"Securing Satisfaction:" African American Community Building in Fowler, California from 1890-1930

by Anna Moreno Keithley

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The period from 1890 to 1930 in Fowler, California marks a dynamic era when individuals and whole families poured into Central California communities like Fowler aiming to establish themselves within a new space. During this period immigrant and migrants groups were especially noted in this phenomenon. Fowler's cosmopolitan population ranged from Japanese and Chinese immigrants, Latino migrant workers, Armenian refugees, and African American migrants.

This movement of people into Fowler was not unique – many were migrating into the West aiming to settle in these residential towns and cities. What is significant about Fowler's African American migrant group is how they established themselves within this particular town site. The Central Valley's economic development during this period was tied to a global fruit, and vegetable market. Growers, business leaders, ranch owners, and farm laborers were in the forefront of this economy. This industry's development played a significant role in this multi-ethnic population, especially in the way they shaped their social environments and in how they interacted with one another. Many migrant and immigrant groups settled into this town site seeking a sense of financial security and social peace.

Historians have cited the numerous social and economic challenges that African Americans endured in the nineteenth century. Even prior to the Civil War many African Americans made the decision to leave the South to outlying areas. Once the Civil War ended and black male enfranchisement was established, many African Americans still made the choice to move away from the South. The massive movement of African American individuals and families occurred throughout the nineteenth century and well into the mid-twentieth century.

For many, the movement out of these southern areas meant a possibility of landownership, economic stability, social acceptance, and possible protection from violent terror. For these migrants, the promises that a Western site like California offered seemed to be a better alternative than the various obstacles they faced in their Southern homes. Historians and social scientists have noted that many African Americans suffered relentless oppression, grinding poverty, and distressingly narrow opportunities for improving their circumstances during the 'Jim Crow' era. Areas of settlement and relocation were found throughout the nation. One area where black relocation and settlement occurred was in California. While northern urban sites provided economic possibilities that the South could not,

one has to look at other major motivators like political rights, religious freedom, and familial reunification.

One of the major themes in the lives of black Californians was their sense of community. This sense of community was tied to the establishment of churches. As the black population grew in California, there was a "proliferation" of churches throughout the state: "By 1906, there were 63 black churches in the state; ten years later, 95; by 1926, 192." These organizations and religious institutions incorporated new residents into "the local community" and challenged, "white Angelenos who chose to discriminate" against African American residents. Here, these organizations served a specific function within an expanding urban population. Other articles detail this in various California cities like San Francisco and Oakland. Climate conditions, landownership opportunities, and ideological promises attracted different groups of individuals to California.

The potential for land ownership, not only in Fowler but throughout the Central Valley, was one of the main incentives for thousands of individuals to make the journey to the state's interior. As the fruit industry continued to boom in the first ten years of the 1900s, promoters began to advertise the demand for laborers, not only locally but also in nationwide black newspapers. Locally, the Fowler Ensign reported in June 1907 that the California Promotion Committee was actively aiding immigrants from throughout the country to relocate into the Central Valley. The article notes that any farmer or individual with farm labor experience would "solve the industrial question of sufficient labor supply for the agricultural district."

It is important to note that this mass movement and settlement into rural Fresno County was not undertaken just by African Americans, but also by various other ethnic groups. The efforts of actively promoting and attracting individuals through the use of newspapers and boosters indicates that laborers and their families were especially needed for California's agricultural industry. Unlike many Southern areas, African Americans in Fresno County were able to purchase their own farmland without any social or legal restrictions.

Fresno County, and much of the interior of California, was the ideal location for this large-scale intensive agriculture to develop. Fowler and various other rural communities were undergoing a period of economic growth, yet there was a short supply of laborers to meet the growing demands of towns and small cities. Nationally, source evidence indicates that among various black newspapers California's promotional efforts were extended to African Americans through the predominate lure of land ownership. Various newspapers began advertising and writing about the Central Valley's economic opportunities. Land Ownership was the major feature that was emphasized in black newspapers. Weekly advertisements concerning fruit acreage, price per acre, accessibility to water, rail fare to California, and farmers' testimonials aimed at convincing potential African American farmers to migrate.

One of the major projects to utilize these potential agri-ventures and social benefits was through establishing colonies. "Colonization" – meaning an economic and social enterprise of establishing communities – was a small phenomenon that some African American groups undertook during this period in California. Articles and promoters of these ventures would underscore an ideological view of agrarian life. In A. J.W.'s article "The Western Way: Not

Organizations and Leagues but Money and Land," there is a contrast created between eastern and southern states' social and economic environment with that of California's socio-economic environment. The author contends that while in the eastern and southern states African Americans "are being agitated over the discriminative or class laws," blacks in California are changing their social and economic issues by forming their own all black farm enterprises and communities. Ultimately, the main goal of this social and economic venture was to give African Americans the opportunity to "have a home where his rights as a man can be appreciated." The promotion of rural California by black boosters and newspaper advertisements as a site of possibility did convince some African Americans to make the move to this developing state. Yet, the most effective tool in convincing various individuals and families to relocate from Southern or Midwestern areas was familial and friendly letters. For some, word of mouth proved to be the most effective in convincing individuals of relocating hundreds of miles to the Central Valley to reunify with their families.

Chinese laborers, Japanese immigrants, African American migrants, and Armenian refugees were some of the groups to call Fowler home in the beginning of the twentieth century. White ranchers encouraged the immigration of minority groups into the area due to their cheap labor. While African Americans began to immigrate inwards to the Central Valley, many found that during the lean years, farm labor wages were too low. Many skilled African American laborers moved towards urban cities were they found work within the domestic industry. Yet, some of Fowler's black migrants settled in the community with the hopes of establishing themselves within an agrarian-based economy.

During the early twentieth century, Delilah Beasley traveled throughout California collecting local biographical sketches of African American communities and individuals. Beasley's aim was to create a collection that recorded African American history during California's formative years of the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. As seen locally in Fowler, many middle-class African Americans throughout the state were actively advocating "black civic, cultural, and political life…"

In the 1880s, Julia Bell and her husband settled into rural Fresno County. Her role as the property owner of her ranch seems to enforce her economic independence in being able to support her family members at the age of fifty. We can see how a widowed African American woman was able to pull a sense of financial independence to facilitate the reunification of her family - a family that had been separated for over thirty years. Once unified this family was able to relocate into California. According to Beasley, Bell wrote to various family members who still resided in South Carolina, and informed them of the "possibilities of Fowler." Her ownership of farmland and her active role in bringinh her family together by providing financial assistance so they could join her in Fresno County reveals her active role in facilitating outward migration from the South during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Bell was listed as the sole owner her property, which had a total value of $372, and the total tax she paid to the community for the year of 1909 was $10.71. As this record indicates, Bell (now a widow) is not only listed in the census records as the head of household, but also is acknowledged as a landowner whose taxes contribute to the town's financial budget. While Bell

was not the only female head of household in these public records, it is indicative of the respectability she had received not only within her ethnic community, but also within the larger community.

For many African American women, especially those with a middle-class standing, primary education and the pursuit of vocational education are not considered a threat to their notion of femininity. Thus one can assume the value an education had for the future of this community, even for young women. As historian Beverly Guy Sheftall notes that after the Civil War there was an increasing demand for black teachers throughout the nation. The federal government, private institutions like African American churches, and civic groups established many black-teaching colleges throughout the county in the beginning of the twentieth century. Female education, especially for many middle-class African Americans, was considered important. The one issue that collectively gained the most attention from black Californians concerned education. Education was a community effort since it was considered one of the main institutions that would uplift their social, political, and economic standing.

The Wysinger family not only is indicative of this struggle, but their experience is indicative to the nineteenth-century environment of black Californians. The court case that drove this issue to the forefront occurred thirty-five miles from Fowler, California. Arthur Wysinger, the son of Edmond Wysinger, was denied admission the local public school. Arthur's father Edmond sued the local school master for his denial. In the opinion given by Justice C. Belcher Foote, the ruling stated that since the city of Visalia did not offer or maintain a school for black children, then the community had to admit them to the local white school. Thus, the 1890 California Supreme Court case *Wysinger v. Crookshank* ended the practice of denying black children a public education. This case paved the way for the passage of state legislature that led to the prohibition of "discrimination in public accommodations." The assertion of Edmond Wysinger in demanding that his son receive an education drove at the heart of what many African Americans desired. An education was considered a social and economic necessity in uplifting one's community during this time period.

Religious institutions played a larger role then just fulfilling the community's spiritual needs. They also functioned as a place to meet for civic and educational purposes. However, as indicated by local back clergymen utilizing the local newspaper, religious institutions also signified a community's position within the town site. By associating themselves as fellow Christians, Fowler's African American community aligned themselves with the manners and identity expected from a good, Christian resident. Also, as historian Sandra L. Barnes highlights, African American churches also connected this community to a larger statewide network, one which provided support and modeling of how to integrate themselves within a larger town site. Ultimately, for this community their religion was not strictly spiritual, it was an integral part of their community identity. Their religion was the basis to interact with their fellow Fowler residents, and was a means to displaying their intention of calling the town their home. The African American community also hosted public events to show their assimilation efforts. One such event occurred on the first Friday of 1909 when Emancipation Day was celebrated at Fowler Hall. Local African American clergymen from Fowler, Bowles, and Fresno gave speeches.

Those noted were Jordan Young (Julia Bell's brother), A.I. Bell, and the event's person of honor, David Jennings. The nature of the speeches describes the value that this community gives to the ideal of racial progress, specifically a sense of social and economic progress to fulfill a sense of American citizenship. These assorted speeches were titled "The Negro as a Farmer," "The Negro as a Soldier," "the Negro as a Pioneer and Rancher," "The Negro as a Businessman," "Our Women as Missionaries," "The Negro Minister," and "The Negro as a Professional Man." All meant to emphasize specific movements of economic and self sufficiency; one that it is assumed would draw the attention of the local newspaper.

However, when the Fowler Ensign did not note the event on the subsequent edition, various African Americans complained that they were slighted. The opening paragraph of the Fowler Ensign article begins with an apology, stating that the newspaper had no intention of purposely ignoring their celebration. Fowler's local black population, specifically those with established property holdings and community social standing, felt aligned not only with the town's "proper" image but this also indicates a strong sense of their right to fully participate within local affairs – a true indication of their civic and religious participation.

The dominant narrative concerning the outward movement of people, now termed the First Great Migration, often sites the "push" factors. These "push" factors mainly concern Jim Crow Laws, the rise of black lynching, and lack of economic opportunities for African Americans in the South. Thereafter, the historical narrative asserts that World War I had created a growing abundance of industrial jobs which "pulled" many African Americans to northern urban locations. While many did undertake this journey in this manner, many had begun to leave the South prior to the outbreak of World War I.

Many individuals and families traveled and settled in areas that were further away from the South – specifically in Western territories and states. In California, there has been an important component that the historiography has given little to no attention to: the viability that the interior of the state provided as an alternative or more lucrative social and economic venture for African Americans. Various individuals from a composite ethnic identity were able to own homes, businesses, and agri-property. There were also many individuals who did not own property, but nonetheless participated within this local economy. While this is not a newly studied development, it is an important social environment to study in relation to the rest of rural America. Especially in how quickly and open it was to success.

In relation to the focus to the study of black migration and settlement, it is important to note African Americans were among a varied group of people – Asian, Armenian, Latino, and Eastern European –all of who aimed for a sense of financial and social security. This serves as an example of how an African American community interacted and operated within such a diverse social populace within a rural society – one that was experiencing a moderate prosperous period.

Fowler's black community was not unique in their development. The ideal of self-sufficiency, based on an agrarian model with a Christian faith was their core vision. African Americans were among many who came into the area seeking to work and substance within the farm economy. In terms of their religious faith, many African Americans were attempting to

align themselves within the predominantly Christian groups seen throughout Fresno County. Yet the importance of looking at Fowler's black community is that it provides a key narrative in black migrant studies and community building. A narrative in which shows a bold attempt in assimilating and asserting their communal identity within a larger, diverse group.