

Juneteenth A Black American Tradition

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"The Eyes and Ears of the Community"

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Juneteenth '92'

A Community Celebration



Clara Peoples

Clara Peoples Community Care organized the this years traditional Juneteenth celebration. Other participating organizations were, Children's Services Division, Emmanuel Hospital, Bethal AME Church, E&M Sentry Market



Community Care and Bethel Church Volunteers



Emanuel Hospital



Community Care and Bethel Church Volunteers

Juneteenth Celebration!

Juneteenth In The South And West

June 19, 1865, was freedom day for slaves in east Texas and portions of the surrounding states. It was on this day that General Gordon Granger landed with federal troops in Galveston, Texas, with the expressed mission of forcing the slave owners to release their slaves. Many of these slaves had been brought to east Texas from other southern states, such as Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia and "all over the south" by slave owners "because the abolitionist had talked freedom for the Negroes, and they were afraid that their slaves would be freed and all that investment that they had [made]...." [Legends of three types] soon arose explaining the date of the celebration.... (1) the news withheld to make one last crop, (2) the news delayed by mule travel, and (3) the news delayed by the murder of the messenger.

The most frequently collected legend was the one which explains the date in light of the master's need to make one more crop. Versions of it were used to explain the observance in east Texas and southwestern Arkansas.

Although none of the informants told the legend of the slain messenger, there were several versions of the mule legend collected. The most stylized account was included in a letter sent by Haywood Hygh, Jr., a high school teacher in Compton, California, who attended Juneteenth celebrations as a lad in Karnack, Texas. He wrote:

One [story] is of paramount importance to us. How Juneteenth got started. The story is legendary in nature. However, my eighty-six year old father swears that it is the truth; that an ex-Union soldier (Negro) rode a mule from Washington, with a message given him by Abe Lincoln, Yessuh, all the way to

this section of the country. And when he got to Oklahoma, he informed the slaves that they were free. From there he went to Arkansas [sic] and Texas. It was the nineteenth of June when he arrived in Oklahoma. My father swears it, and he says if his father was still alive, he would do the same swearing without batting his eyes. Many of the old-timers are with him one hundred percent.

Only two informants indicated that they knew the mule legend. Artis Lovelady said he had heard it, but confessed that "I don't know the whole story."

Juneteenth was also originally celebrated in Louisiana. Rupert Secrett, retired barber and former sponsor of the celebration in Brenham, Texas, mentioned friendly "hurrahing" among blacks of Louisiana and Texas as to which state was the first to celebrate emancipation. Louisiana blacks often said: "The people in Texas didn't know they was free until the people from Louisiana came over and told 'em." David Johnson, Dean of Students at Texas College, Tyler, Texas, and a native of Louisiana, recalls the celebration being observed "...all over the state of Louisiana." He specifically recalled the celebration being strong around the New Orleans area, the city from which General Granger began his historic voyage to Galveston. And U.T.D. Williams, Steward in the Ebenzer AME Church, Tyler, Texas, attended Juneteenth celebrations in the northwestern town of Grand Bayou, Louisiana, where "the white folks" furnished all the food.

Southwestern Arkansas was another area of an adjoining state into which the Juneteenth celebration spilled over. This southwestern area of Arkansas, like the

adjoining east Texas, is heavily populated with blacks. Mrs. E.B. Tollette lived in the all-Negro town of Tollette in this rural southwestern section of the state. Tollette, Arkansas, "was a large community" of "farmers" and "home owners." She also recalled, with pride, that it also had its own post office. The black farmers in Blevins, Paraloma, Nashville, Tollette, etc. "had great big picnics on the 19th of June."... In the late 1800's many ex-slaves began to migrate the tri-state area into the territory which was to become Oklahoma...and took their precious freedom festival with them. Like the blacks who would take part in the great northern migration of the early 1900's the ex-slaves who took part in this westward movement of the 1880's were close enough to the end of physical slavery to still have a deep appreciation for the day which signaled its end. Therefore, throughout Oklahoma, especially the newly formed all-black communities, they transplanted their Juneteenth celebrations. Mrs. Lillian Crisp, a public school teacher in Ardmore, Oklahoma, taught in the all-black Oklahoma town of Tatum and recalled Juneteenth being an all-day celebration of picnics, baseball games, occasional political speeches, square dancing and general socializing.

There was a second migration of blacks from the southwestern states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma in the late 1930's and early 1940's. This time the move was further west to California, with the major attraction being good paying jobs in the war industries of the Golden State. So many blacks left the peonage of east Texas sharecropping, the unfulfilled promise of Oklahoma's all-black communities,

and the rigid segregation patterns of Arkansas and Louisiana and headed west to California in search of a better life. However, the Juneteenth celebration was one of the cultural casualties of this migration. The generation of blacks who made this trip were some seventy odd years removed from June 19, 1865, that day of days when their ancestors became free men.

These west coast offspring still honored Juneteenth, but not in a manner that would rival their forefathers. In California there were attempts to transplant the tradition once again, but the celebration had dwindled in scope to Juneteenth picnics sponsored by blacks from the same state, for example, an "Oklahoma Picnic" is held in Los Angeles' Lincoln Heights Park every June 19th. However, the biggest change in Juneteenth observances by blacks on the west coast has been homecoming. Like the swallows of Capistrano, each year many of them migrate back home on the weekend nearest the 19th of June. At the 1972 celebration in the all-black community of Branchville, Texas, blacks came back from Kansas, Missouri and California. Juneteenth has also been celebrated in isolated areas of Alabama and Florida. Mrs. Minnie Lee Riley, an old member of Miles Chapel AME Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, told, after church services, how Juneteenth was celebrated in her native home of Clark County, Alabama. And the 19th of June has been observed in the southern Florida town of Boynton Beach.

The most common type of Juneteenth celebrations was an all-day secular affair which began around 10 o'clock in the morning with a parade

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January 1, 1863, the date of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, is solemnly commemorated in many American black communities. It is, however, only one of a number of "freedom day" celebrations held on various dates, for the end of slavery was a gradual process and often a local one which evoked local observances. Thus the date on which General Gordon Granger arrived in Texas-June 19, 1863-with the avowed intention of enforcing Lincoln's proclamation, is commemorated a "Juneteenth" in eastern Texas and beyond, and a considerable body of tradition and lore has grown up about it. Why is it called "Juneteenth"? Mrs. E.B. Tollette, who lives in a rural black community of Tollette, Arkansas, has this to say: "I was talking with a friend about it today and he said, jokingly, 'You know how we name things,' and said 'was the nineteenth' and says, 'then we began to call it 'Juneteenth,' said, 'we nickname these things.'"