouse Built In More Diverse Community," Coles County Daily Times Courier, 10/11/2002.

American populations. Thus every conclusion I draw about Benton applies equally to nearby sundown towns, and every conclusion I draw about jurors from Benton applies equally to those from nearby sundown towns.

On September 9, 2012, I explored thoroughly the website, "Welcome to Franklin County, Illinois," <http://www.franklincountyil.org/>, which seems to be the official website for the county and features a photograph of the county courthouse, located in Benton. I visited every "page," including those at the affiliated Franklin County Tourism Bureau, <http://www.fctb.com/index.shtml>. I checked pages titled "Welcome," "Lodging," "Attractions," and "Events," as well as every subsidiary page.⁸ I also examined Franklin County's printed booklet, "The Getaway: A Visitor's Guide for Rend Lake and Franklin County, Illinois." In all, these websites and booklet include many photographs of people doing things in and around Benton — camping, fishing, golfing, shopping, biking, walking, parenting, etc. The photographs are diverse, but the people in them are not. Every image of every person was Caucasian. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans do camp, fish, golf, shop, bike, walk, and parent, but apparently not in Franklin County.⁹

⁸The Benton Chamber of Commerce does not have a website; I think it relies on these.

⁹As I point out in "Confining Helen Keller Under House Arrest" ([Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong](#) (NY: New Press, 1999, 244), such an array of photographs can hardly result by chance. Either the people who engage in these activities in Franklin County are disproportionately white or the people who produced the websites and booklet chose images that are disproportionately white. My essay points out that all-white websites and brochures, in turn, are more likely to draw all-white visitors in the future. Of course, the operators of Helen Keller's house in north Alabama, which occasioned my essay, knew this. So do the staffs at the courthouse and tourism office in Benton. By not making an effort to desegregate their promotional material, Benton officials send a signal — advertently or inadvertently — to nonwhite tourists that they may not be welcome in Benton.

Latinos can be of any race, of course, so I cannot be certain that none is visible in any Benton or Franklin County tourist literature. However, few brunettes are pictured and no images that most viewers would identify as probably Latino.

White seems right.

My research shows that residents of sundown towns and suburbs are much more likely to be prejudiced toward African Americans than are residents of biracial towns.¹⁰ The first and mildest effect on one's thinking resulting from living in a sundown town is the sense that it is perfectly normal to live in an all-white community. Whites, especially when they are children, do not really notice that the town is not normal and that continued enforcement measures, some violent, have been required to achieve and maintain this abnormal result. As well, owing to the well-known principle of cognitive dissonance, living in an all-white community leads many residents to defend living in an all-white community. The most likely defense is that living in an all-white community is prudent, which implies that African Americans pose some sort of threat — if not of crime, then surely a threat toward property values. It also follows that African Americans are viewed as "they," a group apart. Reading or seeing television coverage of white bad behavior, no white would infer anything about whites generally. Reading or seeing television coverage of black bad behavior, whites in sundown towns are all too likely to generalize. After all, "we" do not know any African Americans personally, since none live here.

People from sundown town backgrounds are unlikely to be able to consider testimony by African Americans as believable as testimony by white Americans, especially white Americans in positions of authority, such as police officers. As well, Benton may also collect white supremacists. Pana, about 100 miles north of Benton, draws white retirees from the Chicago area precisely due to its reputation as a sundown town. Benton may also.

Of course, I do not mean to generalize about everyone in Benton. Indeed, some young adults leave sundown communities precisely to experience more diversity of race and also of thought. Indeed, if they want to experience diversity, young people almost have to leave Benton. Unfortunately, by leaving they remove from prospective jury pools precisely those white people who are more likely to be fair across racial lines.

¹⁰They are also more prejudiced toward gays and other minorities.

Conversely, I have found that some recent high school graduates in Illinois sundown towns are not comfortable attending such schools as the University of Illinois (Urbana/Champaign) and certainly don't want to go to the University of Illinois (Chicago), precisely owing to diversity. Some are even suspicious of Southern Illinois University because they consider it (and Carbondale) too diverse. They may attend the nearest community college or not go to college at all. They are likely to wind up staying in Benton. Again, the pool of potential jury members has inadvertently been biased to include whites more likely to be prejudiced.

For all these reasons, based on my understanding of the nature of this case, it would be hard for Mr. Huddleston to obtain a fair trial from a jury of his peers in Benton. I believe the facts in this report would lead any reasonable sociologist or historian to support a change of venue.