

*~~Roots~~*

*In the African-American community and church*

*-- an ethnographic study of*

*African-Americans in Steelton*

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*Dedication*

~~I dedicate this with great appreciation  
to the African-American community of Steelton~~

## Preface:

I decided to do my project on the African-American community of Steelton, concentrating on the trials and tribulations of growing up as an African-American in a small town in twentieth century America. I wanted to focus, in particular, on the importance of church and community because they encompass a strong sense of culture. I chose to pursue this study of African-Americans because it was a community with which I as an, Euro-American, was unfamiliar. I grew up in a community that was often segregated and I felt deprived of the privilege of experiencing a community that was different from my own, therefore I wanted to experience a culture that I had never had the opportunity to encounter in depth before.

Initially, I did have some difficulties with the project. I was reared in a town in which there was an African-American community; however, the tension between the races often hindered my opportunity to experience African-American cultures and/or to know many African-Americans. I always regretted this lost opportunity because I felt that color should never affect relationships between people. Because I was never able to form any relationship with people of the African-American community, I was unsure of how to approach African-Americans in Steelton. My uneasiness was evident in my first experience at an African-American church, The Buelah Baptist Church in Steelton.

I was really apprehensive to attend the Buelah Baptist Church. I went with two of my friends, Amy Davenport and Andrey Valabek. It helped to have other people with me to give me confidence to enter the doors of the unknown. We were

fifteen minutes late. This was not due to uncouth manners, but rather to directional illiteracy. Our tardiness for church increased my nervousness, I did not want to make a bad impression. I guess it is always difficult to tread upon unfamiliar territory but to blatantly disrupt it is quite another nerve-destroying matter.

We were three, white college students walking close together through groups of people whom we did not know. My mind spun with many random, yet relevant thoughts. What if I say the wrong thing? Will they be mad because we are late? Oh no, I have not been to church in a long time. *Is this the church?* It looked rather like a small, yellow dwelling where an extended family might live. All these fears dissipated like steam from a pot when I encountered a smiling, jovial gentleman at the door. "You came!," He said with a grin wider than the crack of the open door. My tension immediately disappeared and was replaced with confusion. I was not sure if he was speaking to us, but upon glancing around, I realized that it had to be us. "Give me high five girls!," he said as he raised his small, chestnut colored hand. It seemed unorthodox but I reached up and slapped him high five. It was not a glorious rite-of-passage but it was a start. My friends did the same, following close behind.

We were then greeted by a woman who pointed us to Barbara Barksdale who was sitting in the last pew on the right side of the church. She waved to us to join her. I wondered how she recognized us. I guess I was beginning to feel comfortable for realization of the obvious had evaded me. In new situations I like to be inconspicuous but we really did not blend in. I sat down while I apologized for

being late. I fidgeted with my coat; Barbara smiled with understanding.

We stood and sang a hymn. I felt uncomfortable, perhaps it was because I always sing an octave lower while confusing all the words. The discomfort intensified with the particular hymn that was selected, "Free At Last". I really wanted to participate because the unification of these powerful and passionate voices excited even my undisciplined voice to want to sing; however, I questioned whether I had the right to sing a song which resulted from my ancestors enslaving theirs'. I moved my lips but my voice was barely audible, silenced by the guilt. This guilt inevitably lead to paranoia for I felt that everyone in the congregation was focusing their eyes on me.

We sat down and the church service commenced. The minister delivered a sermon concerning all the changes that are taking place with the youth of today. I listened intently. His voice would rise in an adamant crescendo that would fall in a lilt of the last word for emphasis. His preaching became louder and the words began to flow into a chant that lifted the spirits of the congregation, causing them to respond with their own praises of Jesus. I wanted to join the responses. I wanted to sing and clap my hands but my inhibitions caused me to remain composed except for my foot which refused to stop tapping to the beat.

The church service ended with a final hymn. I stood, swaying slightly, either caused by the music remaining in my mind or the uneasiness of my legs from the ache of sitting for so long. I felt exhausted but I was also refreshed and invigorated. Barbara introduced me to Ettia Payne who agreed to be interviewed. I was excited and nervous by the prospect of having a person to interview.

After our talk, we left. The three, white college students walked out the doors of the Buelah Baptist church--not huddled, arms wrapped tightly around their bodies for comfort but down at their sides, smiles on their faces. I told Amy about my uneasiness in singing "Free at Last". She smiled and agreed. She said, "Well, maybe we will never know *that* suffering but I feel that today I have become free of ignorance and fear." I agreed with her.

I also had problems with my project due to the interviewing aspect. I had never interviewed people before and I was nervous that I might offend someone. But I realized after my first interview with Ettia Payne that there was no reason to be uneasy. The people who I interviewed were very willing to talk to me. They were open and straight-forward as well as also being interested in my opinions.

I interviewed seven individuals from the African-American community. I discussed with them their life in Steelton, the importance of church and community, the discrimination that they felt, and their good memories as well as bad. I enjoyed the conversations that I had with them and I appreciated the knowledge and sensitivity I gained from these conversations. I finally felt comfortable in a new environment and with the interviews which I felt were the basis of my project.

Because of this project I was able to grow spiritually and emotionally. I have gained a better understanding and an appreciation of another culture. I have learned that racism does not stem from people but rather from ignorance. My hope is that through this paper, I will be able to stop some of the ignorance which thwarts people from having understanding, compassion, and tolerance for others who are different

from themselves. I have learned that people are inherently the same regardless of color. Everyone feels pain and joy; grief and happiness; love and hate, and everyone must live their life the best way they can.



*~~Steelton~~*

"There was something about the air in Steelton, I don't know if it was country or what...the pace was slower...the homeyness, just the contact of neighbors and that closeness, being able to walk up and down the street and knowing what was around the corner. I definitely miss the closeness of Steelton and definitely the steel mill played a large part of whether we ate. Our lives centered around the steel mill" (Beth Brown).

The streets of Steelton weave a wonderful pastiche of diversity. Each block constitutes a different heritage, adding to the color of the cultural tapestry. The communities diverge in heritage, only to converge in the unification of the larger community known as Steelton. The communities with their various religions, beliefs, and lifestyles cast a bright coloration to the small industrial town which appears grey from the steel mill smoke.

The different communities of Steelton have been formed from the migration of people of various nationalities who were seeking work in the steel mill. The people tended to remain with their own nationality, forming their own communities and neighborhoods. "We had different areas of town, we had Polish people in one area of town and you got the East Side and West Side of people" (Brown, 2). The community of the African-Americans is one of many which is embodied in the larger community of Steelton. This community, like many others, became rooted in Steelton due to the attraction of work opportunities in the steel mill.

Steelton is a small industrial town which expanded around the singular

industry of steel. In 1880, the settlement around the banks of the Susquehanna River was large enough to be established as a town. The steel company began its operations in 1866. From the beginning of the steel works, African-Americans were drawn to the town by the possibility of work. Prior to 1900, most of the African-Americans who migrated into the Steelton came from Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia, migrants from the deep south did not enter the town, in substantial numbers, until after World War I (Pollard, 4).

After 1916, the steel company became known as Bethlehem Steel. Bethlehem Steel was actively involved in recruiting African-Americans from the deep south as strike breakers, accounting for the large migration of African-Americans into Steelton during this time. They flourished to the town due to the encouragement of receiving a job in the mill within only a short period of time (Pollard, 4-5). The migration of African-Americans continued to be heavy during the decade of the eighties. By 1890, over 1200 African-Americans resided in Steelton; however, the number of African-Americans was slightly less in 1900. By 1920, African-Americans constituted ten percent of the population, settling in the lower end on the west side of Steelton near the Susquehanna River (Pollard, 5).

The steel mill provided the incentive for African-Americans to migrate to Steelton as well as the nucleus of their survival. The small steel town's foundations were erected by Bethlehem Steel Company and the people who were attracted to it in pursuit of a job (Pollard, 5). The mill dictated the people's livelihood, causing them to depend upon the steel company for the means to obtain food and shelter. It is for

this reason that the town centered around the steel mill. Therefore, the mill caused an economic equality among the communities. "I mean everybody's family worked in the steel mill, so nobody was rich" (Carelock, 5). Almost everyone, regardless of nationality, worked at the steel company, relying upon this job as a way to support their family.

Because the majority of the people worked at the mill, there was a financial equality created among everyone. "Just about everyone was in the same boat cause most of the men worked at Bethlehem Steel...the incomes were about the same in all families" (Powell, 5). There was not a significant division of class structure in Steelton for the steel mill provided the main source of income for every family. The tiring, hard, and low paying work of the mill was compensated by the support that people found within their communities.

Nonetheless, African-Americans were often discriminated against by other people in Steelton, causing their community to be segregated from the other communities within the town. They were often given the dirtiest and hardest jobs in the mill for lower pay. "[The African-Americans] couldn't belong to the Steel mill managers club because they only hired them to do janitorial or labor type jobs" (Powell, 3). The African-Americans were subjected to segregation from other communities within the town as well as within the school systems, alienating them from other people and social activities and organizations. Because of this segregation, they found support, help, and understanding from the people within their own community and church.

People have a tendency to pull together and they make up for what they don't have. And I think that is why you have the communities that you do with one same action inside another. And I think you draw on these strengths, you have to in order to survive (Brown, 3 ).

Their roots were planted within these two structures giving them the emotional strength they needed to endure the hard times of poverty and struggle. The steel mill provided them with a means to live but the community provided them with a means to survive.

### *~~Community~~*

The structure of the African-American community in Steelton is based on family, neighbors, and church. The combination of these aspects of community establishes a network of support. "As more formal sources of aid and support are threatened...informal support networks become more important for survival. These informal support resources can lie in family, friends, neighbors, church, or community" (Hatchett, 79). The family is the core of this informal support, providing the members with the necessary financial as well as emotional means to survive. "So, in the general black population...there is an overwhelming perception of family solidarity" (Hatchett, 67). Each individual, within the family unit, usually has a particular responsibility in order to help contribute to the other members. The responsibilities of the individuals whom I interviewed were often determined by their birth order and/or the family's needs.

The oldest child was responsible for the care of the younger siblings because the parents often had to devote a substantial amount of time in providing for the

family's essential needs. "My mother, she tried to work outside of the home and she did sew on a part time basis...And being the oldest, I remember her standing me at the sink in the kitchen before I was six years old washing dishes. I remember always taking care of a baby, simply because I was the oldest and that was the way it was" (Brown, 2, 4). The responsibilities of the oldest child entailed acting as a surrogate mother in order for the parents to secure the financial needs of the family, consequently the number of children effected the number of responsibilities.

In general, the individuals whom I interviewed were part of a large and/or extended family, attributing many of their responsibilities to the sustainment of all these members. Shirley Hatchett contends that: "...for blacks an extended household is most likely one that contains grandchildren either with or without the parents of the children" (Hatchett, 59). The extended family dictated more responsibilities but it also provided the other members with more financial and emotional support as well as establishing a strong value system.

We were a part of this extended family and the values that I think were taught by being a part of this extended family are basically what makes us who we are today...[my mother] depended heavily on her mother to my father's mother, they were all very important in her life. They played a very important part basically in raising us...my grandparents had a lot to do with what we ate and how we ate, how we came about our food basically (Brown, 1-2).

The grandparents, especially the grandmothers, provided basic child care. They also helped the family by contributing to the food supply, raising hogs and chickens as well as growing vegetables and fruit. They formed the frame of the family unit, providing the care, values, and wisdom of their years.

The oldest child also had more responsibilities because of the absence of the parents, usually due to death. They were then compelled to act as the provider as well as the care taker. "Our parents died when we were young. And so I helped to raise [my younger siblings]...I got thirty dollars a month and twenty-one of that I sent home for the mortgage" (Carelock, 2). Although the oldest had to maintain the needs of the family, they found strength within the family unit, depending on the other members for emotional support, after causing a closeness and stability among the siblings. The oldest child had to bear most of the burdens of the family's responsibilities; however, there were individuals who were the youngest in the birth order who had to support their families because the older siblings were gone. Thus, these members could no longer contribute to the family.

The oldest and youngest child's responsibilities were often parallel because the oldest child had to care for their younger siblings and the youngest child had to care for their ailing parents. "I was the only one in the house, so the responsibilities fell on me to keep the house. My mother was blind...she had diabetes and then the blindness set in. And she had to come home from work...I did domestic work" (Payne, 2). The youngest child usually had to undertake the responsibility of aiding the remainder of the family members due to their other siblings' absence. They often had to endure the hardship of these contributions without the emotional support from other family members because their siblings were gone from the home. It is evident that within the African-American community of Steelton the family was an imperative facet of the community structure. It was the basis of

solidarity in which other informal means of support were formed; however, there were other aspects of community from which the family could seek help, adding to the network of support. "Besides being more likely to be extended at the household level by the inclusion of family members beyond the nuclear family, black families are extended beyond individual household boundaries" (Hatchett, 48). These boundaries were usually extended from the family household to the other houses in close proximity, establishing a support system among the neighbors.

The neighborhoods in the African-American community in Steelton constituted a means of help and understanding for individuals. "...black neighborhood organizations are major resources for reducing alienation and improving the overall quality of life..." (Milburn, 31). Because many individuals were in the same economic situation, they depended on one another for the necessities for survival as well as the emotional strength to endure these crises. "And if someone was to get sick, it wasn't like today where you have different means...the people in the community and the churches would get together and they would provide food and clothing, whatever they could" (Powell, 4). The neighborhood compensated for the family's inability to fulfill their own needs. The mutual exchange of assistance perpetuated a feeling of unity and stability among the neighbors, giving the family the security of an exterior support system.

The neighbors would assume the responsibility of providing for individuals who needed help financially or emotionally, extending the network of support beyond the realm of family. This extension of assistance was often necessary when

families suffered from traumas such as death. "...when my parents died, the neighbors and everybody helped..because everybody worked together...the neighbors and the church, they helped us" (Carelock, 3). Because of the neighbor's willingness to help and their devotion to one another, a bond among the people in the community was possible.

The African-Americans in Steelton found help and understanding through the combination of family and neighbors, creating the foundation of the community. Riger and Lavrakas observed in an ethnographic study of African-Americans that: "...social embedment, bondedness, and rootedness in the neighborhood was linked to involvement in neighborhood groups" (Milburn, 35). In Steelton, the African-American's close relationships with neighbors usually evolved from another support system outside of their families and neighborhood which established as well as promoted community solidarity. The support system of family and neighbors was constructed from the network of support within the church. Many of the individuals in the African-American community in Steelton contend that church constituted the organization of community and reaffirmed the stability of it, crediting church with providing them with the emotional strength to survive. Their rootedness within the church caused a unity among the community, offering the individuals another means of support.

*~~Church~~*

Even in the bondage of slavery, African-Americans praised God. Their



religious beliefs provided them with solace and allowed them to retain their heritage. They sought strength in their hymns and consolation in their prayers. But in the progression of time, the organization of the institution of church supplied them with a stronger means of reaffirming their racial identity, establishing a sense of community.

The African-American church as an institution of support evolved from the oppression to which this race was subjected. Church was an imperative aspect in the lives of African-Americans for it perpetuated the feeling of commonality and community among them. It provided a social setting in which African-Americans could be actively involved for they were ostracized from American society by the white majority. "Black churches are a unique social entity in that they were developed by an oppressed group that was refused access to the institutional life of a broader American society" (Taylor, 105). The cohesion of culture and customs was sustained in the church, forming a means of retaining African-American's identity as a unified race. Church served the purpose of providing African-Americans with an institution which served as a sanctuary from the harsh discrimination of American society as well as a place to maintain their heritage.

Because African-Americans were forced to endure discrimination within American society, they established the refuge of church in order to secure a place within that society. "The significance of black churches to community life may be attributed, in part, to their position as one of the few indigenous institutions in black communities that are built, financed, and controlled by blacks" (Taylor, 105).

The church was a facet of African-American's lives that they could control and in turn, they found strength and support in that control. It was one of the few realms in American society where they could voice their opinions and socially express themselves without the threat of being scrutinized and/or exposed to the hostility of the white majority.

Richard Allen who organized the Free African Society was responsible for leading the movement that established the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The movement spread to other areas, erecting these churches in various cities (Frazier, 27). One of these areas was Steelton which witnessed, in 1871, the organizing of the first church which was the African Methodist Episcopal, located on Second and Adams Street (Pollard, 5).

Prior to World War I, there was an aggregate membership of three black churches which amounted to nearly seven hundred members. Because there were 1200 African-Americans in the community, only fifty-eight percent could be counted as members of the congregation (Pollard, 5). Only half of the African-American population was affiliated with the church; however, the influence of the congregation cannot be minimized. Although the congregation did not represent the entire African-American population in Steelton, it did demonstrate those who were willing to strive for respectability in a predominantly white society.

The sermons encouraged African-Americans to avoid Sabbath breaking, gambling, drinking, and disorderly affairs, establishing a value system. The sermons were usually conducted twice on Sunday and the congregation was

strongly encouraged to attend both. Although the churches' efforts were to construct an institution which would promote values, morals, and racial identity among the African-Americans, it also served the purpose of providing them with solace and support. The following is a prayer which describes the comfort that these individuals found through their belief in God. It was often recited during services. "Vainly we offer each ample, vainly with gifts would his favors secure. Richer by far is the heart's adoration, dear to God are the prayers of the poor" (Pollard, 5). This prayer depicts the heartfelt plea of the poor and oppressed. The church provided them with a place to profess these pleas as well as occupying an important role in their lives by establishing a system of values and support.

It is evident in the interviews that I have conducted that church served as an important aspect of these individuals' lives, providing them with the means to seek social interaction, support, and solace that could not always be found outside of their community and/or religious sphere. The church constructs, for African-Americans, a stronger sense of their *own* community while supplying them with another source of a support network.

The church served as a place for African-Americans to socially interact and be involved in activities and organizations in which they were restricted from outside of their community. "Black churches serve as the organizational hub of community life...black churches furnish outlets for social expression, provide a forum for the discussion of political and social issues, and serve as a training ground for potential leaders" (Taylor, 105). The church compensated for the loss African-Americans felt

by being restricted from the mainstream of American society, by giving them an establishment where they could openly express their opinions and feelings. "...you were allowed to express yourself. Although everything was geared toward religion, there was more of a freedom of expression." (Powell, 2). This expression was vital to African-Americans' survival for it reinforced their worth and importance as members in society.

The African-American individuals whom I interviewed affirmed that church was a large part of reestablishing community ties. It was a place where they could be social, reaffirming their own positions in society.

There seemed to be an importance there...the church played quite a role as a social center for our community as a coming together. Not only did you have the fellowship, it was an area where people came together socially to actually just bond together. It was the center of our community, it really was (Brown, 3).

The social involvement in the church caused community solidarity, leading to the strengthening of the support system within the community. Individuals received a sense of unity through the church by interacting with others who were also victims of discrimination (Lincoln, 1). The acknowledgement of commonality served to aid individuals in their plight of being subjected to prejudice and rejection, bonding the community together by the same need for help and understanding.

The church as a community structure gave African-Americans the opportunity to be involved in social activities that were not provided for them in other areas of society as a whole. "Religious orientation and behaviors of black Americans emerged as a reaction to blocked opportunities in American

mainstream" (Taylor, 106). African-Americans affiliation with church gave them the chance to participate in organizations as well as enjoy the entertainment of particular programs. "The schools did very little socially... [The church] had picnics and we had trips around the world were you would walk from one house to another and you would gather different items. It was a social...they used to have tea parties for us" (Powell, 2). These organizations and activities also served to link the community with the church, providing the individuals with a feeling of belonging to a society whether or not it was mainstream.

The church as a community structure also formed another means of support for African-Americans. Because the members of the community bonded within the institution of church, they formed relationships with one another of mutual reliance and dependency. "If there were hard times and a community member was sick and they belonged to your church, [the church members] went out and took care of that person...they would gather money from the church to send so that person could have...I guess the money to pay their bills" (Barksdale, 2). The church members' assistance often enabled individuals to survive through their hardships, both financially and emotionally.

The African-American churches in Steelton not only gave individuals a means for social interaction and support, but it also provided solace, for those who struggled with tribulations within their own lives, by instilling a strong value system and belief in God. "I couldn't have made it [without church], I think. Sometimes, you know, you get off on the wrong path and something pulled me back

and I contribute that to going to church, being affiliated with church all my life is the reason for that" (Payne, 8). The church provided individuals with a sense of moral responsibility. Because these individuals could find consolation in the support of the church members and their religious beliefs, they often depended on the church to lead them in the right direction.

These individuals' interaction within the community and church reaffirmed their roots as African-Americans. These roots were reestablished within the community by the formation of people with the same culture and within the church by the style of preaching and music that was uniquely African-American. The melodic chanting of the preacher caused the congregation to answer his sermons with responses of religious praises and shouts, causing them to clap their hands and sway to the beat that was formed by the rhythmical crescendo of the preacher's prayers. The gospel hymns, through their deep minor chords, told of the struggles and strife of slaves' fight for freedom, giving the congregation an understanding of a past generation's hopes, pleas, and plight (Barksdale, 2). These roots were planted in the soils of renewed hope and freedom but they flourished in a time of discrimination and prejudice, leading African-Americans to establish their own community and system of support within the church.

### *~~Discrimination~~*

The African-Americans in Steelton were often subject to discrimination within the town. Their family, neighbors, and church formed their community which provided them with the emotional support to withstand the prejudice which

they were forced to endure.

...few would deny that living in black America has been, and continues to be, detrimental to one's life chances, social integration, and physical and mental health...consequently...exclusion from the mainstream American opportunity structure is played out in many other ways in the social and psychological nature of black neighborhood, family, and individual life (Jackson, 264).

The structure of their community was erected from the segregation they felt from the other communities within the town, arising from many of the townspeople's discrimination of the African-American race. The African-American individuals whom I interviewed revealed that the segregation between the communities was obvious and the acts of prejudice were usually blatant. However, their exclusion from the other communities was acknowledged as a silent realization; they perceived and accepted their position in society as irreversible. African-Americans felt this discrimination within the town and school, segregating the communities.

Steelton is known for its communities of various nationalities, boasting its diversity. These communities intertwine in the intersecting streets and blocks where they reside; however, the beliefs and lifestyles of these individuals of different heritages, unravels any thread of unity which could bond them with one another. "...they want to call this the melting pot, the little town with the big heart but it's like whose heart are we talking about?" (Barksdale, 7). The "heart" of Steelton is not always perceived as being filled with understanding and compassion for all races, discriminating against those whose race differs from the majority. The African-Americans' segregation from the community of Steelton caused them to feel as though their race was not held within the town's "heart".

The individuals whom I interviewed were forced to deal with this prejudice in their daily lives. They admitted that racism existed within the town but they claimed that it was a silenced fact with which they complied. Because of the prevalence of discrimination against the African-American community, these individuals accepted their oppressed role. "They ignored us. And if you went in the office and there were all white people, they would ignore you...I didn't let it bother me. But, you know, you didn't let it show that it made a difference" (Payne, 4). Although these individuals were forced to acknowledge their position in society by other's discrimination, they still felt the hurt and anger of being ostracized from the larger community of Steelton due to their race. "It was prejudice. And it was degrading, if you let it be" (Payne, 4). African-Americans' believed that only they could stop the degradation of the prejudice actions that were inflicted upon them. However, these actions did cause them to feel pain and hurt which they concealed from the racist people by disregarding their prejudice actions, reaffirming the suppression they felt as a minority. They were often taught by their parents to disregard racist acts, enforcing the idea that these acts were an irreversible part of an African-American's life.

The African-Americans in Steelton realized their role in society as being one which was subject to discrimination and hostility, accepting this position through the socialization process within their family. "The family is the important agent of socialization for blacks, for it is within the family context that the individual first becomes aware of and begins to grapple with the significance of racism and



discrimination" (Jackson, 247). The African-Americans in Steelton often did not perceive the existence of prejudice because their parents protected them from discrimination by teaching them to have low expectations of society as well as instilling in them their boundaries within this society.

It was more or less the way our parents taught us, you don't do the, you don't expect that. We weren't too disappointed. We were prepared for it. I think our parents prepared us for it. We knew you didn't do this and you didn't do that. Like we had two theaters, one was called the Strand and one was called the Standard. The black people could not to the Strand, we had to go to the Standard (Powell, 3).

These individuals' felt oppressed within the society because they were socialized to believe they belonged in that position. They accepted their role as inherent and irreversible, leading them to construct their own community where they could seek solace as well as recognition and approval. These individuals' subjection to discrimination permeated into the school systems, extending the prejudicial beliefs and acts from the town to institutions within the town.

Most of African-American children attended Hygeinec which was a segregated elementary school. "We had all black teachers and all black students, And all the black students in Steelton, Except for the ones on the Lower End, went to Hygeinec. In fact, children on the West side passed three schools to get to Hygeinec" (Powell, 2). After eighth grade, the students attended Steelton High which was integrated; however, many of the African-American individuals in Steelton perceived racism within this school system. The African-American students were often disregarded in the classroom and barred from student activities. They endured the discrimination of their white teachers and the segregation from the white

students, prohibiting them from being able to be actively involved in the educational institution. Because the African-American students were usually alienated from school oriented events as well as deprived of a substantial education, an organization was established around the turn of the century that promoted the education and protect the rights of these students.

This organization was the Frederick Douglass Association. It was intended to be an African-American counterpart to the white student alumni association. The initial objective of this association was to encourage those who were seeking the education of moral and mental improvement. The Douglass Association became a social highlight for the African-American community, persisting until after World War II (Pollard, 5). The organization of Frederick Douglass accepted the responsibility of providing the African-American students with their own events to compensate for the school affiliated activities from which they were prohibited. The Douglass Association also secured these children's right for receiving an adequate education, supporting African-Americans in their disputes with the school.

The African-American individuals who I interviewed recounted stories of the segregation and discrimination to which they were subjected. They were often segregated from the white students due to the separation of activities and events in accordance to race.

...mostly our events [were segregated], ya know blacks had their events and whites had their events...we didn't even have the same prom. An organization called the Douglass Association, they had taken care of the black children's prom. We paid our class dues and everything. We were never allowed to go to the prom with the whites (Carelock, 7).

The segregation of the African-American students from the white students was emphasized in this division of social functions. The African-American students were sponsored with their own activities. However, they were still excluded from the events which were provided for the majority of the student body, leaving them with the feeling of isolation from other students. This isolation led them to form their own community in which they could be socially interactive, furthering the segregation between the races. The African-Americans in Steelton not only experienced segregation from the white students but they also suffered from the discrimination of their teachers.

The interviews that I conducted demonstrated that many of the African-American individuals felt as though they were disregarded, in the classroom, by the teachers. They recognized they were treated with indifference while the white students received more attention. "...I remember I used to sit next to this girl and every time that I had my hand up, this person was always called on even though I had the answer and that person didn't. [The teacher] called on the person next to me. Or if I asked for help, it was always I will give you help but not too much to get you through" (Barksdale, 4). These acts of prejudice affected the African-Americans' view of themselves in relation to other individuals, acknowledging that they were deemed to be in a lower position in society because of their race. These discriminatory acts were not overtly obvious as being racist, therefore African-Americans were socialized to believe that they belonged in an oppressed role. Although some resisted these discriminatory acts, most accepted this role as an

inevitable and inherent aspect of their identity. Because these African-Americans accepted the prejudice of the white majority, a silent acknowledgement of a racial structure was constructed.

The African-Americans were placed in a low position in this racial structure, enduring discrimination and segregation. They were socialized through their experiences in this position to realize the silent rule of where they belonged.

There seemed to be a silent rule and you knew your place...and I went to school with white and black students but I remember our prom and our graduation, even though we were friends all year long there was a certain point when you were reminded of who you were. You couldn't mix. You couldn't integrate. You couldn't belong to this particular group or crowd (Brown, 2).

Although the rule was silent, the African-American students heard it through the loud reverberations of prejudice and discrimination. The segregation of races was not only found in the schools but also in the communities where each nationality claimed their own section of town, establishing geographical as well as racial divisions that separated the communities from one another.

The various communities embodied individuals from different races who either through choice or force segregated themselves from other communities. They formed these sub-communities through the commonality of religious beliefs and lifestyles, isolating those individuals who did not share their same cultural values or heritage. "There were pockets of segregation [between the communities]. We had different areas of town...and everybody looked on their community basically as a closed community. There were areas that were totally white and we

didn't even cross those lines" (Brown, 2). The African-Americans were compelled to establish their own community because they were ostracized from the larger community of Steelton due to discrimination, providing them with a derivative of this community where they could be recognized as viable and important members of society. The African-American community was generally located on the West Side and Lower End of Steelton. Their community served as one of the few areas in the society of Steelton where they could voice their opinions and socially interact among individuals who shared their mutual plight of racial segregation.

The segregation of the African-American community in Steelton extended even into death, forcing the African-Americans to be buried in separate cemeteries from the whites. "Even at the cemetery, at the Baldwin, if you were white you could get in but...they had different areas for different nationalities" (Barksdale, 7). The African-Americans were allocated their own cemetery which served as the counterpart to the white cemetery of Baldwin. In Steelton, the African-Americans, in life, rooted themselves in the support of their community and, in death, the roots of their heritage were planted in the ground of the Midland Cemetery.

### *~~The Midland Cemetery~~*

In 1860, there was a flu epidemic in Steelton, causing the death of many of the townspeople. Hamus Dunckle contributed two parcels of land for the burial of these people (Brown, 7). The African-Americans inherited one of these parcels of land which became known as Midland and the whites received the other which was called Baldwin, segregating the African-Americans from the whites even in death.

Hamus Dunckle gave this land with the stipulation that both groups accept the responsibility for providing the maintenance of the cemeteries. The Midland Cemetery became an extension of the African-American community. They accepted their responsibility of tending to the cemetery because the people who were buried there were loved ones as well as former members of the community, representing the roots of the African-American heritage.

The African-American individuals whom I interviewed claimed that their parents and grandparents stressed to them the importance of caring for the cemetery, instilling in them the sense of community.

...it was a place that we did go and it was one of those areas of responsibility, it was expected. This was something that was passed on from our grandparents and their parents because we took care of our own. This was part of being in that little pocket of a community within a community. You were expected to care for you own (Brown, 6).

Because African-Americans were segregated from the larger community of Steelton, they had to depend upon their own community for support. Midland was included as part of their community, supplying individuals with a means to give respect to the deceased members. The cemetery also by providing individuals with a place to visit their relatives, grieve for their losses, and recall their memories, reestablishing the feeling of community.

The community provided the maintenance of the cemetery by individuals caring for their own family plots-- "taking care of their own." But throughout time, this care as well as the cemetery deteriorated due to the community members either moving or dying. Individuals neglected their responsibility to the community and

their deceased loved ones, forgetting the importance of retaining the history of their heritage. "The area where they were buried was kept fairly nice because people who owned the lots were fortunately local and they remained in this area where now a lot of people have either died out or have moved to other areas and they don't come back to clean it up" (Powell, 8). The deterioration of Midland represented, to many of the individuals whom I interviewed, the disintegration of their history, robbing them of their roots.

Individuals in the community were proud of Midland because it embodied their history as African-Americans. The preservation of this history was imperative in the reaffirmation of their identity. The deterioration of the cemetery caused a feeling of devastation for many members of the community, leaving them with a feeling of hopelessness. "My thought was how appalling, how sad, you know, that you have all this wonderful history buried here literally buried...people can't even drive past and acknowledge that people are buried there because of the weeds and trees, nobody even recognized it as a cemetery" (Barksdale, 7). The individuals who I interviewed found the destruction of Midland to be shocking and sad. They felt that their history was lost and their loved ones forgotten.

There were individuals from the community who had not been to the cemetery in years, remembering its impeccable condition which now no longer existed. Beth Brown was one of these individuals who cherished the cemetery as the resting place of her beloved grandmother and the memorial to all the members of the community who established the roots of African-Americans in Steelton. Her

sentiments epitomize those of so many who felt the loss in the deterioration of Midland.

...when I went up there that day and I saw the devastation of Midland cemetery I was just speechless...tombstones were all over the place. There was trash and beer cans. And there were signs of the occult being out there. And to remember my grandmothers as I actually remembered them and to know that they were out there. It really tore at me. I remember thinking that grandma I am going to do something but I won't forget, I won't forget. That's how the poem of Midland came about, really out of frustration (Brown, 6).

The desecration of the cemetery saddened and frustrated so many who felt helpless at the sight of Midland being engulfed by weeds and trees, destroying precious memorials. Individuals found it disheartening to see their history buried beneath the trash of those who disregarded the cemetery as a sacred ground.

Beth Brown's frustration and hopelessness led her to write a poem which beautifully reflects her feelings of despair, desperately pleading for people to remember the individuals who have been forgotten and to save the cemetery that is being lost.

### *Midland*

*Beneath overgrown trees now entwined  
in clinging vines, they came from some  
point in time to rest at Midland.*

*Among ashes, dust and decay they lay  
in unattended graves with no one to  
remember except on Memorial Day...*

*They are lost at Midland.*

*Can you remember them by name?  
Those who died free and slave paving  
the way to a better day...before  
resting at Midland?*



The hope of tomorrow. Their children  
-their dream! We gave them courage  
to fight for things unseen! Surely,  
something is owed for struggles that led to Midland.

Is there anyone who really cares...  
Anyone...with eyes to see and ears to  
hear--whose heart does not cry out  
in despair...at the devastation of  
Midland?

Cry with me as a heritage dies!  
Thrown aside--in a heap  
of perishing Black pride!  
Lost in memories;  
lost in time....

Shame! Shame! Forgotten roots  
sigh...This is Midland! (Beth Brown)

This poem was written for the recognition of the African-Americans who fought and struggled to create a better life for future generations, planting the roots of a heritage. This roots have been regretfully allowed to be buried beneath unattended graves, forgetting those who once established and formed a community in which others can now seek refuge. Beth Brown believes that people's understanding of the importance of the cemetery was lost in their oblivion of the those individual's contributions.

Brown declared that African-Americans want to find their roots by tracing their lineage to Africa, disregarding the roots of their heritage in America. She emphasized that the roots of the African-American people are in America where they fought for freedom and struggled for rights to release their race from the bondage of oppression.

In 1985, there was the movie, Roots. There was such a sense of roots.

And an importance was being put on roots. And where you came from, they just seemed to forget about the roots in America and in urban America, they just wanted to go back to Africa. It was like a total blocking out of who we are. We are here today because of the people who were here before us which are our roots. So our roots are intertwined in this country. I just felt that our heritage is important, my memories of these people re important. And it just seemed so terrible that with the struggles they make so we could be where we were, where we are today that everything was just lost and forgotten (Brown, 6).

Although some people in the community did forget that their roots were in Midland, there were others who realized that a heritage was also being laid to rest in the cemetery among the dead. A heritage that they wanted to uncover from underneath the weeds and trees, saving their roots in order to allow them to thrive for the next generation. Many of the individuals whom I interviewed felt that people wanted to overlook the cemetery's contribution to the community because they wanted to forget the pain; however, they also forgot the happiness they now feel resulted from these people's efforts to create a better future. But there are individuals who didn't forget and who want to cause others to remember; these individuals are involved in a project to restore Midland as well as the roots of their heritage.

The restoration project of Midland evolved from those African-Americans' who felt angry and saddened by the deterioration of the cemetery and the lost heritage. The purpose of the project is to restore Midland, rediscovering the history of the African-American history. The person at the forefront of this project is Barbara Barksdale who was also devastated by the cemetery's condition. "It was very sad, in fact I cried and I thought God what can I do? What can I really do to change

this and make things really right?" (Barksdale, 8). She resolved to change the disintegrated state of Midland, providing African-Americans with their history and roots that were once an important extension of the community.

Barbara, in frustration and desperation, began the efforts to restore Midland my herself. She pulled weeds, chopped trees, and tried to scrub the stones of their worn and dirty countenance. But her determination availed her with an aching back and more frustration. Her mission to independently repair the cemetery was an impossibility for she needed help. A community had allowed the cemetery to deteriorate and a community was needed to help restore it. Barbara began to recruit individuals to aid her in the restoration of Midland, bringing people together as a community. She found support within her family, neighbors, and church, reaffirming the purpose of community.

The project of Midland has accomplished the revival of the cemetery as well as causing solidarity among the community in the common purpose of finding their roots and acknowledging their heritage. Barbara succeeded in teaching people about the history that was being lost beneath the trees and trash. "Barbara, she became interested in it so now we have a committee. And I'm real active in that. I mean, with Barbara, you learn everyday cause when it got cleared we went around and saw all these headstones from all these people who had been in the service..." (Carelock, 12). Because of this project, people learned about their history, reaffirmed their heritage, and renewed their sense of community.

The people I talked with about the project revealed their feelings of joy and

gratitude for the restoration of the cemetery. They appreciate Barbara for her efforts to give the community the special gift of revitalization. "[The project is] beautiful, beautiful. She's a beautiful person. Barbara is doing a good job" (Carelock, 11). Barbara humbly accepts their acknowledgement of her endeavors but she believes that she had no other choice in her decision. She knew that the history of the African-American heritage, in Steelton, was being pitifully lost; saving it would return the community's roots as well as their hope for the future community.

The Midland cemetery is and will always be an extension of the community. It is reminiscent of a time when African-Americans were segregated in life as well as death, discriminated against because of color. The prejudice of others caused African-Americans to establish a community of commonality where they could seek support, solace, and understanding from the racist society from which they were refused. The people who lie beneath the restored grave sites are the people who struggled and fought for the possibility of claiming their rights in that society, causing it to be a reality for future generations. The restoration of Midland has closed the circle of the community, reestablishing the value of a heritage which was lost and regained.

The African-Americans in Steelton were often victims of prejudice, segregated from other communities within the town. Their subjection to discriminatory acts socialized them to believe that they inherently belonged in their irreversible role of oppression. Because they were forced to endure alienation from the mainstream of society, they established a community which functioned as their

*own* society, one where they could be recognized as viable individuals who made valuable contributions. Their community embodied family, neighbors, and church, constructing a network of support and understanding. This network of support was imperative for their survival, supplying them with the emotional strength to bear the burden of racism. The African-Americans in Steelton planted the roots of their heritage in the small steel town, hoping that these roots would remain and flourish. And because of the efforts and struggles of past generations, these roots *have* flourished, reminding others of a race who fought the bondage of oppression in order to survive.

### *~~My Concluding Comments~~*

I, for a brief amount of time, became a part of a Steelton community, a community with which I had been previously unfamiliar. I chose to experience the community of African-Americans because I had always had an interest in their heritage and culture. I began to slowly enter their community by attending church and talking with individuals.

I interviewed seven members of the African-American community. I talked to them about their lives in Steelton, listening intently to their memories and stories. I felt their strong emotions of sadness and pain as they told me accounts of their experiences growing up in Steelton, being subjected to prejudice, discrimination, and segregation.

These interviews provided me with emotional strength, diminished my fears

of the unknown, and freed me from ignorance. I believe that the most touching and influential interview that I conducted was the first one with Ms. Ettia Payne. She was very animated and enthusiastic in recounting the stories and memories of her life. I listened intently while I concentrated on her face. I studied it--her features, her skin, and her expressions. The stories could have been told solely through the defined wrinkles--frown and laugh lines--and the determined look of a fighter and survivor.

I became so involved in the tales of her life that I felt the anger and pain that she had once felt in her endurance of racism and segregation. As she told her stories, I began to feel as though I was her. I began to think that I understood what it meant to grow up as an African-American. I felt as though I had lived this life--the life of an African-American, in the times of hard work, little respect, depression, and determination to survive.

At the end of the interview, I reached down to turn off the microphone which I held in my hand. I looked so white. It was then that I realized that I am also a color. The color which will never know the oppression and heartache that Ms. Payne felt in her lifetime.

My experiences in the African-American community have provided me with a renewed sensitivity of others. I may have not been subjected to the discrimination and pain that they felt but I can acknowledge it and in doing so I think that I have gained a very special gift--the gift of understanding and unity.

## ~~Hope For The Future~~

*Clayton Carelock~~*

"I would like our young people to get a different outlook on life. You know, mostly young people today, they think that someone owes them...so many of them missing out on their education and opportunities...they don't seem to care about nothing" (Carelock, 9).

*Jesse Powell~~*

"I think the most important thing is that people learn to respect one another and get along together, that's the most important thing. I mean there is always going to be squabbles...but I think once you really learn to really get along together and respect other people's ideas and respect people who are different from you. I think that...we can overcome anything if we must overcome those basic facts" (Powell, 9).

*Barbara Barksdale~~*

"I would definitely want complete unity and happiness in most people. Not none of this you know they say in the north when you look at a white person they will have a smile on their face and they will walk behind you and call you nigger and in the south the difference is that the white person will call you a nigger to you face. So, I hope these days will come to pass...never even worry about having to use the word "nigger". That the bonding, the friendship--true friendship could happen, a unity of people" (Barksdale, 8).

*Blondena Fortune~~*

"[My hope would be for kids to get along] Your color doesn't mean anything to you. it doesn't keep you from getting sick. And color means nothing, as far as that goes" (Fortune, 11).

*~~Oh fear not in a world like this,  
And thou shalt know ere long,  
Know how sublime a thing it is  
To suffer and be strong~~*

*--Longfellow*



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