



Infusing Marketing Strategy To Create Economic Empowerment for Black Communities: Saving The Last Oklahoma Black Towns

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, the United States commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre. The Tulsa Massacre represents one of the hidden secrets in U.S. history about Oklahoma black towns and communities. Starting in the 1800s and extending into the early 1900s, many of these towns were thriving on their own, fully self-reliant until they were targeted for destruction by the 1920s. The purpose of this article is to provide awareness of the 13 remaining black towns in Oklahoma and share a marketing framework to provide economic empowerment to these underserved communities. This article is significant because there is limited academic research related to the business dynamics of the Black Towns of Oklahoma. This research will continue to rural governments, public officials, black town supporters, and marketing practitioners in building sustainable economic development in underserved communities.

KEYWORDS: All-Black Towns of Oklahoma, Black Towns of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Black Towns, Marketing, Black Community, Economic Development, Rural Towns, Underserved Communities

EDITORIAL NOTE

For several years, Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) faculty and students have assisted the Coltrane Group to promote historic Black towns. In 2008, the late Andre Head and his wife Jessilyn Head (still living) founded the Coltrane Group. This non-profit organization in Oklahoma City provides support to restoring, documenting, and preserving the heritage, buildings, and people of the remaining historic Black Towns of Oklahoma. The main problem is that most people are not aware of most of the towns and their history. OBU MBA students, Brooks Ait Ahmed, Elly Baze, Matthew Walkingstick, and Hayden Ashley, worked with the Coltrane Group to develop a marketing framework. The authors would like to thank Professor Caesar Andrews, Jr. for his contribution to this article.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the United States commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre. Sadly, many individuals

are unfamiliar with this story. On May 31, 1921, a group of White Americans attacked the affluent and predominantly Black neighborhood of Greenwood in Tulsa, a business-minded enclave affectionately called "Black Wall Street" (BBC.com, 2021).

For many people living in the United States, American history does not reflect all the significance of underserved communities. Sadly, misinformation or lack of information can be damaging to economic growth, especially in rural communities. Honest depictions of underserved communities are important to citizens seeking an authentic historical sense of African heritage in the United States. Unfortunately, there are gaps in knowledge about the importance of historical Black locations throughout the country. Oklahoma is no exception. The purpose of this article is to provide awareness of the 13 remaining black towns in Oklahoma and share a marketing framework to provide economic empowerment to these underserved communities.





CAPTION: The above photo postcard of the Tulsa Race Massacre was widely distributed following the violent assaults of Black citizens in 1921. Like postcards depicting lynchings, these souvenir cards were powerful declarations of White racial power and control. Photo Credit - Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 1921, Object number: 2011.175.10

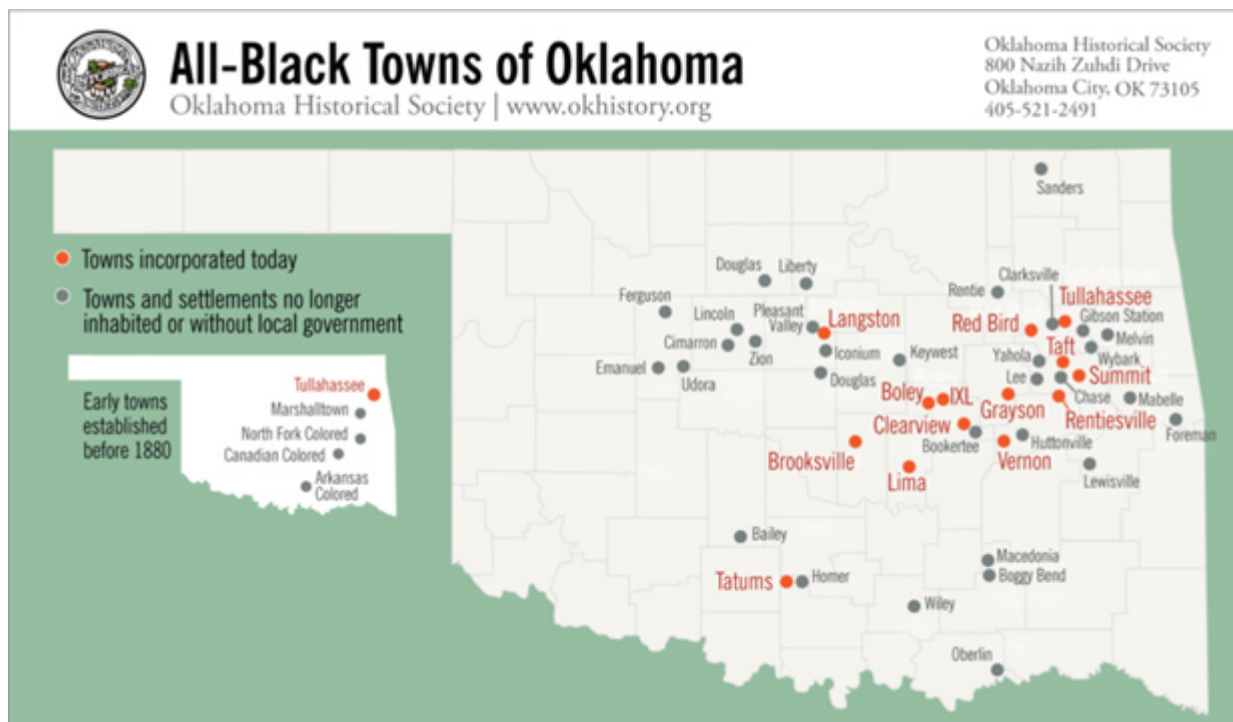
BACKGROUND

Many aspects of the Black Towns of Oklahoma (BTO) have been passed down through generations, while the historical significance has been left out of books and other accounts, for numerous reasons. These towns can be characterized as small, rural places (Slocum, 2019), often with deeply embedded roots in state history. For example, Guthrie was the capital of Oklahoma for a period (Slocum, 2019). Boley is the largest All-Black town. Much of this black town legacy can be traced to the era following the release of enslaved people, when many Black Americans headed West seeking opportunities for securing land and striving for economic growth. As a result, Oklahoma experienced the largest concentration of Black-town settlement (Slocum, 2019).

Between 1830 and 1842, several thousand Blacks enslaved by Native Americans walked the Trail of Tears more than 1,000

miles from various Southeastern areas, ending in a place known at the time as the Indian Territory, which is Oklahoma now (Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Historical Center, & Tulsa Historical Society, 2020). The traits that define historic Oklahoma all-Black towns are characterized by African American culture rooted in post-Civil War society. With the establishment of the State of Oklahoma in 1907, there were more than 50 Black towns. People of African descent formerly enslaved by Native Americans in many cases acquired up to 160 acres per individual (Slocum, 2019).

Events around the Great Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s led to the end of most historic Oklahoma all-Black towns, as African Americans moved farther West in search of jobs (O'Dell, n.d.). Even though most towns disbanded after the Great Depression, roughly one-quarter sustained economic and municipal cohesion for almost a century, and many still exist today.



SOURCE: Created by the Oklahoma Historical Society, OHS.

Currently, there are 13 historic all-Black towns in Oklahoma (See Table #1). Most are in east-central Oklahoma. Two prominent towns are Langston and Boley, each with more robust economies and populations above 1,000 people. No other towns in the group exceed 250. Langston has a college

that originated in 1897, now known as Langston University. It helped the town endure the Great Depression and thrive throughout much of the past century (Tulsa World, 2020). A 14th existing Black town, named IXL, was incorporated much later, in 2001 (James, 2021).

Table 1. The Current Black Towns of Oklahoma

#	Town Name	Population	Year Founded	Local Government (Mayor / City Council)	United States Post Office Location
1	Boley	1,174	1903	Yes	Yes
2	Brooksville	60	1903	Yes	No
3	Clearview	48	1903	No	No
4	Grayson	156	1902	Yes	No
5	Langston	1,860	1890	Yes	Yes
6	Lima	52	1904	No	No
7	Red Bird	92	1889	Yes	No
8	Rentiesville	124	1903	Yes	No
9	Summit	137	1896	No	No
10	Taft	238	1902	Yes	Yes
11	Tatums	149	1895	Yes	Yes
12	Tullahassee	110	1881	No	No
13	Vernon	Unavailable	1911	Yes	No

Sources: U.S. Postal Service Location Finder, Oklahoma Demographics by Cubit, Google, & and Oklahoma Historical Society.

BUILDING A WINNING ECONOMIC MODEL FOR THE BLACK TOWNS OF OKLAHOMA

The Black towns in Oklahoma represent a unique chapter in American history. Many Black Americans settling in Oklahoma achieved success, often against tremendous odds. As was the case in every state, the Great Depression caused a decline in economic prosperity. During the 1920s and 1930s once prosperous towns were becoming extinct. Additionally, as was common throughout the country then, discrimination, segregation, and limited life chances contributed to social barriers significantly impacting opportunities for Blacks in Oklahoma (McAuley, 1998).

The Black communities that found ways to keep their legacies alive still face persistent challenges today. Without economic intervention, these remote towns struggle to survive due to financial, mental and physical hardship. Through Jim Crow laws, legislators regulated social, economic, and political relationships between Whites and Blacks; these laws were passed principally to subordinate Blacks as a group to Whites and enforce rules favored by the dominant culture (Kousser, 2003). These mandates were intended to hurt Blacks economically. Yet, the economic success of Blacks towns in Oklahoma threatened that narrative. For example, a White mob attacked the Greenwood district of Tulsa (called

Black Wall Street), killing hundreds of Black citizens and destroying the once thriving Black community (Gayle, 2021). The catalysis for this destruction on this Black community could be attributed to the economic jealousy of the White community at the time.

Yet, the BOT survival is critical to not only Oklahoma lore, but also to American history. Through donations, the Black towns in Oklahoma attempt to restore the visibility of historic buildings in order to share their unique stories. While the longevity of these remaining towns is noble, Oklahoma Black Towns needs a more effective marketing strategy and business plan. The Coltrane Group has implemented several projects, including town tours, to provide revenue (Head & Head, 2020).

Located in Oklahoma City, the Coltrane Group was founded in 2008 by the late Andre Head and his wife Jessilyn Head, currently living in Oklahoma City. This non-profit organization promotes the arts, entertainment, and recreation; it is dedicated to restoring, documenting, and preserving the heritage, buildings, and people of the remaining historic Black Towns of Oklahoma (Head & Head, 2020). The organization has targeted people who want to preserve African American history in the United States and sustain this heritage for future generations to understand and remember.



CAPTION: The Coltrane Group Was Founded by the Late Andre Head and Jessilyn Head.

The Coltrane Group's mission encompasses historic preservation, increasing economic development, and the cultural tourism of Oklahoma's historic Black Towns. In fact, this organization focused on impacting BOT tourism in these underserved communities (Green, Arrieche, Brown, Carlson, Power, Nolan, Chavez, Higgins, Posada, Rayner, & Vandivort, 2020). The Coltrane Group sponsors a variety of events in these towns, including 'up-close-and-personal' experiences with rodeos and blues/gumbo festivals(Head & Head, 2020). By working with a network of organizations, the Coltrane Group addresses inclusive education with lessons in history for the remaining Black towns in Oklahoma. Increased economic development will provide a lifeline of financial hope for these small rural towns,

EFFECTIVE MARKETING STRATEGY

The current surge in attention to injustices experienced by African Americans creates the perfect time to promote and market the long-lived traditions of Black excellence within Oklahoma. To be successful, BOT businesses needed to be customer-focused. They will benefit from incorporating the spirit of the past in their forward-looking strategies. These communities were once prosperous areas supporting government, businesses, churches; and schools. There were Black intellectuals, activists; and political figures. Black towns became active, self-supporting communities that were models of Black economic and social vibrancy (Slocum, 2019). They became flourishing models of Black American community-building, economic success; and social cohesion(Slocum, 2019). Businesses excelled in a variety of areas, including farming, barbering, law, restaurants, publishing and retail (Oklahoma Historical Society & Oklahoma History Center & Tulsa Historical Society, 2000).

Currently, the 13 Black towns in Oklahoma face several disruptive forces that make any marketing efforts very difficult (Ahmed, Ashley, Baze, & Walkingstick, 2020). Political factors are a major contributor to the growing concerns for the Black towns in Oklahoma. These communities need additional sources of revenue, since the tax bases for these towns are small. Therefore, communities welcome streams of income like development grants to assist with promoting the towns (Ahmed, Ashley, Baze, & Walkingstick, 2020).

To date, the focus of the 13 remaining towns has been limited to traditional marketing. Peter and Donnelly (2013) suggested effective marketing starts with the recognition of customers' needs, then establishing products and services that satisfy

this market demand. Furthermore, they maintained that businesses should focus on building long-term customer relationships. Retrospectively, the Coltrane Group has used word of mouth marketing to enhance public awareness of the Black towns in Oklahoma. Yet, the most promising tool for these rural towns is a well-developed marketing strategy, focusing on the digital economy.

The following marketing strategies are among those that should be considered:

- **Create a united marketing strategy for Black Towns of Oklahoma.** In the modern world of business, every component of an organization must play a part in marketing. Peter and Donnelly (2013) suggested that organizations should utilize the appropriate business strategy. Rather than each town work individually on marketing, these rural towns should share resources to create one effective marketing message. For example, the towns could work together to promote innovative projects like the virtual train tours (Ait Ahmed, Ashley, Baze, & Walkingstick 2020). An integrated marketing strategy will enhance the promotion process.
- **Spread general awareness about Black Towns of Oklahoma.** General awareness of the Black Towns of Oklahoma is scattered. According to McAuley (1998), most Oklahomans, whether White or African American, would find it difficult to name more than two or three of the towns. Blending a variety of promotional tactics, including traditional marketing, email and other online marketing, can be effective if the marketing messages are consistent and well-planned (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2019). In fact, the Coltrane Group has expanded its digital presence in the tourism world; it created a LinkedIn page, Instagram page, YouTube channel and a Facebook page to promote and display historic evidence of these Oklahoma Black Towns. A more robust social media strategy will greatly benefit these rural towns by allowing the organization to engage audiences across diverse demographic groups.
- **Deploying brand ambassadors can also increase outreach to new potential supporters of the Black Towns of Oklahoma.** Influencers are opinion leaders who can share an organization's

message via their own platforms, like Facebook, to their audiences or constituencies (Perreault, Cannon, & McCarthy, 2019). In the case of the Black Towns of Oklahoma, these towns should first recruit famous or other notable individuals who grew up in these towns, or seek out celebrities who believe in their cause. These high-profile individuals, as ambassadors of Oklahoma Black towns, could use their personal brand to spread the news about the Black Towns of Oklahoma.

With the right marketing strategies, the Black Towns of Oklahoma may be able to survive these disruptive times and even thrive. Rather than depending only on their own resources and platforms, by working with allies, Oklahoma Black towns may increase their visibility and influence exponentially.

CONCLUSION

What will be the future of Oklahoma Black Towns in the United States? American history remains a staple in today's learning for all citizens interested in understanding America. Sadly, some people were not taught about certain events in the nation's history or about certain types of people. The record in Oklahoma is no exception. Consequently, it is important for people to understand and appreciate how communities lived, thrived and survived throughout harsh times. This article provided awareness of the 13 remaining black towns in Oklahoma and shared a marketing framework to provide economic empowerment to these underserved communities.

The economic development of these rural towns is fragile. In general, people in these communities endure low incomes and poor property values (McAuley, 1998). In fact, some homes do not have modern conveniences, like indoor plumbing. As many residents left rural communities for larger cities, many towns faced financial jeopardy. Those challenges were further exacerbated when White lenders would not extend credit in Black towns (James, 2021). With the lack of thriving businesses town governments have little revenue to operate.

Yet, effective marketing will help the remaining 13 Black towns in Oklahoma tremendously because they will be able to reach more people and promote their towns. In conclusion, though the Black Towns of Oklahoma have a story to share with the larger community, the collaborators need a well-developed marketing strategy for attracting tourists and selling their products and services.

Sadly, there are gaps in knowledge about the importance of historical Black locations like the Black Towns of Oklahoma. Therefore, this article is significant because there is limited academic research related to the business dynamics of these black towns in Oklahoma. This research will contribute to rural governments, public officials, supporters of rural black towns, and marketing practitioners in building sustainable economic development in underserved communities.

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