

## Review Essay Series

# Race Relations in the Sunflower State

by James N. Leiker

### EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In a fine addition to this series evaluating existing histories and suggesting new directions historians might take, Professor James N. Leiker tackles one of the most important yet least understood topics in Kansas history. Race, in a sense, has defined Kansas from the start. Nevertheless, as Leiker points out, Kansans seem largely unaware of their racial past.

Clearly, Kansas society has been structured by race. Yet, until recently, historians ignored that fact. Many people wanted African Americans barred from the state. School segregation was widespread in Kansas even where it was not legal, and blacks were excluded from some but not all public institutions. Not only has society been structured by racial inequality, but there also were powerful overt manifestations of racism in the Wyandotte Constitution, in some aspects of the response to the Great Exodus, in the activities of Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and in the more recent activities of the Posse Comitatus.

*"I guess Kansas is getting like the South, isn't it, ma?" Sandy said to his grandmother as they came out on the porch that evening after supper. "They don't like us here either, do they?"*

*But Aunt Hager gave him no answer. In silence they watched the sunset fade from the sky. Slowly the evening star grew bright, and, looking at the stars, Hager began to sing, very softly at first:*

*From this world o'trouble free,  
Stars beyond!  
Stars beyond! . . .  
There's a star fo' you an' me,  
Stars beyond!<sup>1</sup>*

The boy "Sandy" and his grandmother are fictional characters. Yet the Kansas sunsets that the author describes are real—as real as the evening stars that have inspired millions of people who called the place "home," the same stars that contemporary Kansans continue to honor in their state motto.<sup>2</sup> From his family's house at 732 Alabama Street in Lawrence during the early 1900s, the creator of Sandy and Aunt Hager had much opportunity to enjoy Kansas's admirable stars and sunsets but also to endure some of its less admirable racial qualities. The author was Langston Hughes, the famed poet and novelist of the Harlem Renais-

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1. Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter: A Novel* (1930; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969; paperback edition, 1995), 201–2.

2. *Ad astra per aspera* ("To the stars through difficulties").



*Until the late 1940s employment for Hispanics in Kansas usually was limited to labor-intensive jobs unwanted by Anglos. Here Kate and Josie Robles work in the sugar beet fields in Finney County.*

The “New Western History” promoted an approach that made race a major topic, but now there is a need for historians to develop new topics and new methodologies. Professor Leiker has made a number of intriguing suggestions. The standard topics need expansion, as he reminds us, and we need to look more carefully at newer topics such as the actions of racial groups to build their own communities and to control their institutions and value systems. Some communities are working to preserve their stories of the past. However, Leiker argues that historians also must recognize that several other racial groups have been a part of Kansas, in particular Indigenous peoples, Hispanics, and Southeast Asians. He indicates that we must look at how race was redefined as new groups moved into Kansas.

The idea that race relations in Kansas followed a western rather than a northern or southern pattern needs further testing. And of course there is that seeming contradiction to unravel: Why did Kansans maintain a pattern of racial liberality on the one hand and a system of segregation on the other? “Although traditional historians and revisionists might agree on little else,” writes Professor Leiker, “their combined efforts reveal this much: that Kansas is a paradox, and that racism has been neither consistent nor monolithic.” His article is excellent food for historical thought and a challenge to “the next generation,” charged with “the task of unraveling that paradox and deciphering its meaning for the different racial groups that have lived here.”

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sance, who lived in Lawrence and Topeka as a child and whose ancestors had been instrumental in the state’s formative years. On February 7–10, 2002, the city of Lawrence and the University of Kansas celebrated the centennial of Hughes’s birth with a scholarly symposium. During an afternoon session, the subject of Kansas’s racial past came up when a visitor asked a group of panelists why, after a century, the state had not honored its famous African American son previously. After one panelist responded that Kansans—being notoriously conservative—generally did not acknowledge achievements in the arts and literature to the same extent as military and politics, another respondent cynically added “Kansas is not just a conservative state, but a racist one.”<sup>3</sup>

If uttered outside an academic setting, the remark might have generated a public controversy. Kansas citizens, and Kansas historians, mostly have regarded their past as one of remarkable racial openness. Almost from its birth, “Kansas” has been synonymous in the national mind with abolitionism and John Brown, where antislavery forces fought a bloody and ultimately successful battle to exclude slavery from western lands. Their efforts precipitated the Civil War, in which Jayhawkers raised the first black volunteer regiment for Union service. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, tens of thousands of black freedmen, who saw Kansas as a haven from racism and oppression, sought its protection during the Great Exodus. African Americans nationwide, who might know little else about the state and its history, know about Nicodemus, at one time the largest (and still active) all-black settlement west of the Mississippi River. And even the most remedial student is aware of the significance of the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case that sparked the modern black civil rights movement. Proud of such accomplishments, most listeners would find the assertion of Kansas as a “racist state” astonishing, just as they would find Hughes’s characterization of it as “southern-like” simply bewildering.

History, however, is nothing if not bewildering. In contrast to traditional interpretations that view Kansas as a place free of racial problems, revisionist scholarship of the past generation has challenged the extent to which toleration and liberalism have influenced its past.<sup>4</sup> In many ways these historiographical changes merely reflect the larger transformation of both the historical profession and the nation as a whole during the civil rights era. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s many historians abandoned the widely held consensus that American history represented a progressive continual advance toward democracy and equality, as they examined the social conditions of race and gender that made cases like the *Brown* decision necessary in the first place. As the experiences of women and minorities commanded more attention, it was inevitable that Kansas’s reputation, like that of the United States itself, would undergo new scrutiny and criticism. In the process, scholars have discovered what Langston Hughes and many other people of color have known all along: that race relations in the Sunflower State have been far from peaceful.

This is not to say that the “new history,” while certainly offering increased knowledge, has necessarily increased understanding. Scholars know far more

3. Author’s recollection, February 9, 2002. On Hughes’s Kansas connections, see Mark Scott, “Langston Hughes of Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 3 (Spring 1980): 3–25.

4. For an overview of the revisionist literature relating not only to race but to the breadth of Kansas history, see Rita G. Napier, “Rethinking the Past, Reimagining the Future,” *ibid.* 24 (Fall 2001): 218–47.

now about antiwhite violence and discrimination. However, they also know more about how minority peoples, and often whites themselves, fought and defeated institutionalized bigotry with some success. Kansas has seen its share of both, yet at present historians lack a framework that helps explain some of its contradictions. How is it, for example, that the same state that advocated Indian genocide and practiced school segregation also became the only state to legally evict the Ku Klux Klan and only one of seven to censor the racist film *Birth of a Nation*? Contrary to revisionist accusations, few “traditionalists” claimed Kansas to be free of any racist activity. The question is whether racism comprised an inherent part of the state’s ideological and political founding and whether racist views have been so entrenched and systematic as to place persons from various groups at permanent disadvantage.

If Kansas historians—be they “traditional” or “revisionist”—have not fared well when trying to understand racial issues holistically, then at least they have fared no worse than their fellow regional scholars, who have employed paradigms of “minority–majority” relations more suited for the South than the West. For many, “race relations” automatically equates with “black–white relations.” But western settlement involved more than just two groups; the overlapping presence of Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians makes the study of race in the West far more complicated. Adding to the confusion is the recent theoretical literature on the social construction of “race,” which sees racial difference as defined not through biology but through human culture and events.<sup>5</sup> When this approach is applied to the West, some provocative questions arise. Why has African American history, rather than, say, Native American history, provided the focal point for “racial” discussions? How did Hispanics come to be classified as “minorities” while Germans, Italians, and other European immigrants—many of whom also experienced discrimination—are routinely classified as “ethnic groups?” The expected demographic changes of the next century will place more burden on western historians to consider these issues, so examining where the historiography of race relations has been might deliver a clearer idea of where it should go. That, in turn, might be a valuable starting place for a dialogue about one of America’s most pressing, frustrating, and at times seemingly unsolvable issues.

Of course, there are those who say that Kansas’s lack of racial problems is due simply to its homogeneity. Accompanying the complaints of weary interstate travelers about the state’s “flat” geography and apparent cultural blandness are charges of it being one of the “whitest” places in the country. Although often exaggerated, the charge has some merit. In 1973 a political scientist computed a “diversity index” for all fifty states that ranked Kansas thirty-seventh; oddly, race was not included in the index, for had it been, Kansas would have been ranked at or near the bottom. In the words of Robert Smith Bader, “Kansas diversity has been and continues to be unremarkable.”<sup>6</sup> Historically, non-caucasians constitute

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5. On race as a social construction, see Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Yehudi O. Webster, *The Racialization of America* (New York: Palgrave, 1992).

6. Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 106–8.



When Lawrence and the University of Kansas celebrated the centennial of Langston Hughes's birth on February 7–10, 2002, the question was raised why Kansas had not honored its famous native son previously.

The above illustration accompanies Hughes's poem "Life is Fine," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, first published in 1959.

less than 10 percent of the population. African Americans by far have been the largest minority group, but their growth rate, at least prior to 1940, failed to match that of whites. The higher visible presence of blacks in the nineteenth century, as opposed to their dwindling proportionate numbers in the twentieth as well as their increasing concentration in urban areas, probably strengthened the popular perception that major issues pertaining to race had been resolved early.

At first, historians uncritically adopted that perception, even in light of their own evidence to the contrary. In a 1933 article in *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, author Genevieve Yost reported that of the 206 victims of lynchings in the state up to that time, 38 had been black men. The author claimed rape to be the third most likely cause of lynchings (after horse-stealing and murder), but in instances where rape was the primary cause, lynchings of blacks outpaced whites four to one, at a time when blacks' share of the population seldom reached 5 percent. Still, Yost refused to acknowledge the similarities between Kansas and Southern states: "the negroes form such a small percentage of the total lynched, a ratio of one negro to four and one-half whites, that the race problem cannot be considered an especially important factor in the state."<sup>7</sup> Nor did the documented presence of anti-Indian violence upset the dominant interpretation. Characteristic of many westerners after the Civil War, white Kansans favored a harsh military policy toward Native Americans, supporting efforts to raise volunteer militias and have the responsibility for Indian affairs transferred from the Department of Interior to the Department of War. During congressional debates over this issue in the 1860s, Kansas journalists consistently used racial epithets and called for Indian extermination, even praising the instigators of Colorado's 1864 Sand Creek Massacre as heroes. White opposition and desire for reservation lands led to the removal of the Iowas and Sacs and Foxes, long considered "civilized Indians," to Indian Territory in 1885.<sup>8</sup>

Traditionalists had ample evidence of racial antagonism. In the case of African Americans, such evidence apparently did not outweigh the more positive legacies of the territorial and Civil War periods when Kansas's reputation for liberality seemed well established. Indian-white relations were another matter. Native Americans appeared prominently in early pioneer memoirs and narratives but always as part of the "savage wilderness" that the newcomers fought and conquered. As of the mid-twentieth century, western histories employed the same rhetoric of manifest destiny that had permeated nineteenth-century boosterism: that the Indians' demise, while regrettable, was probably preordained for a more just and civilized society to be built.<sup>9</sup> "Race relations," as defined at the time, involved discussions about diverse peoples who survive in the present and must co-exist in the future. Within two decades after the Plains Wars, however, Native

7. Genevieve Yost, "History of Lynchings in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (May 1933): 182–219, quotation on 199.

8. Marvin H. Garfield, "The Indian Question in Congress and in Kansas," *ibid.* 2 (February 1933): 29–44; Roy W. Meyer, "The Iowa Indians, 1836–1885," *ibid.* 28 (Fall 1962): 273–300.

9. See Julie Wilson, "Kansas Uber Alles: The Geography and Ideology of Conquest," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Summer 1996): 171–87; Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963). A representative quote of how Indian-white relations was not seriously considered "a race problem" with consequences for the twentieth century can be found in Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), 670: "The last page was written on the saga of western warfare; the two races would live forever in peace. At last the restless pioneer could advance unmolested across the Great Plains where shaggy buffalo and tawny red men had long held sway."

Americans had become so invisible to most Kansans that whatever vestiges of racism against them that lingered were not considered serious distractions from the state's self-image of being relatively free from "racial problems."

As late as the 1970s, leading textbooks reflected this notion. Both William Frank Zornow's and Kenneth S. Davis's histories of Kansas devoted little or no attention to Indians beyond the nineteenth century and only a handful of black Kansans were mentioned. Robert W. Richmond's *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts*, published in 1974, provides a more thorough discussion of early Native Americans but gives slight attention to the landmark *Brown* case, nestled in a chapter on modernization.<sup>10</sup> Although revisionists denounced such histories as deficient, it must be remembered that in addition to their assumption of Kansas as a nearly exclusive "white" state, these works emanated from an older historiographical tradition that emphasized synthesis and unity instead of the study of specific groups. Issues of race and experiences of minorities were not necessarily irrelevant but neither were they to be elevated above the search for a common, integrated past shared by the majority of Kansans. In the 1960s a new trend started to develop that would challenge the goal of a unified past, eventually producing counter-charges of balkanization according to race and gender.

The "new history," as it would affect the study of race in Kansas, came from two distinct directions—one addressing minority issues, the other dealing with the peculiarities of region. Black history had its genesis in the works of W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter Woodson during the early 1900s. Created to document the economic and social progress of African Americans, the field attained intellectual respectability but suffered from marginalization until the civil rights protests and rise of "Black Power" on college campuses gave it new impetus. By 1970 many universities had established courses and departments devoted to African American studies and history, and a new burst of scholarship appeared in academic presses and journals.<sup>11</sup> Native American history experienced a similar revolution, moving away from the standard anthropological narrative about tribal movements and conflicts with whites toward emphasis on cultural survival. Chicano history and Asian American history came into vogue as well. To many onlookers it appeared as though the new specializations in minority histories resulted in the telling of several disparate stories at once, independent of each other, but in fact the new works pursued a common thread in that all explored the significance of racism and structural inequality in helping shape their respective pasts. In the 1980s a second wave of revisionism arose in "New Western History," which attempted to replace the Turnerian frontier model of westward expansion with a focus on the West as a unique region. While many new western historians did this through studies of the environment and borderlands, race became a central feature as well. The title of the field's premiere book, *The Legacy of Conquest*, implied the imposition of a racialized order that subordinated the West's original peoples beneath an oppressive caste system. Adopting the methods of social his-

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10. William Frank Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957); Kenneth Davis, *Kansas: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1984); Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas, A Land of Contrasts* (St. Charles, Mo.: Forum Press, 1974).

11. William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

*How could "the free state" that opened its doors to fugitive slaves and freedmen simultaneously be a land of Jim Crow and Indian removal?*

tory, an abundance of works soon appeared that questioned the image of a democratic, egalitarian region where issues of race had been solved a century earlier.<sup>12</sup>

The cumulative affect of these two strands was that Kansas historians could no longer ignore race relations or treat it as just an interesting side issue, despite the state's relatively low proportion of minorities. For many, these changes betokened a renaissance of scholarship. As New Western History especially eroded the tired adage that "everything important in Kansas happened before 1890," researchers explored a new range of twentieth-century topics. In so doing they also uncovered disturbing paradoxes related not only to race but to regional identity. Fewer places had a greater claim on such "Northern" qualities as black freedom, but as black writers Hughes and Gordon Parks, as well as the plaintiffs in the *Brown* case, pointed out, Kansas had its "Southern" side as well. And if "the West" is a distinctive region also, then to what extent, be it geographical or social, does that region encompass Kansas? How could "the free state" that opened its doors to fugitive slaves and freedmen simultaneously be a land of Jim Crow and Indian removal?

Answers to these queries necessarily began among antebellum and Civil War scholars, since it was during these periods that Kansas supposedly had defined itself as a free-thinking Northern state. The foundations for much of the revisionist attack on this assumption lay in the work of James C. Malin, a University of Kansas professor whose numerous books and articles had minimized the influence of the antislavery movement, and of the slavery question itself, on territorial politics.<sup>13</sup> Building on Malin's thesis that the violence of the Bleeding Kansas decade originated more from economic and environmental causes than from ideological differences about human bondage, Eugene Berwanger's *The Frontier against Slavery*, published in 1967, provided the first serious blow to Kansas's "free-state" reputation, even though the book did not address itself to Kansans' racial views specifically. Berwanger examined the context in which antislavery sentiment developed in the Old Northwest and border states of Iowa, Indiana, and Kentucky, states from which the bulk of white settlers had emigrated during the 1850s. In contrast to the myth of the Free State movement's founding by New Englanders who detested slavery on moral grounds, the majority of antislavery advocates opposed slavery merely as an economic institution that degraded the labor of white men. Such views were consistent with the ideology of the growing Republican Party. "Free soil and free men" became the slogan for expansionist westerners, whose efforts to exclude slavery from new territories did not necessarily translate into beliefs about black equality. Berwanger's book was revolutionary for its revelation of a supreme irony: that antiblack racism was an important motivation in stopping the spread of slavery, evident in numerous efforts to

12. For examples of New Western History, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Clyde Milner II, ed., *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

13. James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1942); Malin, *The Nebraska Question, 1852-1854* (Lawrence, Kans.: n.p., 1953); Malin, "The Proslavery Background of the Kansas Struggle," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10 (December 1923): 285-305; Malin, "The Topeka Statehood Movement Reconsidered: Origins," *Territorial Kansas: Studies Commemorating the Centennial* (Lawrence, Kans.: n.p., 1954). A useful summation of the literature on Kansas in the territorial period is found in Gunja SenGupta, "Bleeding Kansas: Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001-2002): 318-41.

exclude even the presence of free blacks in Kansas during its constitutional debates.<sup>14</sup>

This theme was examined more closely in James Rawley's *Race and Politics*, published two years later. Following on the heels of Berwanger's thesis, Rawley further upset the assumption of a dichotomous struggle between New England abolitionists and proslavery Southerners by showing that the 1859 Wyandotte Constitution, which eventually allowed for Kansas's admission as a free state, was the victory of an alternative moderate faction between the two extremes. The Free State movement, begun in 1855 as an antislavery platform for westerners, emphasized the negative effects of slavery on whites rather than on blacks. Consequently, free-state legislators even experimented with efforts to restrict settlement to whites alone, similar to popular mandates that excluded blacks in other western states such as Oregon. Rawley argued that the triumphant Wyandotte Constitution, by confining the right to vote to white males, not only meant the political defeat of proslavery forces but provided the basis for racial segregation laws that would last a century.<sup>15</sup>

Herein lay some of the contradictions that would haunt Kansas for much of its history: tension between a commitment to blacks' legal freedom and a hesitance to embrace the full realization of that freedom through the extension of political and social equality. Before and during the Civil War, towns such as Lawrence served as active stations on the "underground railroad," and white officers such as James Lane, admittedly more eager to destroy Southern power than to advance African American rights, refused to wait for presidential authority to recruit blacks into Union service.<sup>16</sup> African Americans themselves tested the potential of this environment. Langston Hughes's grandfather and namesake, Charles Henry Langston, helped lead organized efforts by black Kansans to re-



*Characteristic of many westerners after the Civil War, white Kansans favored a harsh military policy toward Native Americans. But even this documented anti-Indian violence did not alter the perception that Kansas was a nonracial state.*

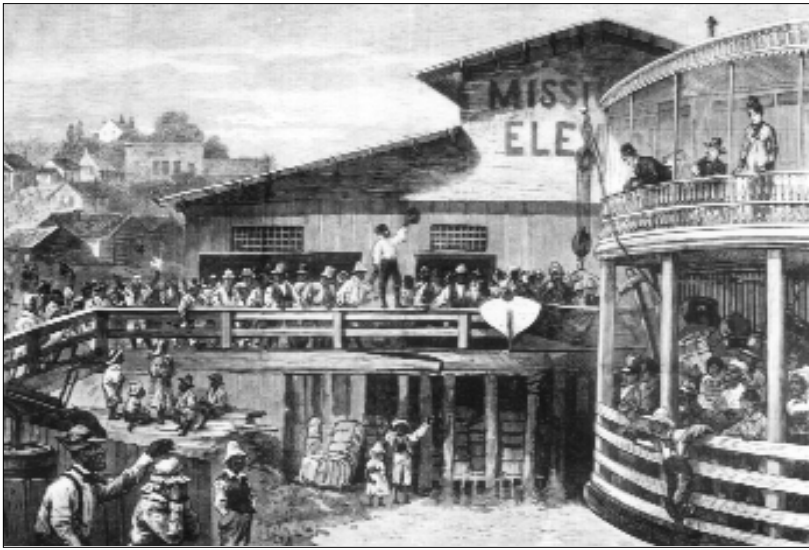
*In the above 1868 sketch, Indian prisoners are marched through a snowstorm following the burning of their village on the Washita River in Indian Territory by Colonel George Custer and the Seventh U.S. Cavalry.*

14. Eugene Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967); see also Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

15. James A. Rawley, *Race and Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1969). Recent studies have elaborated on racism in the antislavery movement. See Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "'Advocate the Freedom of White Men, as Well as that of Negroes': The Kansas Free State and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 102–15; Gary L. Cheatham, "'Slavery All the Time, or Not at All': The Wyandotte Constitution Debate, 1859–1860," *ibid.* 21 (Fall 1998): 168–87; Cheatham, "'Kansas Shall Not Have the Right to Legislate Slavery Out': Slavery and the 1860 Antislavery Law," *ibid.* 23 (Fall 2000): 154–71.

16. Dudley Taylor Cornish, "Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (May 1953): 417–29; Richard B. Sheridan, "From Slavery in Missouri to Freedom in Kansas: The Influx of Black Fugitives and Contraband into Kansas, 1854–1865," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 28–47;





*The relationship between blacks and whites in eastern Kansas appears to have been relatively friendly until 1879, when Kansas was the reluctant recipient of twenty-six thousand “exodusters” from the South. The poverty-stricken exodusters’ need for assistance and relief placed an economic and emotional drain on white residents.*

*In the above sketch, from an 1879 issue of Harper’s Weekly, masses of blacks leave the South for Kansas.*

voke the “whites only” suffrage clause in the state constitution. But after four years of such efforts, white voters in 1867 rejected a black suffrage plank by nearly two to one, leaving African Americans to wait until passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 before universal male suffrage would be adopted.<sup>17</sup>

White Kansans are retrospectively proud of their state’s image—deserved or not—as being a place “different from the South,” which, on occasion, has caused them to respond positively to the advancement of black rights. Pride, however, has its limits, especially during times of increased minority immigration. The defeat of black voting rights coincided with an overall growth of the African American population from a mere 627 in 1860 to more than 12,000 by 1865. By the end of the Civil War, blacks constituted 9 percent of Kansas’s population, a number they have not sustained since.<sup>18</sup> Even with this increase, the relationship between blacks and whites in eastern Kansas appears to have been relatively friendly until 1879. In that year, Kansas saw the migration of twenty-six thousand “exodusters,” former slaves who left the South after President Hayes’s removal of Union troops, thereby ending federal

Reconstruction and leaving freedmen subject to the mercies of white Southerners. Enticed by rumors of free land and by Kansas’s mythic association with freedom, exodusters differed from previous black migrants in their extreme poverty and general lack of preparation for life in a struggling agricultural climate. Although state agencies and local charitable organizations cooperated in providing relief for many of the new arrivals, white communities and even established black ones regarded the mass of indigents as a drain on financial resources.<sup>19</sup> Racial animosity rose through the following decade, with at least two lynchings and with institutionalized discrimination becoming the norm.<sup>20</sup>

Together, Berwanger, Rawley, and other scholars of the territorial and early statehood period did more than simply document a strain of antiblack prejudice that influenced Kansas’s founding. They also located that prejudice within a distinctive regional setting, anticipating the works of new western historians a generation later. According to these interpretations, Bleeding Kansas represented not

17. Richard B. Sheridan, “Charles Henry Langston and the African American Struggle in Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Winter 1999–2000): 268–83; Thomas Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865–1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 23–27.

18. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1998), 94–95.

19. The two leading books on the Exodus are Robert Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

20. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865–1915*, 46–68, 163–70; Yost, “History of Lynchings in Kansas,” 182–99; James N. Leiker, “African Americans and Boosterism,” *Journal of the West* (forthcoming).

a triumph of “Northern” over “Southern” values that foreshadowed the larger conflicts of Civil War, defeat of the Confederacy, and establishment of black legal rights, but rather the triumph of a third regional perspective, that of the West, with its own foreshadowing of Indian conquest and the creation of a new, racially structured order. In this sense, white Kansans’ racial views are representative of those of other westerners, which can be linked to the basic conservatism of both. On the one hand, belief in their own myth of an egalitarian frontier required westerners to do more than mouth platitudes about equal opportunity and protection under the law. This allowed African Americans at least to enjoy high degrees of physical and economic autonomy. On the other hand, Kansans and other westerners generally frown on “artificial” efforts of government to assist disadvantaged groups, or to establish policies of racial integration that interfere with an individual’s right to associate with whom he or she pleases.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to Hughes’s admonition that Kansas was “getting like the South,” neither Northern nor Southern models of race relations have explained effectively the state’s racial past. Situating Kansas within the framework of western history and exploring the racial dynamics of that region offers better possibilities.

If African Americans constituted the main pariah group for the South, then Native Americans filled this role for the West, meaning that non-Indians—especially blacks—fared better by comparison. The consequences of whites’ military and economic expansion for indigenous peoples after 1865 is well known. Less known is the extent to which blacks shared with whites some of the benefits of that expansion. Despite legal attempts to keep them out, many African Americans discovered a loosening of racial restraints when they moved westward. Black men who worked on the Texas cattle drives generally received the same pay and treatment as that of their white peers, while black residents of towns like Dodge City and Caldwell attended the same churches, schools, and public facilities as whites. Racial discrimination certainly existed in the developing cattle towns, but racial segregation was practically unheard of, at least until the 1880s when population increases in such places brought new pressures to conform to “eastern” standards of conduct.<sup>22</sup> In their focus on the political centers of eastern Kansas, historians have missed opportunities to explore the differences in race relations to western Kansas, where the scarcity of settlers through the late nineteenth century encouraged a lessening of prejudice in the interests of economic survival. In 1882 a newspaper in Kinsley openly opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act and even declared that the Chinese should be recruited as valuable workers and citizens for the Great Plains.<sup>23</sup>

While some individual blacks gained acceptance and even a measure of equality by living in the developing “white” towns, others pursued opportunities to separate themselves from whites by creating their own communities. Boosters and town builders played on the image of Kansas as an enlightened state by mar-

*Racial discrimination existed in the developing cattle towns, but racial segregation was practically unheard of, at least until the 1880s.*

21. Randall B. Woods, “Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The Color Line in Kansas, 1878–1900,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14 (1983): 181–98.

22. C. Robert Haywood, “No Less a Man: Blacks in Cow Town Dodge City, 1876–1886,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 19 (May 1988): 161–82; Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 16–17; Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 84–85.

23. Miner, *West of Wichita*, 101–4.

*Western expansion did not affect all people of color equally, and in the case of African Americans, the consequences of expansion were not entirely negative.*

keting western lands as “racial utopias,” free from Southern prejudice. Prior to the Exodus, black colonization societies had explored the possibility of relocating struggling freedmen westward, the largest effort being Nicodemus in Graham County in 1877. At its peak, Nicodemus, named for the first American slave who bought his freedom, had more than three hundred residents, a bank, and several schools and churches. Pitched to prospective settlers as “the Negro haven on the Solomon River,” Nicodemus declined in the mid-1880s, along with other, smaller black settlements, due to the same forces that strangled white communities: low rainfall, low agricultural production, and lack of access to railroads, which restricted access to distant markets. Nonetheless, any generalization about the nature of race in Kansas must account for the presence of such enclaves and their significance for black–white relations. For example, during Nicodemus’s peak years of trying to attract a railroad line, the town encouraged white settlement, and consequently both races lived and worked side by side, even intermarrying, while building and promoting the town’s economic prospects.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways, the story of Kansas settlement illustrates a temporary alliance between blacks and whites, first to conquer and then to exploit newly occupied lands. Such an alliance was possible only in the presence of a third racialized group, the native inhabitants from whom the West was seized. African American men participated fully in the military campaigns of conquest during the post-Civil War years. Beginning in 1866 buffalo soldiers served in segregated federal regiments as part of the regular United States Army. Although some historians see the presence of black soldiers at western forts as catalysts for an expansion of racial hatred, others emphasize a kind of rough equality achieved between black and white enlisted men.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the federal troops who garrisoned Forts Hays, Riley, and Leavenworth, Kansas made its own contributions to an expansion of military opportunities for blacks. The original constitution had restricted membership in state militias to white males; growing more sensitive to the demands of black voters, the legislature removed the offensive restriction in the late 1880s. Fearing the defection of African Americans to the Populist Party in 1898, Republican Governor John W. Leedy approved the formation of a black volunteer regiment, the Twenty-third Infantry, which served in the Spanish–American War. Unlike enlisted men in the federal army, soldiers in the Twenty-third were commanded by their own black officers.<sup>26</sup>

These examples plainly show that western expansion did not affect all people of color equally, and that in the case of at least one group, African Americans, the consequences of expansion were not entirely negative. Despite a documented

24. Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979); Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Leiker, “African Americans and Boosterism”; Anne P. W. Hawkins, “Hoeing Their Own Row: Black Agriculture and the Agrarian Ideal in Kansas, 1880–1920,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Fall 1999): 200–13; Claire O’Brien, “With One Mighty Pull: Interracial Town Boosting in Nicodemus, Kansas,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 16 (Spring 1996): 117–30.

25. James N. Leiker, “Black Soldiers at Fort Hays, Kansas, 1867–1869: A Study in Civilian and Military Violence,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1997): 3–17; William A. Dobak, “Fort Riley’s Black Soldiers and the Army’s Changing Role in the West, 1867–1885,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Fall 1999): 214–27.

26. Willard Gatewood, “Kansas Negroes and the Spanish-American War,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Fall 1971): 300–13; Christopher C. Lovett, “To Serve Faithfully: The Twenty-third Kansas Volunteer Infantry and the Spanish–American War,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Winter 1998–1999): 256–75.

strain of antiblack prejudice embodied in the state's founding, such prejudice was not evenly diffused and in fact often was ignored altogether as Kansans scrambled to populate and develop their state. Indeed, when considering the national resurgence of racial violence and systematic discrimination that began during the late nineteenth century, the claims of boosters and traditional historians about Kansas's racial liberality should not be dismissed out of hand. However, as revisionist scholarship has proven, whites' exceptional friendliness toward blacks has been historically dependent on the latter group's low numbers. Toleration carried little cost in the sparsely settled rural areas on the Plains. In the larger cities of eastern Kansas, where African Americans were more likely to locate, informal segregation prevailed. In Kansas City, Topeka, Manhattan, and elsewhere, blacks were excluded from white-owned hotels, restaurants, theatres, hospitals, and residential neighborhoods. Randall Woods has characterized the system as one of "parallel development" in that white Kansans seemed to have taken the "separate but equal" doctrine more seriously than Southerners, rejecting notions of inherent inferiority and even supporting blacks' efforts at social and economic progress but within a structure that guaranteed "respectable" distance between the races.<sup>27</sup> Scholars of race relations have focused more attention on the history of *de jure* segregation than on any other subject. For Kansas, the study of segregation in public schools has become a major topic, perhaps because of the national significance of the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* case, which launched a series of landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions that ruled "separate but equal" unconstitutional. Following the leads of Malin, Rawley, and others, revisionists have contextualized the complicated system of segregated schools within the state's western, Republican values of small government and local autonomy. As public schools assumed more responsibility for teaching blacks in the 1870s, legislators refrained from creating a Jim Crow-style system at the state level but left open the possibility for school boards to do so locally. In 1879 the legislature allowed school boards located in cities of the "first class" (defined as cities with populations of fifteen thousand or more, where, not coincidentally, 90 percent of blacks lived) to operate separate elementary schools. Segregation in secondary schools, which few blacks attended, or in "second-class" cities, were prohibited.<sup>28</sup> Some historians see in this system a means by which legislators institutionalized



*Black individuals found acceptance as they moved westward. In developing Kansas towns, racial segregation was nearly nonexistent, and blacks and whites attended the same schools, churches, and public facilities. In the above photograph, taken in Salina, the black gentleman appears to enjoy the acceptance of his white peers.*

27. Woods, "Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation?"; Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas*, 163–70; Nupur Chaudhuri, "We All Seem Like Brothers and Sisters: The African American Community in Manhattan, Kansas, 1865–1940," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 14 (Winter 1991–1992): 270–88.

28. James C. Carper, "The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854–1900," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Winter 1978): 254–65; Mary L. Dudziak, "The Limits of Good Faith: Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1950–1956," *Law and History Review* 5 (1987): 351–91; J. Morgan Kousser, "Before Plessy, Before Brown: The Development of the Law of Racial Integration in Louisiana and Kansas," in *Toward a Usable Past: Liberty under State Constitutions*, ed. Paul Finkelman and Stephen E. Gottlieb (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

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racial inequality while simultaneously keeping the law of the state racially neutral. By contrast, Paul Wilson—an intriguing authority on this subject given his role as defender of the state’s legal position in the Brown case—has argued that Kansas’s policy of deferring to local leaders on issues such as school segregation reflects its libertarian ideology of decentralized, “laissez-faire” government.<sup>29</sup>

While the historiographical changes that began in the 1960s have yet to produce consensus, scholars now basically agree that Kansas defies classification as either “Northern” nor “Southern” in its racial views. Most see it as a divided state, wavering between its conservative principles and its moral need to live up to its mythic reputation for tolerance. Numerous books and articles attest to the ironic ways in which the state’s very “non-system” of segregation cultivated the seeds of its own demise. African Americans themselves used separation to build stable, politically active communities that, by the early twentieth century, produced leaders who launched frontal attacks on Jim Crow. Members of the state supreme court struck down segregation in second-class cities, keeping legal discrimination contained, and tried vainly to uphold laws requiring equal facilities. By the 1930s, following an increase in segregation there, white and black student activists at the University of Kansas demanded an end to discriminatory practices at state regents institutions, predating the counter-culture campus movements by at least three decades.<sup>30</sup> In fact, revisionists have uncovered much evidence in which defenders of the state’s reputation can find optimism. Paul Wilson has echoed the sentiments of many who claim that the Brown decision probably neither could have originated nor succeeded as it did in any other segregation practicing state.<sup>31</sup>

Enough time has passed so that “the sixties,” that turbulent decade, has become itself the subject of historical scrutiny. In the process, scholars and reformers have confronted both the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement and its limitations. In the aftermath of the Brown case, state officials instituted a phased-in program whereby whites who chose not to enroll their children in integrated schools could continue to practice racial separation as a matter of voluntary, private choice. In 1960 activists in Lawrence picketed a private swimming pool that refused to admit blacks, earning the scorn of local whites who believed that individual proprietors had a right to exclude whomever they wished.<sup>32</sup> As similar reactions occurred nationwide, civil rights leaders must realize that dismantling

29. Dudziak, “The Limits of Good Faith”; Paul E. Wilson, *A Time to Lose: Representing Kansas in Brown v. Board of Education* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 25–40.

30. See Jason Pendleton, “Jim Crow Strikes Out: Interracial Baseball in Wichita, Kansas, 1920–1935,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 86–115; Judith R. Johnson and Craig L. Torbenson, “Stories from the Heartland: African American Experiences in Wichita, Kansas,” *ibid.* 21 (Winter 1998–1999): 220–33; Milton S. Katz and Susan B. Tucker, “A Pioneer in Civil Rights: Esther Brown and the South Park Desegregation Case of 1948,” *ibid.* 18 (Winter 1995–1996): 234–47; Jean Van Delinder, “Early Civil Rights Activism in Topeka, Kansas, Prior to the 1954 Brown Case,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 21 (Winter 2001): 45–61; Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 216–21; Wilson, *A Time to Lose*, 40–48; Nancy J. Hulston, “‘Our Schools Must Be Open to All Classes of Citizens’: The Desegregation of the University of Kansas School of Medicine, 1938,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Summer 1996): 88–97; Kristine M. McCusker, “The Forgotten Years of America’s Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939–1945,” *ibid.* 17 (Spring 1994): 26–37.

31. Wilson, *A Time to Lose*, 25–26.

32. Dudziak, “The Limits of Good Faith”; Rusty L. Monhollon, “Taking the Plunge: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Desegregation in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Fall 1997): 138–59.

*de jure* segregation could only advance equality so far. Some began to address the structural causes of economic disparity that in turn produces *de facto* segregation, while others abandoned the goal of integration altogether and embraced militant ideologies such as Black Power. White Kansans who resisted these changes voiced their opposition not through aggressively racist assertions of black inferiority but through reaffirmation of their traditional beliefs in gradual progress, individual reliance, and especially through their distrust of a liberal activist state that perceivably champions minority causes—all of which seemed out of step with the new militancy.<sup>33</sup>

As history changes, so do historians, and so do the meanings they discover in the past. The events of a generation ago that focused national spotlight on the injustices of race also demanded a reassessment of the role racism has played in retarding America's full achievement of democracy and equal opportunity. The new history, however, has not been without its faults. Race relations studies conventionally take black history as their starting point—reasonable enough, since African Americans constitute the nation's largest and most visible minority, probably more true in Kansas than elsewhere. But race relations has never been simply a two-way strand. Indians, Hispanics, Vietnamese immigrants, all have lived in Kansas simultaneously, all have been affected by concepts of race, and all of their histories intersect. A legitimate criticism of revisionist scholarship has been its tendency toward fragmentation—the writing of history through the experiences of specific groups with little or no effort to interrelate those experiences. The richness and complexity that this approach has generated cannot be denied because the consequence has been a wealth of information about how racism affects particular peoples at particular moments. At present, however, Kansas historians lack a more holistic understanding about why racism exists, why it grows strong at certain times and not others, and why for that matter the experiences of some groups should fall under the rubric of "race relations" at all.

Fortunately, recent historiographical trends can provide some guidance. Over the past two decades some scholars have shifted attention from such questions as "How have whites and non-whites gotten along?" to "How does our culture define white and non-white?" A pioneering essay in 1982 by southern historian Barbara J. Fields framed some of the important issues; since biologists and geneticists now concur that "race" has little or no basis in physical science, race obviously is an ideological construct. As such, it is subject to regional and chronological change, meaning that categories such as "white, Indian, black" are not rooted in nature but in how society chooses to define them or in how individuals define themselves. In the 1990s new books appeared with such titles as *How the Irish Became White* and *The Invention of the White Race* that located the foundations of racial identity in the labor struggles of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> These newer works with

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33. For an example of white Kansans' reactions to the new discourses of the radical phase of the Civil Rights Movement, see Rusty L. Monhollon, "Black Power, White Fear: The Negro Problem in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960–1970," in *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century*, ed. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 247–62.

34. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 143–77; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1, *Racial Oppression and Control* (New York: Verso Press, 1994). For an example of racialization theory applied to the history of a particular western state, see Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

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a more theoretical bent constitute a “neo-revisionist” stage in the literature as they de-emphasize the study of “race relations,” which assumes the existence of static, permanent groups, in favor of the study of race as an idea that evolves over time.

Such approaches have yet to be applied to the study of Kansas. However, revisionists have prepared the groundwork by exploring how specific groups retain their “minority” identities. For example, Native American history since the 1960s has largely eschewed the conventional narrative of battles and broken treaties and instead has addressed questions of assimilation and acculturation. Just as blacks used racial segregation to build strong communities from within, Indian tribes in Kansas used the federal reservation system to maintain local sovereignty over tribal affairs and managed to borrow selectively from whites some cultural traits as survival mechanisms without losing their own cultural distinctiveness.<sup>35</sup> Population statistics seem to verify their success. In 1940 federal census records listed the number of Native Americans in Kansas at less than twelve hundred. That number doubled by 1950, more than doubled again by 1960, and in 1990 stood at more than twenty thousand.<sup>36</sup> Rather than proving a dramatic rise in reproductive fertility, the increase suggests a strengthening of “Indian identity” (not exactly synonymous with “Indian ancestry”) as a cultural movement.<sup>37</sup> Although some may not see this phenomenon in racial terms, the fact that more Kansas residents over the past several decades chose not to claim themselves as “white” and instead choose to associate with a group once considered degraded and nearly extinct raises questions of both a racial and a historical nature.

**E**ven more than Native Americans, Hispanics constitute the fastest growing minority both in Kansas and nationwide, a group that according to all demographic predictions will surpass African Americans as the largest non-white category by 2010. But here again, questions about the meaning of race and its social construction abound. Prior to 1970 census enumerators and most government agencies classified Latino peoples as white ethnic groups rather than as members of a separate race. Building on the success of the black movement, students and labor leaders drew attention to the long pattern of discrimination faced by Mexican Americans and Hispanic immigrants. As activists began calling for “Chicano” solidarity, historians likewise reexamined the long trail of Anglo abuses dating back to before the Mexican–American War. Endeavors of this type were not new; borderlands experts such as Herbert Eugene Bolton and social scientists such as Carey McWilliams had explored U.S.–Mexican relations and the conditions of Latino workers decades earlier. What was new was the use of “race” as an explanation for oppression, a model previously reserved for black history. Under these revised interpretations, Hispanics comprised an inferior racialized caste in

35. See Joseph B. Herring, *The Enduring Indians of Kansas: A Century and a Half of Acculturation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990); H. Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854–1871* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Unrau, *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673–1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Unrau, *Mixed-Bloods and Tribal Dissolution: Charles Curtis and the Quest for Indian Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

36. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Sixteenth Census, 1940*, vol. 2, pt. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 14; *ibid.*, *Seventeenth Census, 1950*, vol. 2, pt. 16 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 34; *ibid.*, *Twenty-first Census: General Population Characteristics, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), 10.

37. See Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

the capitalistic order imposed on the Southwest after 1848, part of an internally colonized group whose indigenous ancestry and use of Spanish language prevented them from enjoying the benefits of “whiteness.”<sup>38</sup> As scholars and reformers noticed more parallels between anti-Latino prejudice and the kind suffered by Indians and blacks, Chicano history fell increasingly under the topic of “race relations” and Hispanics themselves, despite their national and ethnic heterogeneity, increasingly were described as a racial minority.

While the Hispanic influence in Kansas dates back to the employment of Mexicans on the Santa Fe Trail, their numbers did not sizeably increase until after 1900. Perhaps because of their comparatively late arrival, historians tend to overlook them. To date, only a dozen or so articles, theses, and dissertations have been produced to document and explain their presence. As in other western states, Mexican immigration to Kansas skyrocketed during the World War I period, when young, single males were recruited for work in meatpacking and railroads, and when the Mexican Revolution caused the flight of political refugees. The Mexican population of the Sunflower State increased from a mere 71 in 1900 to 8,249 a decade later and to more than 13,000 by 1920. Most immigrants originated from the poor, illiterate peasantry of Mexico’s countryside and as such remained vulnerable to the vagaries of the labor market. By 1930 Mexicans were highly visible in the beet fields of western Kansas, in salt and sugar production around Hutchinson and Lyons, and along the major railroad lines, especially the Santa Fe with its terminals in Wichita, Topeka, and Kansas City. While many performed seasonal labor and returned to Mexico for several months each year, others stayed permanently and established barrios with their own Spanish language churches, newspapers, and ethnic celebrations.<sup>39</sup>



*Despite the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, racial prejudice and segregation persisted in the Sunflower State. The above illustration is from Langston Hughes’s Black Misery, a 1969 work in which the author wrote: “Misery is when you find out your bosom buddy can go in the swimming pool but you can’t.”*

38. For a representative sampling of revisionist literature on Chicano history, see Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle toward Liberation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1979); Arnoldo De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

39. J. Neale Carman, *Foreign-Language Units of Kansas*, vol. 1, *Historical Atlas and Statistics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1962), 40; Larry G. Rutter, “Mexican Americans in Kansas: A Survey and Social Mobility Study, 1900–1970” (master’s thesis, Washburn University, 1968); Judith Ann Laird, “Argentine, Kansas: The Evolution of a Mexican–American Community, 1905–1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1975); Kenneth L. Johnson with John J. Hartman and James W. McKenney, *Wichita’s Hispanics: Tensions, Concerns and the Migrant Stream* (Wichita, Kans.: Wichita State University, 1985); Valerie M. Mendoza, “The Creation of a Mexican Immigrant Community in Kansas City, 1890–1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Berkeley, 1997); Mendoza, “They Came to Kansas: Searching for a Better Life,” *Kansas Quarterly* 25 (1994): 97–106; Michael M. Smith, “The Mexican Revolution in Kansas City: Jack Danciger versus the Colonia Elite,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 14 (Fall 1991): 206–18. A broad synthetic work is Juan R. Garcia, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900–1932* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).





*Hispanics, constituting the fastest growing minority in the nation, had become visible in Kansas by the 1930s. Coming primarily from poor and illiterate communities in Mexico, most immigrants found work in the sugar beet fields in western Kansas or along major railroad lines in Wichita, Topeka, and Kansas City. Pictured above are Hispanic residents of Garden City, ca. 1930.*

Scholars have approached the study of Hispanic Kansans with the same paradigm of “assimilation versus acculturation” employed in Native American history. The migratory nature of their work and geographical proximity to Mexico meant that for many, relocation to the United States was not the traumatic cultural uprooting it was for European immigrants. Non-Hispanics often charge them with “ethnic clannishness,” raising questions about the extent that prejudice played in their lives. Larger cities such as Topeka excluded Mexican children from both private and public schools, whereas in smaller towns such as Hutchison and Garden City, an informal segregation system existed in theatres and restaurants. The most blatant examples of discrimination occurred in the workplace. Although Mexicans and Anglos worked side by side and received the same pay in railroad construction and beet picking, Mexicans

usually were given fewer hours to work and seldom advanced to managerial positions. With the onslaught of the Great Depression, Kansas joined the rest of the United States in deporting Mexican workers to preserve “white” jobs. Finney County saw a dramatic reduction of its Hispanic population by nearly 75 percent during the 1930s. Like most minorities, Hispanics themselves were divided over how to respond to such practices. Some took a firm stand to maintain their native language and heritage, while others adopted “Americanization” strategies, emphasizing education and the English language as means of social mobility. Preservation of Chicano identity remains a strong theme today, although sociologists have noticed trends similar to those of other immigrant groups in that many second- and third-generation Hispanics possess little ethnic loyalty to their parents’ and grandparents’ countries of origin.<sup>40</sup>

Chicano history offers the prospect of valuable comparisons with other minority groups, especially with regard to segregation policy. Prior to 1940 the Kansas City school district attempted to create a tri-racial system of separate schools for whites, blacks, and Mexicans. In most cases, however, the ex-

40. Rutter, “Mexican Americans in Kansas,” 148–54; Johnson, Hartman, and McKenney, “Wichita’s Hispanics,” 33–38, 41–52; Robert Oppenheimer, “Acculturation or Assimilation: Mexican Immigrants in Kansas, 1900 to World War II,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (October 1985): 429–48; Henry J. Ávila, “Immigration and Integration: The Mexican American Community in Garden City, Kansas, 1900–1950,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Spring 1997): 22–37; Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 159–64; Leonard David Ortiz, “La Voz de la Gente: Activist Publications in the Kansas City Area, 1968–1989,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Fall 1999): 228–44.

pense and administrative burden of keeping three races separated caused Hispanics to be classified as blacks; hence, Mexicans often shared hospitals, schools, and neighborhoods with African Americans. Hispanics generally resented being categorized this way, considering themselves different from blacks and insisting on inclusion in "the white race."<sup>41</sup> A 1985 study reported on racial tensions between Chicanos, blacks, and Vietnamese in northeast Wichita, caused by job competition and resentment against recent immigrants who were believed to receive preferential treatment from the United States government.<sup>42</sup> Such examples show that people historically have defined themselves and acted in ways that are inconsistent with the categories scholars try to impose on them. With the anticipated increase of the Hispanic population, it is entirely possible that future discussions of "race" will focus less on the color line and more on the language barrier. Historians' ability to assess these changes will be hampered until they gain a better understanding about the subjective fluidity of racial identity.

Surprisingly, some neo-revisionists have started already by examining the most overlooked racial group of all: whites themselves. Beginning in the 1990s "whiteness studies" tracked the history of how a single category of "white" was created to describe the vast diversity of European immigrants and to what extent such people consciously thought and acted as members of a white race.<sup>43</sup> In so doing, they have challenged revisionists to articulate more clearly what they mean by such generic terms as "white racism," often employed as a catch-all phrase to describe a range of prejudiced beliefs. Following on Barbara Fields's assertion that racism is an ideology, then whiteness theorists ask whose interests that ideology has served, whether or not white supremacy has found consensus among people who can claim its benefits, and how such ideas have been manifested in the public sphere.<sup>44</sup> Here we return to the subject of Kansas's reputation for liberality. Racial discrimination certainly has existed in the Sunflower State, but has that discrimination been the result of a consistent racist ideology? Who exactly are "the white people" of Kansas?

One obvious approach to that question is to gauge the prevalence of organized white supremacy groups. During the 1920s the revived Ku Klux Klan gained a following of perhaps some one hundred thousand members in Kansas. A paucity of research prevents firm conclusions, but the few studies that exist have linked its success to Kansans' strong traditions of prohibition and Protestant fundamentalism. Although the twenties' version of the Klan did demonize racial minorities, their primary targets were Judaism, Roman Catholicism, immigration, urban politicians, and bootleggers. Kansas's rural character and its past littered with frontier violence always had delivered a fertile setting for secret societies. Racism was a major tenet, but the burning cross in Kansas also owed much to the state's Populist strain and its accompanying opposition to the excessive power of business and government. In contrast to the Klan's official distrust of organized

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41. Rutter, "Mexican Americans in Kansas," 97–115; Laird, "Argentine, Kansas," 192–98.

42. Johnson, Hartman, and McKenney, "Wichita's Hispanics," 157–60.

43. For examples, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso Press, 1991); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

44. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History."

*In the 1980s the  
Posse Comitatus  
gained access to a  
small radio station  
in Dodge City, from  
which it verbally  
assailed not only  
blacks and Jews  
but Catholics,  
banks, courts,  
and the Internal  
Revenue Service.*

labor as the work of communist agitators, many of its members began as striking railroad workers in Arkansas City.<sup>45</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan had influential enemies in journalism and government. William Allen White regularly denounced the Klan as an “organization of cowards” through the *Emporia Gazette*, and Republican governor Henry J. Allen launched an investigation into its activities. Allen was an unlikely candidate for anti-Klan crusader, often expressing nativist and anti-Catholic ideas in public forums. His opposition and that of other political leaders to the Klan rested not so much on the group’s bigotry but on its secret and extralegal nature, perceived by conservatives as a threat to order and stability. Supported by the governor, the attorney general’s office charged the KKK in 1922 with being a Georgia-based corporation doing business in Kansas without an approved permit issued by the state charter board. Subsequent appointees to the board blocked the KKK’s application, and through a series of court rulings and appeals that outlasted Allen’s term, the Invisible Empire was legally prohibited from operating in Kansas in 1927. By this time the group already had lost much of its membership due to squabbling and internal scandals.<sup>46</sup> This was not the first time state officials had taken such a stand. From 1915 to 1923 the governor’s office—first under Arthur Capper and later under Allen—usurped the authority of the Kansas Board of Review of Motion Pictures in prohibiting the showing of *The Birth of a Nation*, despite it being one of the most popular films of the period, for reasons of historical inaccuracy, sexual suggestiveness, and dehumanization of blacks.<sup>47</sup>

Understanding the varied reactions of white Kansans to groups like the Klan is impossible without an appreciation of the state’s long-standing rural, conservative values. While some have been attracted to flattering ideas about caucasian superiority, equally attractive have been the grand worldviews of corporate monopolies and government conspiracies around which small, independent agricultural producers often have rallied in both legal and extralegal causes. The latest manifestations are evident in the rise of the modern militia movement. In the 1980s the Posse Comitatus gained access to a small radio station in Dodge City, from which it verbally assailed not only blacks and Jews but Catholics, banks, courts, and the Internal Revenue Service. Senator Bob Dole and the state attorney general’s office condemned the use of public airwaves for such purposes.<sup>48</sup> Even in their reactions to such organizations, Kansans have been quick to call for bans and censorship against any form of perceived radicalism, be it from the left or the right. Organized white supremacy has had its followings in the Sunflower State, but only when it incorporated ideas and issues not exclusively related to race.

Much more research awaits completion on this topic, yet at a tentative glance it seems that “white” identity has been a theme, but not the central theme, of

45. Lila Lee Jones, “The Ku Klux Klan in Eastern Kansas during the 1920s,” *Emporia State Research Studies* 23 (Winter 1975): 5–11, 23–41.

46. *Ibid.*, 12–23; Charles William Sloan Jr., “Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK from Kansas, 1922–1927,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Fall 1974): 393–409; Patrick G. O’Brien, “‘I Want Everyone to Know the Shame of the State’: Henry J. Allen Confronts the Ku Klux Klan, 1921–1923,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 19 (Summer 1996): 98–111.

47. Gerald R. Butters Jr., “The Birth of a Nation and the Kansas Board of Review of Motion Pictures: A Censorship Struggle,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 14 (Spring 1991): 2–14.

48. Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 353–54.

Kansas history. Put another way, white Kansans think of themselves as white, but they do not think about it much. For historians, this presents a daunting challenge to reconcile the traditionalists' assumptions of a racially tolerant state with the revisionists' claim that racism is and has been a defining part of the state's ideology. The dichotomy of choices is a bad one; whether or not Kansas is a racist state depends on one's definition of "racism," and besides, the question leads nowhere. More fruitful would be a historiographical dialogue that explains how racism and anti-slavery, Indian removal and admission of exodusters, civil libertarianism and civil rights, the Ku Klux Klan and a conservative state government that evicted the Klan, have all managed somehow to walk hand-in-hand and in fact to spring from common roots.

With that goal in mind, toward what direction should we turn? What priorities should historians set as they grapple with these contradictions? Several possibilities exist, but here is one for consideration: balance, both geographical and chronological, as well as greater balance with regard to groups being studied. The story of African Americans in Kansas remains a rich topic, deserving of more exploration. However, as long as historians continue to form generalizations about race based on the experiences of black-white relationships alone, they will continue to miss much that is complex and important. More works on Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans, especially in the twentieth century, as well as comparative works that can tie the experiences of all these together, are sorely needed. Similarly, the literature on race suffers from an excessive focus on the northeastern part of the state where the drama of the territorial and Civil War periods unfolded, and on the nineteenth century when early Kansans inherited a set of racial ideas from their forebears in the Midwest and the South. But the next set of "racial problems" that Kansans are likely to confront will emanate from the opposite corner and from a century later. Most scholars have yet to even notice the demographic transformation occurring in southwest Kansas, where each day new arrivals bring their own ideas about race from such distant, war-torn places as Central America and Southeast Asia.

The catalyst in this has been the meatpacking industry. In the 1970s major beef companies discovered in western Kansas an ideal combination of sparsely populated areas, vast acreage available for pastures and feed lots, and a "right to work" mentality that stifled the influence of labor unions. Between 1980 and 1990 more than six thousand new jobs were added to the towns of Garden City, Liberal, and Dodge City, known as "the triangle" where literally thousands of cattle are slaughtered each day. To fill the needed labor force, recruiters directed their efforts to "non-whites" and non-English speaking peoples, namely Latinos from



*During the 1920s a revived Ku Klux Klan gained momentum throughout Kansas, with membership estimates running as high as two hundred thousand. While this group did target racial minorities, its activities focused primarily on Jews and Roman Catholics. Caught in an alleged corporate illegality, by 1927 the Klan was prohibited from operating in Kansas.*



*The military has played a strong role in stimulating increases in racial diversity, although in Kansas racial acceptance has been built less on liberal values of equality than on conservative demands for order and stability. In the above photograph, military personnel go through the chow line in the mess hall at the Olathe Naval Air Station, 1945.*

Mexico and Asian refugees from Vietnam and Laos. By 1998, 60 to 80 percent of the work forces at two of the leading plants consisted of Hispanic immigrants. An industry famous for low pay, poor worker safety, and high employee turnover, meat processing has brought an abundance of new jobs but also rapid strains on social services, housing, education, and police protection. Complaints about ethnic gang violence, workplace discrimination, and police profiling are common, although initial studies indicate that bigotry against minorities is linked to a particular group's perceived position on the social scale, suggesting a positive correlation between racism and class prejudice.<sup>49</sup>

The significance for race relations is obvious. Communities that until two decades ago held mostly whites are now the most racially diverse parts of Kansas, dealing with problems that industrial urban areas have not resolved after a century. These changes may be too recent for historians to address directly, but researchers can produce works that inform the policymakers and community leaders who cannot avoid addressing them. Kansans' famous reputation for tolerance plummeted during the black exodus of the late 1870s and again during the first wave of Hispanic immigration during the 1910s; what reason to expect different reactions now? Will future prejudice be directed at all minorities, or will those African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans who already claim native

status benefit from the addition of new pariah groups? And as some of these recent arrivals inevitably attain middle-class status and rise to positions of authority, what stands will they take on issues such as affirmative action or the use of Indian mascots? The answers are not foregone conclusions.

**G**iven the strong role that immigration has played in race relations, it would be useful to know more about the sponsoring institutions that have done the most to affect demographic change. Anti-Hispanic and anti-Asian prejudice in southwest Kansas often stems from the unfair association of these peoples with the negative changes wrought by the beef industry. From that point, some might conclude that racism is the consequence of capitalist greed that creates racialized exploitable classes. Yet on occasion, individual companies have protected their minority workers, if for no other reason than to guarantee a

49. Donald D. Stull and Michael J. Broadway, "The Effects of Restructuring on Beefpacking in Kansas," *Kansas Business Review* 14 (Fall 1990): 10–16; Robert A. Hackenberg and Gary Kukulka, "Industries, Immigrants, and Illness in the New Midwest," in *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, ed. Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway, and David Craig Griffith (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995): 187–211; Lourdes Gouveia and Donald D. Stull, "Dances with Cows: Beefpacking's Impact on Garden City, Kansas and Lexington, Nebraska," in *ibid.*, 85–107; Marla Mack et al., *Special Needs of Minority Groups in Kansas: A Study of the Status of Minorities in Kansas and Minority Participation in Kansas State Government* (Wichita, Kans.: Center for Urban Studies, Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs, Wichita State University, 1994); Kansas Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Race Relations in Rural Western Kansas Towns* (Kansas City, Kans.: 1998).

reliable work force. During the Great Depression, the Santa Fe railroad resisted industry trends to fire and repatriate its Mexican employees. Santa Fe officials refused to comply with formal demands made by Governor Clyde Reed in 1930 to replace its foreign workers with natives, falsely claiming that their Hispanic force came from New Mexico. As a result of such corporate protection, discrimination against Hispanics was less severe in Kansas than in the Southwest.<sup>50</sup> Knowing the circumstances under which minorities have entered the state, as well as public attitudes toward the businesses and public agencies with which they are affiliated, might go far toward an understanding about their relative degrees of acceptance. For instance, considering that the only contact many small-town white Kansans are likely to have with minorities is through college campuses or athletic teams, studies on sports and “town–gown” relationships could shed light on how racial ideas develop at local levels.<sup>51</sup>

Another institution with strong significance for race relations has been the military. Although most western histories emphasize Indian–white conflict, some Native Americans played instrumental roles in assisting the United States Army as negotiators, traders, and scouts, subsequently becoming a ubiquitous presence at frontier posts like Fort Riley and Fort Larned.<sup>52</sup> If scholars probe beyond the manifest events of warfare, they may discover that the army has been a causal agent in promoting racially diverse communities. In the case of Fort Riley and its civilian neighbor Junction City, African Americans in 1990 accounted for nearly one-fourth of Geary County’s residents. In 1975 restaurant critic Calvin Trillin described his great delight with Junction City’s Satalite Cafe, run by a retired black mess sergeant and serving mostly a black clientele. Trillin favorably contrasted the cafe’s daily specials of pigs’ feet, black-eyed peas, and cornbread with the bland culinary offerings of most Kansas restaurants. Casual observers, however, missed the full complexity of the place unless they looked in the kitchen and discovered that these meals were not prepared by blacks at all, but by a Japanese woman whom all the locals knew as “Judy-san.”<sup>53</sup> Asians and Pacific Islanders constituted 4 percent of the county’s population, and Hispanics comprised 6 percent, as compared respectively with 0.9 and 3.8 statewide.<sup>54</sup>

“Keeping the Army happy” has been crucial for Junction City’s economic survival, which likely explains why minority servicemen and their families have enjoyed a greater degree of accommodation there than elsewhere. Prior to the civil rights era when many army posts were located in states with anti-miscegenation laws, Fort Riley developed a reputation as a haven for biracial couples and their children. City officials forced a relaxation of local segregation rules beginning in 1922 when the Ninth Cavalry was assigned there. Hundreds of black soldiers—many of whom were married to Filipina, and, after 1945, Japanese, women—

*Scholars who probe beyond the manifest events of warfare may discover that the army has been a causal agent in promoting racially diverse communities.*

50. Johnson, Hartman, and McKenney, “Wichita’s Hispanics,” 53–72; Rutter, “Mexican Americans in Kansas,” 84–93.

51. A recent example is Rusty L. Monhollon, *This is America? The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

52. James E. Sherow and Williams S. Reeder Jr., “A Richly Textured Community: Fort Riley, Kansas, and American Indians, 1853–1911,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Spring 1998): 2–17; see also Thomas W. Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860–90* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).


53. Calvin Trillin, “U.S. Journal: Junction City, Kansas,” *New Yorker* (July 7, 1975): 81–84.

54. Office of the Kansas Secretary of State, “Minority Populations and Family Poverty Status in Kansas Counties, 1990,” 2, 5.

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made the area their home and began establishing civilian businesses. Vietnamese and Thai women joined this population in the 1970s, followed by Latinos from Central America a decade later. Today, local churches, businesses, and cultural celebrations regularly conduct their affairs in multiple languages.<sup>55</sup> Although it would be a mistake to characterize Junction City's ethnic and social history as harmonious, few places better illustrate the military's role in stimulating increases in racial diversity, built less on liberal values of equality than on conservative demands for order and stability—again, a long-standing Kansas tradition.

Clearly any understanding of race relations in the Sunflower State must consider the context under which immigrants arrive, whether as soldiers, meatpacking workers, homesteaders, or fugitive slaves. It also must account for the simultaneous presence of both racial cooperation and hostility and recognize the differences across specific communities and industries that sway Kansans toward one or the other. Traditional historians and revisionists might agree on little else, but their combined efforts reveal this much: that Kansas is a paradox, and that its racism has been neither consistent nor monolithic. The next generation faces the task of unraveling that paradox and deciphering its meaning for the different racial groups that have lived there.

Of course, it would be ideal if historians could abandon the discussion of "racial groups" entirely and address themselves to the one race that science recognizes: the human race. However, as long as human beings insist on dividing themselves into such categories, historians are obliged to study them under their own terms. The stars upon which Langston Hughes gazed nearly a century ago have covered a vast array of diverse peoples who struggled to make their own destinies in the place called Kansas. What they believed about the slippery concept called "race" had much to do with how they lived, loved, and fought. Those who would examine the legacies of our racial past should feel confident that in this, one of "the whitest states in the country," the history of Kansas has had much to teach the rest of the world, and it will continue to do so in the future. 

55. Susan Lloyd Franzen, *Behind the Facade of Fort Riley's Hometown: The Inside Story of Junction City, Kansas* (Ames, Iowa: Pivot Press, 1998).