

The Black Belt that should have been

By: Dr. Ridgely Muhammad

--Guest Columnist--

In studying the history of Black land ownership, I became fascinated with those 45 years after slavery when Black people amassed over 16 million acres of land. As cruel as slavery was, it had not broken Black people to the point that they had given up on being free, independent and productive.

Most of the land was in what is called the "Black Belt". Twenty to 30 percent of the farmland in Virginia, North Carolina, Florida and Arkansas was owned by Blacks in 1910. Forty to 50 percent of the farmland in Louisiana, Alabama and Georgia was owned by Blacks. Fifty to 60 percent was owned by Blacks in South Carolina; while over 60 percent of the farmland was owned by Blacks in Mississippi.

These nine contiguous states would have been a good base for economic development of the Black race in the early 1900s. Add to this the schools, hospitals, insurance companies and other institutions that Blacks had produced in this Black Belt region, and you have the beginning of a viable nation.

However, the most startling thing that I discovered was the number and type of inventions that Blacks had patented in the brief period from 1865 to 1899, such as the baby buggy, bicycle frame, chamber commode, clothes dryer, door knob, egg beater, electric lamp bulb, elevator, fire extinguisher, fountain pen, golf tee, guitar, horse shoe, ironing board, lawn mower, lawn sprinkler, mailbox, mop, peanut butter, pencil sharpener, phone transmitter, refrigerator, stove, street sweeper, tricycle and typewriter.

All of these things are taken for granted today, yet play an essential part in modern life. Million Man March proved that when Blacks are not intimidated by the White power structure, they could come together with peace and brotherhood.

I might be wrong, but I feel that one of the main reasons that Blacks do not want to separate is that they feel that Blacks don't have the intelligence to build an economy and nation with all of the luxury and conveniences of White America. However, the research reveals that right after slavery, Blacks showed great genius and ingenuity, which is proven by all of these patented inventions produced in that short period of time.

One may ask, "If they were so smart, then why are they still poor?" The short answer to that is "terrorism." White terrorism worked to destroy the hope and creativity of a Black nation on the rise.

In past Farmer Newsletter articles, we have shown how the United States Department of Agriculture, in collaboration with the Whites in the South, worked to take back those 16 million acres of farmland. A study of lynching will reveal how Whites also used a type of psychological warfare to intimidate the very "minds" of Blacks.

We also have plotted the number of Black-owned farmland acreage starting from the first national census data that kept track of it, starting in 1900. The acreage data is plotted in units of millions. Therefore, "16" on the graph represents 16 million acres.

My mind was blown away with the level of creativity that Blacks exemplified in the two decades between 1880 and 1900. This 20-year period accounted for almost 70 inventions, compared to less than 10 for the period between 1900 and 1920. What happened to dampen this quick rise of Black creativity? The answer lies in the increased brutality and lawlessness perpetrated against Blacks during this period.

After Blacks were sold out by the Republican Party after the 1876 elections (known as the Hayes Compromise), the Northern troops were pulled out of the South, allowing the KKK to have its way with Blacks. A string of crucifixions (lynching) reached a crescendo by the 1890s, terrorizing Black people literally out of their minds. Between 1889 and 1930, at least 3,000 Blacks were lynched; some specifically targeted because they

owned land or had businesses.

All attempts at passing anti-lynching legislation failed, as the federal government sat holding its hand. Starting in 1890, a systematic disenfranchisement of Blacks began in Mississippi and by 1901, America saw her last Black congressman of that era. In 1896, the Supreme Court's ruling on "separate but equal" in the Plessy v. Ferguson case accepted "Jim Crow laws" as the law of the land. These political and judicial signals, on both state and national levels, humiliated and frightened the Black population.

Between 1895 and 1921, there were at least 36 riots where White folks destroyed Black neighborhoods in the South and North. The most outrageous level of White mob violence occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. Many Blacks ran out of the Black Belt into Oklahoma and Kansas. By the early 1920s, they had amassed much wealth in enclaves of Black-dominated regions such as "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa. The Whites blew that portion of Tulsa off the map by dropping bombs on Black neighborhoods.

Not surprisingly, the level of creativity dropped after 1900, and after 1910, the acreage of Black-owned farmland also began to drop. The "poison" of fear produced by terrorism had produced its desired effect. Today, many Black youth have been led to believe that the failure of Blacks to rise was because they did not have the intelligence or internal fortitude to be independent and prosperous. However, an analysis of America's history of psychological terrorism gives a more rational explanation for the stunted development of Black people in the U.S.

History has now shown that the monumental rise of Black people immediately after slavery could have produced a virtual "nation within a nation" in the Black Belt. From 1990 to 2000, over 500,000 Blacks migrated back to the South. Most of our three million acres of Black-owned farmland is still in the South. Therefore, if Blacks unite and follow a wise economic agenda, we may yet see the Black Belt rise again.



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