

TEXAS CITY HAUNTED BY 'NO BLACKS AFTER DARK' PAST

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VIDOR, Texas (CNN) -- As a reporter for CNN, I've spent a lot of time traveling around the United States. And along the way, I've developed some impressions of who we are, and where we are, as a society.

When it comes to relations between blacks and whites, it's no surprise to me that we are, in many places, still separated, despite a desire for better relations. African-Americans often live in one neighborhood, whites in another. When I was recently assigned to cover a story about the history of racism in Vidor, Texas, for the "Paula Zahn Now" show, it turned out that I was surprised by some of the things I found, namely that some whites were openly telling me they still wanted separation from blacks.

Vidor is a small city of about 11,000 people near the Texas Gulf Coast, not too far from the Louisiana border. Despite the fact that Beaumont, a much bigger city just 10 minutes away, is quite integrated, Vidor is not. There are very few blacks there; it's mostly white. That is in large part because of a history of racism in Vidor, a past that continues to haunt the present.

"We've been trying to live down something for 40 to 50 years," said Orange County Commissioner Beamon Minton. "Once convicted, you're a convicted felon. You can't ever put that aside."

Vidor was one of hundreds of communities in America known as "sundown towns," places where blacks were not welcome after dark. In some of these towns, signs -- handwritten or printed -- were



Very rare example of a surviving "Sundown" sign from the Jim Crow period. It says "WHITES ONLY WITHIN THE CITY LIMITS AFTER DARK". This artifact is from the book *Sundown Towns* by James W. Loewen.



United KKK meeting
Vidor, Texas
August 20, 1971

posted, saying things like "Whites Only After Dark." But in general, sundown towns existed by reputation. Blacks knew they were places to avoid after dark.

Charles Jones is a 62-year-old African-American man who lives in Beaumont. He told us when he was 19, he and three of his black friends were changing a flat tire on their broken down car in Vidor one night. A white policeman stopped. "He said, 'Well, let me tell ya -- you boys better wrap and get out of here, because I'm going to go to that next exit and come back around. You better be gone!' " Jones recalled.

Vidor also had a reputation as a haven for the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, Jones recalls seeing a Klan rally in Vidor when he was a child. Vidor city officials point out that that doesn't mean the rally was filled with Vidor residents. They say the Klan brought members from all over and targeted Vidor for rallies.

One of the most memorable instances of that was in 1993, when the federal government tried to change years of racial separation, and brought a handful of black families into Vidor's public housing. In response, the Klan marched in Vidor. Within months, the few black families moved out. And African-Americans were left with a deep impression that still exists today.

"They think that's a racist town," said Walter Diggles of the East Deep Texas Council of Governments. "They think when you go through Vidor, you better be very careful, and most blacks still refuse to stop."

Vidor officials acknowledge racism is still present in Vidor. But they also say it is a very different place from the one it was decades ago. "We don't have a Klan," said Minton. "We haven't had a Klan in 30 years. We are trying to change our image, and we have changed, but I'm not sure we've convinced them [African-Americans] of that."

Last year, for example, the Vidor schools posted a billboard, which included the face of an African-American girl as a way to attract black families. City leaders also point out that Vidor reached out to African-American victims of Hurricane Katrina, and provided temporary shelter "The vast majority of our citizens are not racist," said Vidor Mayor Joe Hopkins. "We'd welcome anybody here who is a good solid citizen."

Indeed, I was left with a genuine impression that some Vidor residents wanted the city to welcome other ethnicities prejudice. Peggy Fruge told me she'd welcome blacks to her neighborhood. Then she said this: "I don't mind being friends with them, talking and stuff like that, but as far as mingling and eating with them, all that kind of stuff, that's where I draw the line."

I was taken aback, surprised the sound of prejudice could emerge so easily. But, I realized, her comments only reflected part of the story. In fairness, Vidor had changed, at least somewhat. It's no longer a city that actively shuns blacks. In fact, African-Americans often shop there, even if very few are residents.

Still, what took me aback was how Vidor had evolved into a kind of complacency. It was trying to change, but not all that hard, and sometimes wanted to be left alone. And to a great extent, that explained why Vidor has not quite escaped its past.