
BLACKDOM

Philippa Jackson

In the 1840s Henry Boyer, a Free Negro from Pullman, Georgia, traveled to the Southwest while serving as a wagon driver in the Mexican-American War. He returned to Georgia and passed on stories of the Southwest and its wide open spaces to his family, including his nephew Francis Boyer.

Inspired by these tales, in 1896, Francis and fellow schoolteacher Dan Keyes walked from Georgia to New Mexico and founded the town of Blackdom. Blackdom was once home to 300 people who were drawn there by articles that Francis had written for southern newspapers promoting the idea of a self-sufficient community far from the persecutions of the post-Civil War South. Most who came were interested by the promises of free land. Like those who followed them, they came looking for a place to live, work, prosper and raise a family far from the ever-present racial oppression of Georgia.

The community center in Blackdom housed the school and several church congregations and was built with funding from the local school district — a contribution believed to be in response to local concerns about Black and White children attending the same school. “Once there were more than a few, they’d do anything to keep us apart,” relates Mr. Boyer.

It was the scarcity of water that finally caused families to give up on the dream of the all-Black town of Blackdom. By 1920, the year of its legal incorporation, families had begun to drift away. Some families moved to nearby Vado, others to Roswell, Las Cruces and even Albuquerque.

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Hazel Parker works on a quilt in her Roswell, New Mexico, home.
Photo by Gwendolyn Mintz

ing chute), the women serving out large meals of beef and beans and pie, and the families together dancing at the end of work to familiar fiddle music rooted in the Ozarks and Appalachia.

The coming of the railroad was a boon to ranchers. Herds formerly driven to local markets in New Mexico were now taken to railheads at Magdalena and Fort Sumner for shipment back East. By 1891, railroads had acquired nearly 3.5 million acres of land, including right-of-ways — nearly three times the total amount of government land sold to individuals. The railroad had a profound impact on all the people and land of New Mexico. The Navajo Reservation was

“checkerboarded,” with alternating sections of land allocated to the railroad and to the Indians, seriously and permanently disrupting family and community life. Many Indians left traditional agriculture behind for wage labor on the railroads. The railroad also brought immigrants to the state and powered the boom in health-seekers and tourists at the beginning of this century. Towns like Deming and Clovis were born with the railroad. And railroad lore is very much a part of the state’s cultural profile.

The railroads also transported workers and materials to and from the many mining districts that sprung up around the state in the last quar-