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TULSAPEOPLE / JUNE 2015 / JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

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Journey back in time

GAIL BANZET-ELLIS



Alicia Latimer is coordinator of the African American Resource Center at Rudisill Regional Library. The Resource Center partners with the Tulsa Library Trust and the Tulsa City-County Library to offer an annual tour of Oklahoma's black communities.

Evan Taylor

From the dusty porch of her hometown's community center, **Shirley Ballard Nero** gazes across the forgotten landscape of vacant lots, older homes and abandoned buildings. The streets are silent except for a few croaking frogs in the distance.






Born and raised in Clearview, Oklahoma, Nero is the town's biggest advocate. At its peak, the black community swelled to nearly 1,000 residents with its own economic center of businesses, factories, a college and "a church on every corner." Today, the town is hanging on to a population of 47.

In the early 1900s, after proprietors pooled their money to plot land in Indian Territory and register new towns, Nero's father migrated to Clearview from Arkansas. Fliers and

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5 Questions: Amanda DeCort
Executive director, Tulsa Foundation for Architecture
BRIA BOLTON MOORE

Tough stuff
KENDALL BARROW

newspaper ads distributed among black communities in the South promoted Oklahoma's lush landscape and welcoming schools and churches.

"They arrived in droves on trains and wagons looking for a new beginning and freedom of religion," Nero says of black settlers. "Clearview was a place to start all over."

But the community's glory days were short-lived. A cotton depression sent shock waves through the area, and agreements made between whites attempted to keep blacks within the town's boundaries. By the 1920s Nero says Clearview was experiencing "the beginning of the end," punctuated by the Great Depression. Its exodus continued when the community's school district folded in 1969.

"Clearview has been my life," says the retired educator of 29 years. "I went off to teach but never left Oklahoma. I've always wanted to tell its story because I'm proud of it."

Clearview mirrors the history of Oklahoma's 12 other original black communities still in existence.

According to Nero, Oklahoma was once home to an estimated 56 black towns or settlements — more than any other state.

As a respected historian of Oklahoma's African American heritage, she boards a charter bus every summer to guide curious souls back in time on the one-day All-Black Town Tour, organized by Tulsa's African American Resource Center. Held the second Saturday of June, the event commemorates Juneteenth — June 19, 1865 — when slaves in Galveston, Texas, celebrated the delayed news of freedom granted in the Emancipation Proclamation.

"We sell out every year; there's even a waiting list," says **Alicia Latimer**, coordinator of the resource center. "We have a cadre of people who have been with us since the tour started, and some of our participants are originally from these towns."

Each tour covers a different quadrant of communities, allowing its more than 100 participants to walk the streets and visit with locals.

Not only are the tours a source of pride for residents, but they also are significant lessons of rarely documented culture and character.

"Many Oklahoma pioneers were of African American and Native American descent, but people don't know that," Latimer says. "Oral history is frequently discounted, but it is important to tell."

She says historians like Nero "pave the way" for the African American Resource Center to build rapport with local residents and gather historical details.

"We have a legacy to pass down to younger generations," she says. "If we don't tell them this history, what will happen in the future?"

As the number of tour participants from around the world grows, Nero hopes more people will show interest in Oklahoma's black town heritage and join its campaign for preservation.

"The more race talk there is these days, the more people are becoming aware," she says. "You have to understand the past in order to deal with the future. You have to know



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where you came from.”



One of the oldest buildings in Clearview, Oklahoma, one of 13 black towns still in existence. Photo by Gail Banzet-Ellis.

June 13 — Oklahoma All-Black Town Tour

7:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Buses depart from Rudisill Regional Library, 1520 N. Hartford Ave. \$45; includes breakfast, lunch and a live performance by Blues Hall of Fame guitarist Harold Alford. For tickets, call 918-549-7645 or visit www.tulsalibrary.org/aarc.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

6/20 Kendall Whittier Art Festival Shop the talented works of Oklahoma artists and craftsmen and enjoy local food, the Fab Lab Tulsa Kids' Zone, live music from local musicians and open house exhibits by merchants and organizations of the historic Kendall Whittier neighborhood. **11 a.m.-5 p.m. East Admiral Boulevard and North Lewis Avenue. Free. Call 918-633-1934 or visit www.historickwms.com.**

6/20-7/20 The Lollipop Guild Art Exhibition This concept show features miniature works by more than 80 artists from around the world. All pieces are 12x12 inches or smaller and showcase a variety of media. **10 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Saturday. Lovett's Gallery, 6528 E. 51st St. Free. Call 918-664-4732 or visit www.lovettsgallery.com.**

*This article appears in the [June 2015](#) issue of [TulsaPeople](#)
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