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Does My Town Have A Racist Past?

 While doing research on sundown towns in Arkansas, I came across an article written for the *Teaching Tolerance* magazine from their website <http://www.tolerance.org>. In this article the author, James Loewen, a leading scholar with a Ph.D. from Harvard in Sociology, who has also written many books which include *Lies Across America,* as well as a book on sundown towns. Loewen began to do his own research on sundown towns, which were typically towns that practiced their own ways of keeping people out of their towns that they felt like were not of the “right race” to belong and dwell among the white folks of the community after dark, and was amazed at some of his findings.

 Loewen first learned of such towns when he was a student in college and other classmates began telling him of such towns. As he began his research, it was discovered that there were many of these towns spread out across the United States, much to his astonishment. As he pondered the question of how these communities were able to self-appoint themselves to decide who could live in their town and who couldn’t, he decided to write a book about it.

 Although the main target of white hostility was towards the African-Americans, many other races were being singled out as well, such as Jews, Catholics, Greek Americans and Chinese Americans. Many towns today that once participated in the practice of keeping certain race groups out of their towns no longer openly deny the presence of these races but also distort the actual explanations of why the demographics are many times slanted, such as the climate not being right or the economic structure being the reason for a particular race not residing in a town.

 During the initial research that Lowen did, he first had the assumption that towns were white because it just happened to be a town where blacks chose not to settle, but he later learned that it didn’t happen that way by accident. The racial policies that were enacted in many of the towns kept the towns white. This practice was also seen in many of the schools and even on the railroads. If a crew member was African-American and the train stopped at a station in a white town, he was told he could not stay in the town overnight.

 Teachers faced with the perplexing task of teaching their students about the racial injustices done to particular groups have proven to be challenging. “For teachers, the emergence of ‘recovering’ sundown towns poses the possibility of distorted understanding of racial demographics among students. In the old days, when a town or school explicitly excluded, it was easy to pinpoint the excluded group – often enough by reading the sign at the city limits. Today, complicity is more subtle” (Loewen). He goes on to suggest this could be a valuable teaching tool to clear up any misconceptions the younger generation may have about sundown towns and the impact they had on particular races and towns. Teaching students about the role race played in the development of many of the towns across the United States could greatly impact how society deals with race issues in the future. As Loewen suggests, “It likewise opens the door to more general discussions of questions of racism in society. Using the examples of racial exclusion and denial in sundown towns, teachers can challenge students to do history — to investigate the racial past of their own communities, neighborhoods, or schools” (Loewen).

Works Cited

"Does My Town Have a Racist Past?" Teaching Tolerance. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 June 2013.