

# Sundown on the Prairie: White Ethno-Nationalism and Exclusion of African-Americans in Norman, Oklahoma From 1889 to 1967

Presentation by Michael Givel, Professor of Political Science, University of Oklahoma to: West Wind Unitarian Universalist Congregation—Adult Religious Education, Norman, Oklahoma on January 14, 2018

# Introduction

In Professor James W. Loewen's book: "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism, p. 4" he writes a sundown town is:

"...any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African-Americans or other groups from living in it and this was "all-white" on purpose."

# Researched history of Norman, Oklahoma said to be a sundown town to determine:

- Sundown period
- How Norman become a sundown town
- Whether sundown was through extra-legal and / or legal means
- How was sundown practices implemented
- Exceptions, if any to sundown enforcement
- Resistance to sundown enforcement

# Methods

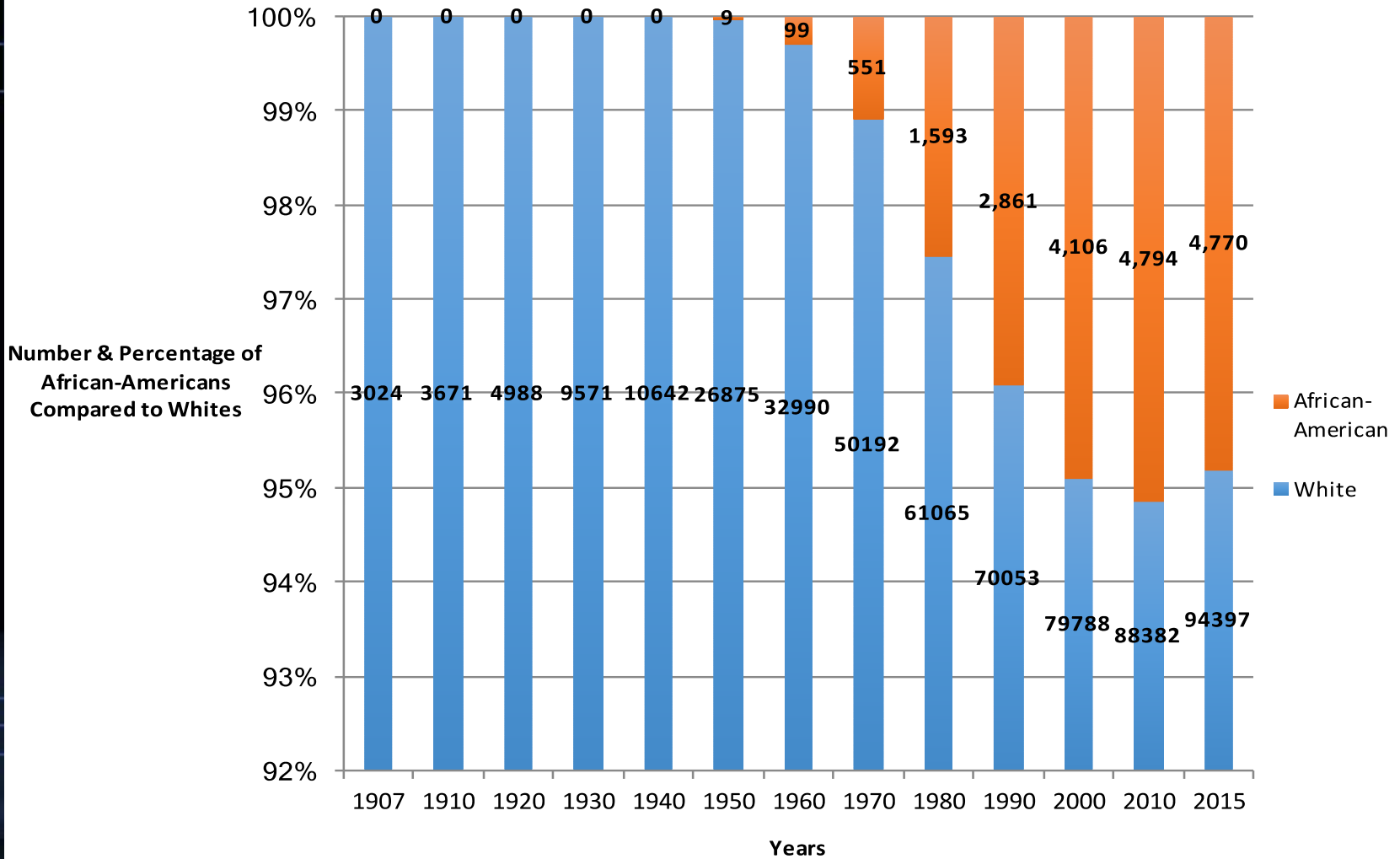
- Quantitative descriptive analysis of US and Oklahoma Census data from 1907 to 2015 of number and percentage of African-Americans to Whites
- Chronological and qualitative content and archival analysis from 1897-2015 of scholarly books, newspaper articles, court documents, law journal articles, and authoritative interviews

- Number of authoritative qualitative publications examined:
  - Books-5
  - Newspaper stories-44
  - Court documents-5
  - Electronic article-1
  - Norman city documents-7
  - Law journal articles-2
  - Authoritative transcripts-3
- Direct evidence in publications examined:
  - Length of sundown period
  - How was sundown policy created?
  - Legal or extra-legal?
  - How implemented
- Review of all Norman city ordinances from beginning to 1971 for any sundown related ordinances

- Direct evidence in publications also examined regarding exceptions to and overview of resistance to sundown policies and enforcement
  - Number of authoritative publications examined included:
    - Court briefs-1
    - Electronic pages-1
    - Newspaper stories-9
    - Norman City Minutes-1
    - Norman Ordinances-1
    - Books-1
    - University of Oklahoma Board of Regents Minutes-1

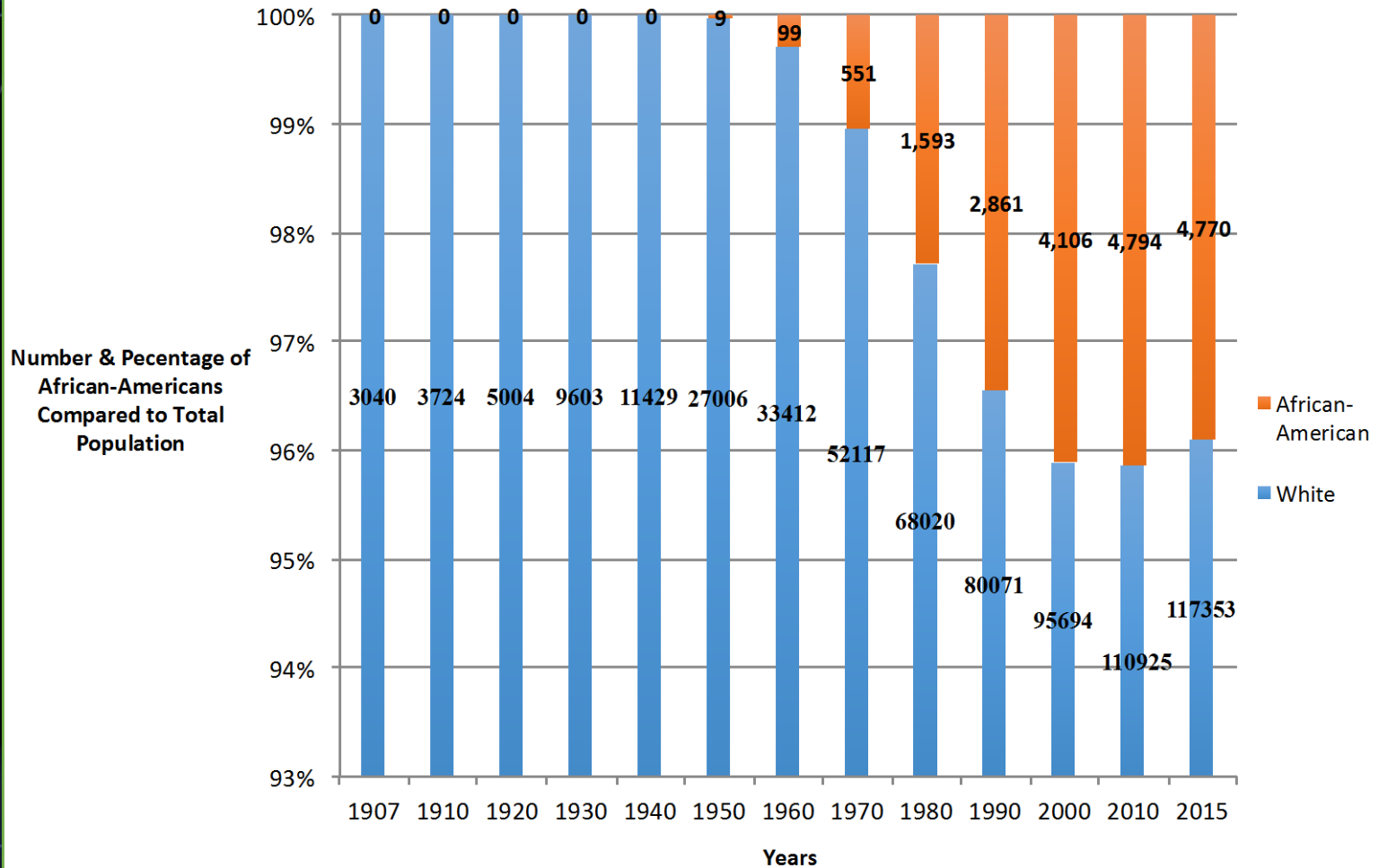
# The Evidence

**TABLE 1. African-Americans Compared to Whites in Norman, Oklahoma from 1907 to 2015**



**Sources:** Oklahoma Supreme Court Case No. 43404, "In Re Protest of Referendum Petition No. 1968-1" Brief of Protestors; 1920, 1930, 1980 US Census of Population; 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1990 US Census-Race; 2000, 2010, 2016 US Census.

**TABLE 2. African-Americans Compared to Total Population in Norman, Oklahoma from 1907 to 2015**



**Sources:** Oklahoma Supreme Court Case No. 43404, "In Re Protest of Referendum Petition No. 1968-1" Brief of Protestors; 1920, 1930, 1980 US Census of Population; 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1990 US Census-Race; 2000, 2010, 2016 US Census.



- Census data indicates from 1907 to around 1940 Norman had no African-Americans
- In 1950 there were nine and in 1960 there were 99 after University of Oklahoma 'integrated' student housing
- Norman's African American population began to rise from 1970 to present—but still remains relatively low compared to white Normanites
- Was this a natural occurrence or done on purpose?

# Terror and Racial Cleansing on the Prairie--1896 - 1899

- Two key sources document early racial cleansing, pogroms, and terror in Norman and Cleveland County, Oklahoma by white terrorist gangs that ran African Americans out
- Sources include:
  - Daily Oklahoma State Capital newspaper article of January 5, 1897, p. 2 entitled: *War on Negroes: Many of Them Whipped and Ordered to Leave Oklahoma Territory*
  - Oklahoma Supreme Court case of: J J Wallace v. Town of Norman, cited at: 1900 OK 11, 60 P. 108, 9 Okla. 339.

- Quoting the Daily Oklahoma State Capital newspaper article of January 5, 1897, p. 2 entitled: *War on Negroes: Many of Them Whipped and Ordered to Leave Oklahoma Territory:*

“This whipping of colored men has been going on in the southeastern part of Oklahoma for several months, and hundreds of negroes have been ordered to leave the territory, and given to understand if they did not go severe punishment would be their lot. Many colored men have been whipped because they refused to go, some nigh until death. During the season for gathering cotton last fall these masked men made visits nearly every night to the home of some colored men, and he and possibly several members of his family were whipped if they refused orders of the band. It is the object of these gangs, so it is alleged, to run the negroes out of the country so that they will not be rivals on the farms and in the workshops in Cleveland and Potawatomie counties where most of these outrages are going on. Cotton is the principal product, and negroes are experts in cotton fields, and get the best of white labor. The towns of Tecumseh and Norman, containing 2000 inhabitants each, have not a colored inhabitant. All of them have been run out by secret hands.”

- Quoting the plaintiff's trial brief in the Oklahoma Supreme Court case of: J J Wallace v. Town of Norman, p.1 first filed in September 1899:

“In pursuance of said conspiracy, the said conspirators, within the past three years, the specific times being unknown to the plaintiff and plaintiff unable to more particularly give the details thereof, have openly notoriously threatened, assaulted, beaten, and driven from said town certain law-abiding colored citizens of the United States, named Frank Rogan, Robert Green, David Branham, Robert Ely, Morey Lee, and others whose names are unknown to the plaintiff, who have endeavored during said time to labor, live, and lodge in said town; and by reason of said unlawful acts, at no time since the inception of said conspiracy as aforesaid, has any colored person ever labored, lived, or lodged in said town or been permitted to do so, although many such persons, including those above named and others whose names are unknown to the plaintiff, have gone to said town for such purposes.”

- Several other newspaper and scholarly accounts also confirmed: original motivation was job competition and white supremacy enforced by extra-legal violence, threats, and reputation from 1899 to early 1920s
  - Includes 1914 lynching of Dr. B.E. Ward
    - Abducted from Cleveland County jail
    - Lynching occurred at bridge crossing modern day Bishop Creek
  - According to local historian--John Womack in: *Norman an Early History, 1820-1900*, p. 154, in early era: no African-Americans in Norman after dark, no meals served in restaurants—but could eat in the alley, no African Americans employed in Norman, and African Americans could shop as long as merchant made a profit

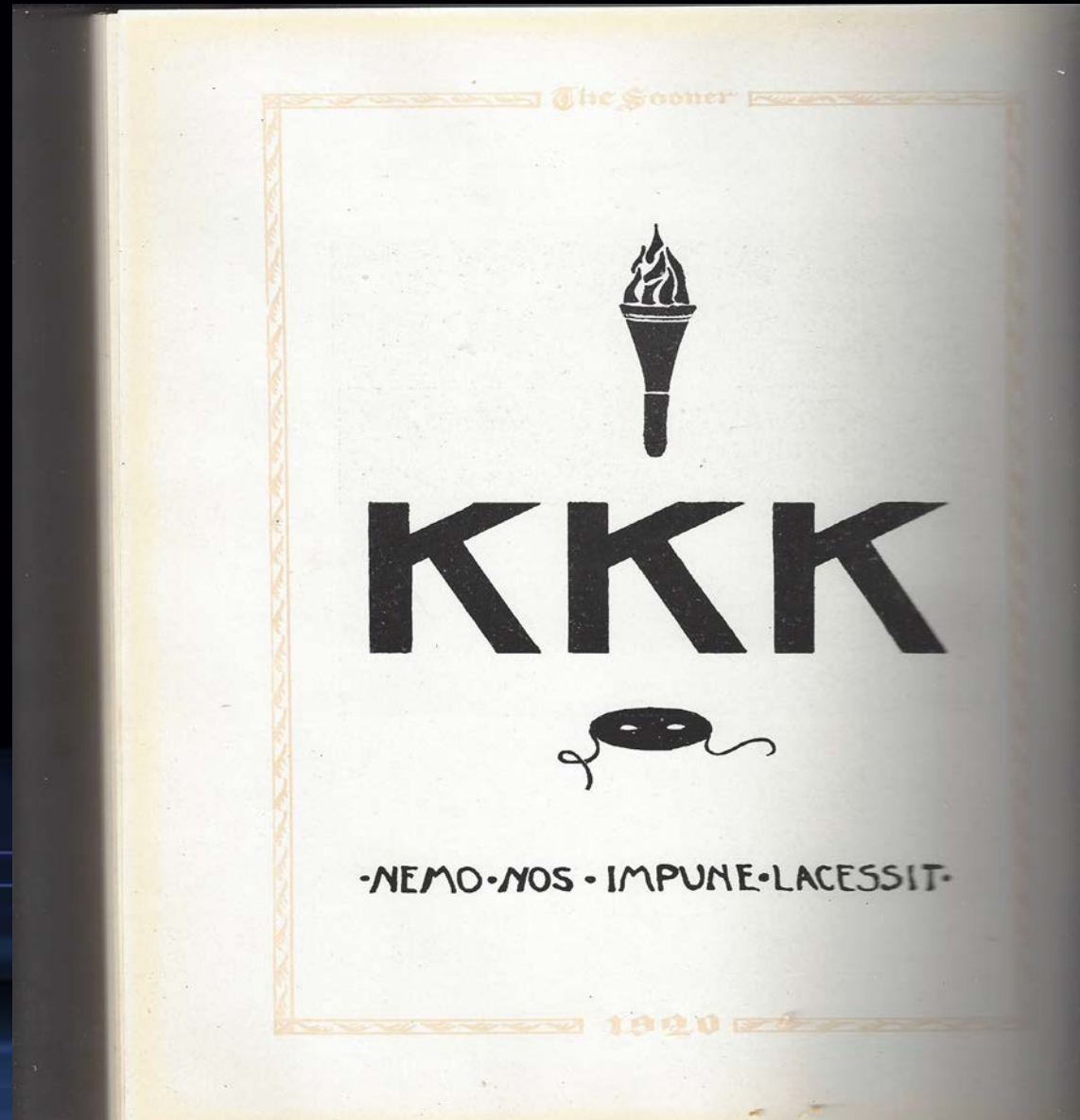


# Ku Klux Klan on the Prairie from 1921- 1923

- Second rise of KKK began in 1915 after *Birth of A Nation*
- Post-1915 Klan lasted to late 1920s
- Nationally and in Oklahoma focused its hate on: African-Americans, Catholics, Jews, immigrants, labor leaders, socialists, communists, opponents of prohibition, 'immoral' individuals, and white supporters of African Americans
- By 1921, Tulsa Tribune estimated 70,000 members of KKK in Oklahoma

- At its height according to University of Oklahoma (OU) Professor David Levy, about one in ten eligible males in Oklahoma were members
- According to Levy, Klan did more terrorist acts in Oklahoma than all other states
- Carter Blue Clark documented over 200 terrorist acts from 1921-1924; including:
  - Floggings, beatings, mutilations, tar-and-feathering, and at least nine murders
  - Oklahoma KKK burned buildings and made threats

- KKK on OU campus: OU Vice President Edwin C. Debarr who was Grand Dragon of KKK of Oklahoma until 1923 and page dedicated to KKK Student Club in 1920 Sooner yearbook





- From November 22, 1921 to March 16, 1922, *Norman Transcript* ran series of articles on front page regarding Norman KKK
- In November 21, 1921 edition, readers learned Norman KKK, No. 10 had formed supported by “more than 100 influential men as sponsors.”
- On December 25, 1921, *Transcript* readers learned Norman KKK made gift to Red Cross through local Norman bank president who would not state name of donor

- On February 7, 1922, *Transcript* headline read: “200 Citizens Object to Negro Orchestra Playing in Norman”
  - Violence and threats against African American jazz band who was playing in Norman after dark
  - Mob, including prominent businessmen, formed with clubs, guns, and ropes
  - Spoke of lynching because African-Americans not allowed in Norman after dark
- February 7, 1922 front page KKK letter printed in entirety in *Transcript*, states: African-Americans not permitted in Norman after dark

- Three front page *Transcript* articles from March 12-16, 1922 reported large KKK parade in Norman including upcoming parade route
  - Witnessed by 1000s lining downtown streets on March 16, 1922
- October 1922 *Transcript* article also noted that silent warning in Norman was:
  - “Negro Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You Here”
- During KKK period: Extra-legal enforcement of sundown included: violence, threats, and reputation

# Sundown on the Prairie To World War II

- A variety of newspaper articles as well as the *Negro Motorist Green Book* continued to document Norman's unwritten and extra-legal code that African-Americans not allowed in Norman after dark or allowed to live in Norman

- Known methods of enforcement included:
  - 1938-violence, threats, run out due to competition for jobs with whites
  - 1940-freeze out by refusing overnight hospitality services, threats, reputation, run out due to job competition with whites
  - 1946-freeze out by refusing overnight hospitality services, threats, violence, reputation, and posted signs that read: “N\*\*\*\*\* don’t let the sun go down in this berg”

# Challenges to Sundown in Norman

- First challenge was Interfaith Coalition of Ministers in 1938-1940-centered in McFarlin Methodist Church
  - Practiced Social Gospel of E. Nicholas Comfort
  - Not successful
- Second challenge occurred during WWII with naval base in north Norman
  - Temporary naval housing for African Americans--only on base
  - Ended after WWII

- *Norman Transcript* editorial of July 10, 1942, p. 8 stated:

“Many changes are taking place in the community life of Norman by reason of the naval construction activities now under way here and more will develop as the navy men come in greater numbers. One of these developments may change a situation that has prevailed ever since the day Norman was first settled in the land run of 1889, that of having no negroes here.”



- Next challenge came in mid to late 1940s
  - Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher key figure in civil rights movement in Oklahoma in 1940s
    - Filed federal lawsuit in 1946 to enter OU law school
    - In 1948, US Supreme Court ordered OU to provide equal education to whites and African-Americans—Fisher entered OU law school
  - In 1949, Julius Caesar Hill applied for OU student housing writing on his housing application his race was: American
  - Due to this, OU Board of Regents created on September 14, 1949 for first time segregated Jim Crow student housing on OU campus
- In 1967, George and Barbara Henderson become first African-American homeowners in Norman
  - Subjected to violence and threats
- In April 1971, Norman voters approve Norman Human Rights Commission
  - Power to enforce open housing in Norman



# Conclusion and Path Forward

- Minor exception to sundown practices as noted in three newspaper articles in 1920s and late 1930s
- African-American glee groups that sang Christian religious spirituals
  - These groups were allowed into Norman after dark, but had to leave after the performance concluded-not permitted overnight

- Answering original questions of this study:
- Was Norman a sundown town?-Yes
- Why did Norman's sundown policy first occur?-  
Job competition with whites and white  
supremacy
- What was the sundown period in Norman?-  
1889 to 1967—78 years
- Was sundown in Norman legal or extra-legal?-  
Extra-legal
  - Author of this study also reviewed all Norman city ordinances from beginning to 1971 and found no legal sundown ordinances

- How was sundown enforced?- methods ranged depending on the period; included:
  - Racial cleansing in early era
  - KKK in early 1920s
  - Enforcement also included:
    - Freeze out
    - Reputation
    - Sundown signs
    - Violence
    - Threats

- Sundown is descriptive phrase of intentionally excluding African-Americans
- Practice also indicative of ethno-white nationalist and racialist ideology of white supremacy and to separate races
  - Focus is inferiority of non-whites
- While not all Normanites supported this policy—ethno-white nationalism was a dominant practice in Norman for 78 years
  - Not opposed by Norman City Government

# Truth and Reconciliation

- Facts and data of this research scattered and not available in a comprehensive manner anywhere in Norman
  - We need to confront our history to learn from it
  - Prominent versions of Norman history need to incorporate this history
- Policy recommendations:
  - An official apology from Norman City government
  - Reparations
  - Unity park
  - Incorporation of this history in local libraries, historical societies, museums, and on-line
  - Commemorate heroes in Norman history who fought for civil rights and human dignity from land run on
  - Properly memorialize victims of sundown Norman from racial cleansing in early Norman history and then on

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