On Sundown Towns

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In Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism, (2005), James W. Loewen explores the unspoken, yet obvious, practice of excluding African Americans from residing in certain towns throughout the United States of America. Sundown towns were recognized as organized jurisdictions that, for decades, kept African Americans or nonwhites from living within their communities, whose populations were thus overwhelmingly white. Up until about 1970, signage was posted at the city limits of many sundown towns, and some read “Nigger, Don’t let the Sun Go Down on you in [insert the town here].” Whether the consequences for being nonwhite in a sundown town resulted in embarrassment, assault, or even death, it was evident that minorities were not welcomed in many cities across the United States.

Sundown towns and other patterns of segregation largely emerged after the abolishment of slavery in 1865, as freed African Americans fled to areas all across the United States, mostly to the northern states. As the immigration of African Americans increased, so did fear among whites, which supported the establishment of sundown towns. Up until the civil rights movement, when practices of segregation were effectively challenged, sundown towns prohibiting nonwhites from establishing residences in their towns. For any caught in these towns after the sun went down, the possibly of violent repercussions, such as assault, arrest, and even lynching, were almost inevitable.

One well known sundown town is Anna, Illinois. Located in Southern Illinois, Anna has a population of roughly 4,442 residents. As a former resident of Carbondale, Illinois (about twenty miles North of Anna) for almost ten years, I became very familiar with the town and the well-known slogan that residents fashioned from the acronym of the town’s name: “Ain’t
No Niggers Allowed.” *How could this be,* I wondered, *here in the twenty-first century?* In his book, Loewen documents his encounter with a store clerk in Anna that verifies the sentiment of many residents in the town; however, it also demonstrates the progressive view of others in the town:

“Is it true that ‘Anna’ stands for ‘Ain’t No Niggers Allowed’?” I asked at the convenience store in Anna, Illinois, where I had stopped to buy coffee. “Yes,” the clerk replied. “That’s sad, isn’t it,” she added, distancing herself from the policy. And she went on to assure me, “That all happened a long time ago.” “I understand [racial exclusion] is still going on?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied. “That’s sad.”

This overt practice of exclusion was practiced in numerous cities across the United States, such as in Detroit, Michigan (Figure 1), where white citizens similarly barred nonwhites from settling.

**FIGURE 1**
A sign posted in Detroit, Michigan, in response to proposed Sojourner Truth Housing Project, February 1942. *(Wikipedia)*
However, proof that a town was actually a sundown town was difficult to verify unless signs were present. In 1943, a race riot in Detroit resulted from white residents’ refusal to allow the influx of Africa Americans into a newly established project housing development within their community. Nowadays, in the absence of signage, the only way to know if a town was a sundown town is to review census records, consult news articles, or collect oral histories. Today, housing laws and regulations make it almost impossible to exclude people from residing where they choose. However, now that our society has seemed to move away from racially charged ways to segregate communities, we must now ensure that other modes of segregation, via someone’s economic status or level of education, do not become new ways to encourage divisiveness.

FURTHER READING