

Vidor and the KKK

The town of Vidor, Texas in western Orange County is typical of East Texas towns with its long history of racism. Even today, Vidor still struggles with racial tensions. The town got its start in 1898 when lumbermen built The Texas and Fort Smith Rail Road to access nearby timber. The city was named after Charles Shelton Vidor, a lumberman and owner of Miller-Vidor lumber company. A recent census lists Vidor's population at 11,440 with over 97 percent white and less than one percent black. As you might guess, the town has a very bad reputation among African Americans.

Since Vidor's formation in the late 1800's the Ku Klux Klan has had a prominent presence in the small town. The KKK held rallies for many years in an attempt to keep out black citizens. Vidor even had an unofficial "sundown" policy which restricted African Americans from being out after the sun set. The town has been accused of holding such rallies and policies as recent as 1993. The last rally was sparked when the federal government tried to force integration by moving a handful of black families into the town's public housing. The Klan responded by picketing and within a month most families had fled. African Americans were left with a bitter, deep impression that still exists.

The town of Vidor continues to struggle with its history of racism but most residents actually want the city to welcome other ethnic and racial groups. Last year, for example, the Vidor schools posted a billboard, which included the face of an African-American girl as a way to show prospective residents that the town is open and accepting to everyone, despite historical tension. The town also reached out to African-American victims of Hurricane Katrina, and provided temporary shelter. Vidor has made some progress in attempts to restore its image but many people believe it will take a lot more time to eliminate the long-standing racial tensions.

Source(s):

Hoffman, Eva J. "A Guidebook to Amtrak's Sunset Limited." Flashing Yellow Guidebooks, Golden, CO, 2009.

Oppenheim, Keith. Texas cities Haunted by "no blacks after dark" past. 13 December 2006. CNN.
<http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/12/08/oppenheim.sundown.town/index.html>

Henderson, Jim. "East Texas Racism Subtle but Persistent" 5 April, 1999. Houston Chronicle.
<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/special/jasper/reaction/226896.html>

Author(s):

Written by Jordan Hoffman (Undergraduate Student) and Susan G. Scott (Lecturer) in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2009.