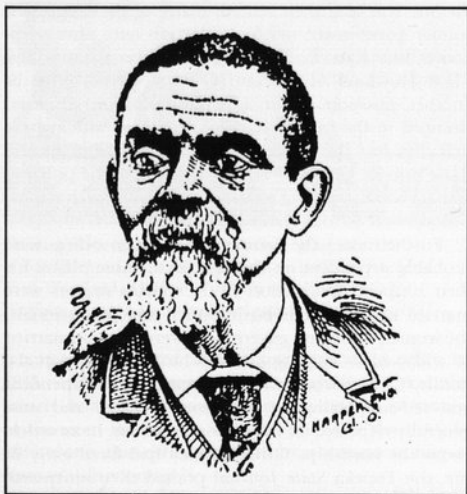


"Protection to All, Discrimination to None": The *Parsons Weekly Blade*, 1892-1900

by Arnold Cooper

FIVE YEARS AGO there was nothing more than a name, but by industry, thrift and the untiring efforts of its projectors—the enterprising colored people of Parsons—The BLADE...is on a solid and permanent basis...."¹ This 1897 retrospective of J. Monroe Dorsey, editor of the *Parsons Weekly Blade* in Parsons, Kansas, provides an insight into the establishment of a weekly black-owned newspaper in southeastern Kansas. The study of the press of a community enables the historian to gain some idea of the scheme of life existing at a particular time. The purposes of this essay are to examine the *Blade* and its role in the black community of Labette County and to add a dimension to the attitudes, aspirations, and concerns of blacks in Kansas from 1892 to 1900. What stance did this weekly take on black emigration, politics, and foreign affairs? What positions did it advocate in furthering community development? What were its editorial commitments? The services and functions of the *Blade* merit scrutiny as a case study of how one black newspaper attempted to educate its patrons in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Edward W. Dorsey founded the Blade Publishing Company in July 1892 and published the first issue of the *Parsons Weekly Blade* on August 20, 1892. Dorsey, born a slave six miles from Lexington, Kentucky, in 1831, learned to read and write by his master's son. Gaining his freedom in Texas in 1863, Dorsey came to Parsons in 1879 and became the first black to hold political office in Labette County upon his election as county coroner in 1883. He worked as a miller for the National Mills and Elevator Company and served as



Edward W. Dorsey founded the *Parsons Weekly Blade* in 1892. A former slave, Dorsey received his freedom in Texas and migrated to Kansas as part of the exodus of southern blacks in 1879.

the business manager of the *Eye Opener*, another black newspaper in Parsons that had published its first issue in July 1892. Because of a dispute, Dorsey left the *Eye Opener* and started his own paper.²

The *Blade* had three principal editors during its lifetime of nine years (1892-1901). Simeon O. Clayton,

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1. J. Monroe Dorsey, *The Blade*, Fifth Anniversary Number, 1892-1897, 1. Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas. Hereafter referred to as *The Blade* (KSHS).

2. Biographical data on Edward W. Dorsey can be found in the *Parsons Weekly Blade*, April 3, 1897, and *The Blade* 13. The first black newspaper in Parsons was the *Kansas Advocate* started in September 1881 by W. B. Avery, a black minister. This publication lasted only several months because, in the opinion of one observer, "The colored people did not furnish a significant patronage to justify its continuance." See Nelson Case, *History of Labette County, Kansas* (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1893), 292. The *Eye Opener* only existed from July until December 1892. See Kansas State Historical Society, *History of Kansas Newspapers* (Topeka: Topeka Printing Company, 1916), 220.

a poet and song composer from Texas, edited the paper from 1892 to 1894. J. Monroe Dorsey, a journalist and Edward Dorsey's son, served as editor and publisher from 1895 until he was succeeded in both of these capacities in 1899 by Charles A. Morris, a local black barber and former *Blade* business manager.³ The basic format of the paper remained essentially unchanged during its existence. Regular columns entitled "The World At Large," "Kansas State News," and the "Kansas Legislature" appeared on the front page. Editorial statements and articles from other black newspapers throughout the country adorned the second page. The last two pages contained advertisements, social news from Parsons and surrounding communities, and farm market information. Reports to Ayer's *American Newspaper Annual* revealed the weekly circulation at twelve hundred copies from 1896-1899. A yearly subscription cost \$1.25 from 1893-1895 and increased to \$1.50, but in 1899 the price dropped to \$1.00.⁴

Edward W. Dorsey established his paper in Parsons, the largest city in Labette County. The first white settlement in the county was a trading post among the Osage Indians in 1840; the Kansas legislature formally created this southeastern county in 1867.⁵ Parsons, named in honor of Levi Parsons, a railroad magnate, gained incorporation as a city in March 1871. The city housed the offices and repair shops of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway.⁶ Parsons grew rapidly. A library association and a school were organized in 1871, as well as

"numerous literary and educational societies." The *Parsons Sun* appeared the same year. The city's population reached 4,199 in 1880, 6,736 in 1890, and 7,682 by 1900.⁷ Improvements to the town multiplied: "The telephone system, the waterworks, and the gas mains were all added... in 1882; the sewer system was put in during the year 1885, and electric lights were added two years later... The business streets were paved in 1878."⁸

In October and November 1879, blacks primarily from the counties of east-central Texas began to arrive in southeastern Kansas as part of a mass exodus from the South. Escape from racial violence and poor economic conditions precipitated this emigration which brought over twenty-five thousand persons in 1879-1880 alone.

7. Blackmar, *Kansas*, 445; U. S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Population*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), 1:418; *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890: Population*, Pt. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895), 1:458; *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population*, Pt. 1 (Washington: U.S. Census office, 1901), 1:617.

8. Blackmar, *Kansas*, 446.

3. Little biographical data exists on the three editors of the *Parsons Weekly Blade*. Simeon Clayton's father, Joseph, was born a slave in Howard County, Missouri, in 1841 and emancipated in Texas. He married first in 1859 and a second time in 1864. It is very probable that Simeon was born in Texas before his family migrated to Kansas in the late 1880s. Simeon Clayton served as a Parsons policeman from 1894 to 1896, later became associate editor of the *Blade* for a short time in 1899, and served as the editor of the *Weir City Eagle*, a black weekly located in a community seven miles from Parsons, for four months in 1900. See *The Blade*, 13, and the *Parsons Weekly Blade*, February 18, 1899, and January 19, 1900. J. Monroe Dorsey was an assistant managing editor of the black-owned *Omaha (Nebr.) Progress* before he became the editor of his father's newspaper. Monroe Dorsey also assumed the presidency of the Blade Publishing Company in 1896. He left the *Blade* in 1899 and returned to Omaha. Charles A. Morris became publisher and editor of the *Blade* in 1899. Besides Clayton, Dorsey, and Morris, there were two other editors of the *Blade*. James E. Johnson, a local school teacher, edited the paper from 1894-1895 while James L. Crow, another black Parsons teacher, served as editor for a brief time in 1899. See *The Blade* 7, 9.

4. N. W. Ayer and Son, *American Newspaper Annual, 1893-1894*, (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Son) 273; 1895, 276; 1896, 274, 999; 1898, 290, 1039; 1899, 292.

5. Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: A Cyclopaedia of State History*, 4 vols. (Chicago: Standard Publishing Co., 1912), 2:82-85.

6. The role of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway in the founding of Parsons is masterfully detailed in V. V. Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 88-97.



Simeon Oliver Clayton served as the first editor of the *Blade* from 1892 to 1894. An orator and poet, Clayton later joined the *Parsons* police force.

From Texas, "Exodusters either went by railroad from Denison and Sherman to Parsons... or by wagon across Arkansas and part of the Indian Territory.... The distance was only about three hundred miles from northern Texas to Kansas...."⁹ One Parsons physician estimated the number of blacks who arrived in Parsons at between fifteen and twenty-five hundred.¹⁰ An eyewitness described their arrival: "Their coming was unexpected, and no provisions for their care and comfort had been made. Buildings for shelter could not be procured. They were mostly without means, destitute of everything like comfortable clothing, and in a condition to appeal strongly to the sympathies of charitable people. Rough board sheds were erected and made as comfortable as could be, in which large numbers were housed for that winter."¹¹

A local white newspaper editor remembered these newly arrived blacks as they "trudged through a driving

sleet, wearing scarcely enough clothing to keep them warm."¹² Other migrants appeared more prosperous, as a local physician testified: "They [black migrants] would come with one, two, three, four, sometimes as high as six horses to a wagon. After landing there at Parsons, some of them bought houses in the town or vicinity, some rented, and some went right into the country."¹³

Black people had lived in Labette County from almost the first settlement. The 1870 census listed fifty-one blacks in Chetopa; thirty in Oswego, the county seat; and thirteen scattered in three small townships, for a total of ninety-four.¹⁴ The number of black residents increased substantially as a result of the southern exodus. Labette County had 2,179 blacks in 1880, 2,045 in 1890, and 1,737 in 1900.¹⁵ Parsons became home to a majority of these black newcomers. Nine years after its founding

12. Harry H. Lusk, editor of the *Parsons Sun*, quoted by Athearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 187.

13. *Ibid.*, 186.

14. Secretary of the Interior, *Compendium of the Ninth Census, 1870*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 191-92.

15. *Tenth Census, 1880*, 1:391; *Eleventh Census, 1890*, 1:412; *Twelfth Census, 1900*, 1:539. The corresponding white population of Labette County was 9,879 in 1870, 20,517 in 1880, 25,523 in 1890, and 25,624 in 1900. Blacks comprised as high as ten percent of the Labette County population in 1880 but they decreased to eight percent in 1890 and six percent in 1900.

9. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 200-1. The substantial black migration to Kansas can be studied in John G. Van Deusen, "The Exodus of 1879," *Journal of Negro History* 21 (April 1936): 111-29; Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

10. Van Deusen, "The Exodus of 1879," 123.

11. Case, *History of Labette County*, 57. Case was a local white judge.



By 1885, when this view of a Parsons residential area was recorded, the town had approximately six hundred blacks living within its boundaries.

(1880), 678 blacks lived in Parsons. A decade later the number had increased to 799 and had reached 807 by 1900.¹⁶

A variety of institutions characterized black life in Labette County and constituted a significant aspect of the social, political, and economic environment of black residents. Blacks in Parsons owned property valued at \$150,000 in 1897, based upon "the findings of two expert appraisers." Parsons blacks were carpenters, butchers, brickmasons, plumbers, and cooks. One was a blacksmith and another an electrician. Several blacks worked for the M. K. & T. Railroad with James Lindsey, a porter, ranking "among our wealthiest citizens. His home ... is one of the handsomest [sic] residences owned by color'd people in this city." Black-owned businesses included a restaurant, three barbershops, a "cozy ice cream parlor," and a billiard hall.¹⁷ To a lesser extent, black economic life in Oswego and Chetopa resembled that of Parsons. No black lawyers practiced in the county but a black physician from a "Kansas City medical institute ... [had] made a strong hold on the people here [Parsons] by ... handling cases that other physicians had given up as hopeless."¹⁸

Segregated black schooling existed in Labette County. The Parsons schools were in a "mixed-up condition—being partly mixed and partly separate. In the first ward the scholars are mixed and in the second and third wards they are mixed from the fourth grade up, the lower grades being separate." Black and white students attended separate elementary schools in Chetopa and Oswego while the high schools in those communities and in Parsons integrated their student body.¹⁹

Black church life flourished. Parsons had six black churches. Oswego had three, and Chetopa had "churches of all denominations ... [with] able and eloquent pastors..." These churches reflected a "credit to the race."²⁰ New Hope Baptist Church in Parsons, for example, was a "substantial brick [building] of broad



Charles A. Morris purchased the Blade Publishing Company in 1899 and served as editor until 1901. A barber by trade, Morris was active in many social and political activities in the Parsons community.

dimensions, with lecture room below, being lighted throughout by electric lights. It was built at a cost of over \$4,000...and is fully paid for." Brown's Chapel A. M. E. Church was "another substantial brick." One observer described the black ministers in the county as "brilliant lights." The Reverend Alfred Fairfax of New Hope Baptist was "one of the shining pulpit orators in the Sunflower State," and the Reverend N. C. Robinson of Oswego's Second Baptist Church was deemed an "excellent leader and a good organizer, as well as a consistent Christian gentleman."²¹

Whites also participated in the religious training of Labette County blacks. Nelson Case, an Oswego judge, reported that he had organized a Sunday school at an A. M. E. church in Oswego in July 1877: "It was entirely

16. *Tenth Census, 1880*, 1:418; *Eleventh Census, 1890*, 1:531; *Twelfth Census, 1900*, 1:617. The white population of Parsons was 3,518 in 1880, 5,937 in 1890, and 6,870 in 1900. Blacks comprised nineteen percent of the Parsons population in 1880, thirteen percent in 1890, and twelve percent in 1900.

17. *The Blade*, 2-3.

18. *Ibid.*, 4.

19. *Ibid.*, 4, 18, 20. A proslavery Kansas legislature in 1855 provided for public schools for whites only and a state law stipulated segregated schooling in 1867. The legislature prohibited segregation in secondary schools in 1879 but retained separate education for the races in elementary schools. In the three decades after the Civil War, a "popular ideology of segregated schooling" existed in Kansas. See James C. Carper, "The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes Toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854-1900," *Kansas History* 1 (Winter 1978): 254-65.

20. *The Blade*, 4, 18, 23. By 1897 Parsons had three black Baptist churches and one African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.), and Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) church. Black churches in Oswego included an A.M.E. and a Baptist church.

21. *Ibid.*, 5, 9, 18, 19.

conducted by white officers and teachers till about 1886. ... [We] assisted in the school till the colored people had learned to read and were able, in a measure, to teach." Other whites taught Sunday school classes in Chetopa's black churches during the 1880s.²²

Black people had an abundant fraternal life as well. Chapters of the Knights of Pythias, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, the United Brothers of Friendship, and an Odd Fellows lodge constituted a "full quota of secret and benevolent organizations." The Afro-American Mutual Benefit Association drew membership from several communities. This organization had three main objectives: "To unify members of our race in this locality; ... To inculcate habits of saving, by requiring each member to pay monthly dues which ... [are] applied to a fund by which groceries and provisions are purchased once a year and distributed to each member; ... [and] To provide suitable and respectable burial for deceased members."²³

Blacks also played a role in politics. An observer recounted the impact of the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment: "On April 4, 1870, the noon stage brought the news of the ratification of the fifteenth amendment, whereupon the colored men then in Oswego were informed of their rights, marched to the polls, the election being then in progress, where they deposited their ballots."²⁴ By the 1890s, H. C. Richardson, a black farmer, held a seat on the Oswego Board of Education; another black man was the assistant city marshal, while H. L. Edmon, a black dry goods clerk, represented his people as a member of the Chetopa City Council.²⁵ All were members of the Republican party.

Forming Public Sentiment

From its very beginning, the *Blade* expressed a definite ambition "to educate our people" and "to get the Negro interested in himself and teach him, intelligently, about the world around him."²⁶ The editors promoted black political participation as part of this education because they regarded politics as a mechanism by which black people could achieve equality. Acting in the role of political educator, the *Blade* considered voting a duty: "We must tend to our obligations as citizens. We must vote either for or against all measures." Frequently, Simeon O. Clayton asked his readers, "Did you register?" The *Blade* also provided instructions on how to mark and prepare a ballot as a way to prepare the black voter.²⁷

The *Blade* urged blacks not only to exercise their franchise but to run for office as a way to develop an indigenous political leadership. It supported black candidates for coroner, surveyor, and sheriff in 1893. Although these aspirants lost, the *Blade* praised local black Parsons voters who "with but few exceptions" stood by their candidacy and cited those blacks who voted against them as a "burden to the race."²⁸ When Clayton ran for constable in 1895, he received a strong endorsement: "We must maintain our loyalty to his support as strongly as votes and energy will afford." Blacks could "prove [their] integrity and race pride" by supporting the former editor of the *Blade*.²⁹ James W. French, a black brickmason, likewise received sustenance from the *Blade* in his successful campaign for county coroner in 1895 when the paper asked "every voter of color [to] watch for the interests of our candidate for County Coroner." Urging "race loyalty of our people," the *Blade* challenged the black community: "If the colored citizens want representation let them quit ASKING for it and VOTE for it."³⁰

The *Blade* went beyond support for voter education and participation toward an advocacy of black political independence and self-determination. Initially, the paper strongly supported Republican party candidates at all levels and reminded its readers in 1892 that "there is not one well thinking Negro who could, without an abuse of his own conscience, walk up to the polls and vote a Democratic ticket." Animosity against Populists in Kansas that same year also surfaced. Any black voter who subscribed to Populism was a "political bastard, unworthy of confidence or respect."³¹ But, the *Blade's* embrace of Kansas Republicans and its antipathy towards Populists changed during the 1890s. Actually, black disenchantment with state Republicans began in 1886 when the party refused to renominate the black state auditor, Edward P. McCabe, for office. McCabe first held the position in 1882 and had won reelection in 1884. Black Republican candidates also lost elections in Topeka in 1888 because white voters in the party defected from their support. When the Republicans withdrew financial support for black newspapers in 1894 and refused to support a black candidate for state auditor, the *Blade* fumed: "If the vote of the Negroes in Kansas ... are not worth the efforts of the Republicans, they [black voters] can be influenced to vote another

27. *Ibid.*, November 18, October 28, 1893.

28. *Ibid.*, April 8, October 28, 1893.

29. *Ibid.*, March 23, March 30, 1895. Clayton was defeated for the constable position but he gained appointment to the Parsons police force in 1894.

30. *Ibid.*, October 26, November 2, 1895; March 13, 1897.

31. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1892.

22. Case, *History of Labette County*, 307-9.

23. *The Blade*, 5, 22.

24. Case, *History of Labette County*, 57.

25. *The Blade*, 6, 9, 20-24.

26. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, February 4, 1893; February 23, 1895.



FACTS are indispensable to the progress of the age, yet they must be linked together.



THE sweeper is a fine invention but it must be closely bound to the chair.



THE horses swiftly sped over the track as if by magic but they were harnessed together and hitched to the carriage.



THE HOG HAS MANY NOTIONS AND ROAMS IN MANY PLACES, YET THE SHOULDER SIDES HAMS, AND EVEN THE TAIL, FOLLOW WHERE THE HOG GOES.



EAGLE THOU ART SOARING TO THE BLUE
ETHER, YET THOU ART TIED TO THE EMBLEM OF THE
GREATEST REPUBLIC IN THE WORLD.

Q HOW IMPORTANT THEN IS IT FOR THE NEGRO TO UNITE AND SUPPORT NEGRO ENTERPRISES.

TAKE HEED AND SUBSCRIBE FOR THIS
PAPER. ONE DOLLAR A YEAR
or ten cents a month.

The variety of types available for job work at the Blade Publishing Company were used to create this analogy of things that worked as a whole only because of their various parts—as the black community of Parsons was a whole which should “Unite and Support Negro Enterprises,” one of its parts.

ticket. . . . We can preach the Populist doctrine as well as Republicanism."³²

The *Blade* did not actually break away from the state Republicans until 1898. Monroe Dorsey cautioned Kansas Republicans that they could not rely upon its past by saying to black voters, "I fought for your liberty." Dorsey declared that "we're working for recognition and principle, but if one party won't recognize us another will."³³ Tired of Republicans afflicted with "lilly-white disease," the *Blade* repudiated the party of Lincoln and supported J. W. Leedy, the Populist candidate for governor in 1898. The historical debt that black people owed the Republicans "has been doubly paid by the Negro with compound interest." Kansas Republicans had failed to appoint blacks to meaningful positions: "Show to us one single act of the Republican party that has in any way been of special benefit or honor to the Negro, except spittoon cleaners. . . and we will scare up a rabbit with horns. . . ."³⁴

Although Leedy lost the election, the *Blade* celebrated the importance of political independence by reminding its readers that "we must cease to be political kite tails."³⁵ William Chafe maintains that "many Kansas Negroes had responded to the appeal of populism. Republican prejudice and indifference had created a political vacuum into which the Populists moved with skill." The *Blade* had thus joined black newspapers in Topeka, Leavenworth, and Kansas City in expressing dissatisfaction and advocating outright defection from state Republicans.³⁶

The *Blade* expressed disillusionment with the McKinley Administration but never urged its readers to vote for any other party on the national level except the Republicans. While Dorsey urged his patrons to stay "'dead in line'" for McKinley in 1896, the vigilant editor complained several months after the inauguration that the newly elected President had turned a "deaf ear to all appeals from black-skinned Republicans who seek a slice of government pie."³⁷ Dorsey also scored the President for not speaking out against the "heinous crimes of mob law" against southern blacks. He complained that McKinley lacked the "moral stamina" to

intervene against southern violence, urged the administration to send troops to protect black lives, and announced that "we are here to pronounce judgment upon the Republican party."³⁸

Each of the *Blade's* editors also lambasted local Republican party officials. Clayton chided white Republican candidates in 1894 for not placing ads in his newspaper, asking "Have you lost your appreciation for the black man's vote, or did you forget him?" Dorsey stigmatized Republican "ring-rule" in Labette County politics in 1897, while two years later Charles Morris suggested that black voters should not regard the Republican party as a "remedy for all of our ills."³⁹ Throughout its existence, the *Blade* attempted to bolster the role of its black constituency as participants rather than passive observers in the political process. The paper asserted its independence on more than one occasion and insisted that black people should never cease to demand political recognition. While the *Blade* urged its readers to exercise their right to vote, it refused to exalt politics above racial solidarity. Clayton stated this position bluntly: "An Afro-American race man is more to be praised than an Afro-American politician."⁴⁰

In response to several of the major domestic issues of the decade, the *Blade* acted as a vehicle for serious reflection about black life in America. For example, it informed its readers about lynchings and encouraged resistance. Clayton believed that lynchings cast a shadow upon the credo of liberty in America: "Instead of America being 'the home of the free and the brave,' it is the rendezvous of the most lawless vagabonds in the world." Although he frequently publicized southern atrocities against blacks, Clayton also attacked lynchings in Kansas. When a white mob lynched a black man in Salina in 1893, the *Blade's* first editor ridiculed "the heathens of Salina" who had displayed a "pernicious spirit of outrage and lawlessness." Reacting to a lynching in Cherokee a year later, Clayton issued a warning to white Kansans: "...as sure as there is a God an intelligent people will not forever submit to this lawlessness."⁴¹

Dorsey continued the *Blade's* anti-lynching crusade by advocating armed defiance. After reciting incidents of lynching in Georgia, Texas and Florida, he issued this emboldened instruction: "Arise! ye Negroes and make one determined, concerted move in defense of

32. Ibid., October 13, 1894. For a detailed account of the relationships that developed between blacks in Kansas and Kansas Populists and the reasons that many blacks reacted negatively toward the Republican party, see William H. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism: A Kansas Case Study," *Journal of Southern History*, 34 (August 1968): 402-19.

33. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, January 19, 1895.

34. Ibid., August 20, September 17, 1898.

35. Ibid., March 26, 1898.

36. Chafe, "The Negro and Populism," 411. The *Blade* endorsed the Republican candidate for reelection in 1900.

37. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, August 22, 1896; April 24, 1897. Dorsey attended McKinley's inauguration in 1897.

38. Ibid., July 3, 1897; October 8, November 19, December 17, 1898. The *Blade* endorsed McKinley in 1900 and became a more vigorous supporter of the Republican party on the state level after Dorsey left as editor in 1899.

39. Ibid., May 26, 1894; July 31, 1897; April 8, 1899.

40. Ibid., December 2, 1893.

41. Ibid., April 22, April 29, 1893; May 12, 1894.

yourselves....Arouse, ye Negroes and be men! Look well to your sabres...."⁴² While Morris urged a less violent response, he did express a bond between northern and southern blacks when he wrote that "the destiny [sic] of every Afro-American in the North is identified with that of his Southern brother."⁴³

At the same time that it printed examples of violence against blacks, the *Blade* encouraged black migration from the South. Clayton, with his Texas roots, argued that blacks who had already left the South had a duty "to do everything in [our] power to assist [our] brethren [sic] to leave the South and settle where land is both rich and cheap and every man can secure a good home."⁴⁴ Morris encouraged southern blacks to migrate specifically to Kansas: "Colored men, come west and take up some of the valuable farms... for now is the time. Come! Come to Kansas."⁴⁵

The subject of black emigration from the United States likewise evoked response from the *Blade*. Initially, the paper attacked the proposition that black people should seek a homeland in Africa, believing that "Liberia has no charms that the Afro-American is sighing to possess." Blacks sought "due recognition" in America, and migration to Africa, argued Clayton, signified that his people were trying to forget their heroic struggle to survive in this country. He asked, "Are we to forget so soon our history...since our emancipation?" and answered by noting that "the very idea of emigrating to Africa is absurd."⁴⁶

But, Dorsey expressed an opposite opinion. He urged the "young men of our race [to] heed the teachings of Bishop Turner." Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop of the A. M. E. church, was a leading advocate of African colonization by American blacks during the 1890s. Dorsey applauded Turner's emigrationist plan to send "enough Negroes who have means or are skilled artisans to...Africa and...prepare the way for the coming millions...."⁴⁷ As a result of the racial turmoil of the period, Dorsey pessimistically concluded that blacks faced only two choices, "Emigration or extermination."⁴⁸ The *Blade* regarded the emigration issue as a significant one and educated its readers by reprinting arguments from other midwestern black newspapers

such as the *Omaha Progress* and the *Chicago Inter Ocean*. When Bishop Turner visited Parsons as part of a lecture tour in 1895, Dorsey reprinted the clergyman's speech and described his talk as "a grand treat to Parsons."⁴⁹

The *Blade* enlightened its readers about other issues besides lynchings, southern black migration, and emigration schemes. The paper promoted the protective tariff as "the best guarantee of national safety," supported prohibition, and printed a series of articles on the question of free silver.⁵⁰ As an educator on domestic matters, the *Blade* envisioned itself as an advocate of "the rights of our people" and a proponent of the "elevation" of the black community.⁵¹

The subject of foreign affairs also received keen attention from the *Blade*. For example, the paper made known its views on the John L. Waller episode. Waller, a black Kansas editor and lawyer, had served as the United States consul to the east African island of Madagascar from 1891 to 1893. After his tenure as a diplomat ended, Waller remained on the island to develop his economic interests. Madagascar, however, became a battleground between the French and the British. When the French gained dominion, the local monarchy resisted. Waller joined the side of the native rulers and the French arrested him as a spy in 1895 and sentenced him to twenty years at hard labor.⁵² The French finally released Waller in February 1896.

Along with other black newspapers in the state, the *Blade* expressed immediate indignation at Waller's arrest when it asked the "Colored citizens of Kansas" to urge President Grover Cleveland to investigate and when it printed a petition calling for action from the "Colored Citizens of Parsons and Vicinity."⁵³ The *Blade* expressed solidarity with Waller's plight: "We love you [Waller] as a typical American Negro.... Your whole race in the United States is sharing a sad discomfiture because of... the neglect of the officers [of the United States government] to do their duty."⁵⁴ The paper expressed skepticism about the Cleveland Administration's willingness

49. *Ibid.*, November 9, 1895.

50. *Ibid.*, January 27, 1894; January 19, 1892; June 8, 1895; July 11, 1896.

51. *Ibid.*, November 19, 1892; January 27, 1894.

52. Randall B. Woods, "The Black American Press and the New Manifest Destiny: The Waller Affair," *Phylon* 38 (March 1977): 24-34. For background on Waller as a significant black Kansan, see Woods, "After the Exodus: John Lewis Waller and the Black Elite, 1878-1900," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 43 (Summer 1977): 172-92; Woods, *A Black Odyssey: John Lewis Waller and the Promise of American Life, 1878-1900* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981). Waller established the *Western Recorder*, Lawrence, in 1883 and the *American Citizen*, Topeka, in 1888.

53. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, March 30, April 13,

54. *Ibid.*, June 15, March 30, 1895.

42. *Ibid.*, November 30, 1895.

43. *Ibid.*, October 12, 1900.

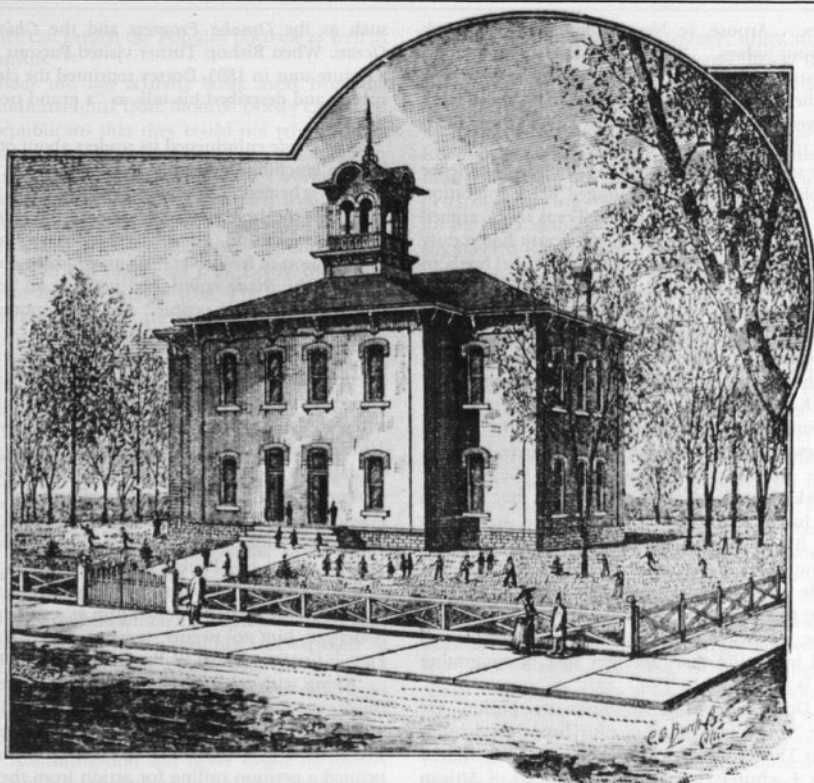
44. *Ibid.*, January 17, 1893.

45. *Ibid.*, November 10, 1899.

46. *Ibid.*, December 17, 1892; January 21, April 22, 1893; March 31, 1894.

47. *Ibid.*, November 9, 1895. For information about Turner and his ideas, see Edwin Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

48. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, December 10, 1898.



While the Blade attacked instances of segregation, it supported, at least under editor Morris, the separation of races in education. Believing that segregation in the classroom would increase black pride and aspirations, schools specifically for black students such as the Oswego Colored School were held up as admirable institutions of learning.

to help Waller because "this country does not [even] protect Negroes at home," and it criticized those Negroes who "sit idly by and see a brother suffer the torments of hell in a dungeon of death and wait for the white man to take the lead."⁵⁵

The *Blade's* reactions to the Waller affair confirm Randall Woods' observations that black Kansas newspapers in the 1890s "viewed diplomacy through the prism of the American caste system" and that they judged foreign affairs "from the perspective of their domestic situation."⁵⁶ The *Blade* likewise reflected an identity with certain non-white populations fighting for independence. In 1896 Dorsey proudly referred to

Antonio Maceo, a lieutenant general of the Cuban insurgents, as a "colored man . . . [who] is due more than half the glory of the success of the Cuban Rebellion" against Spain.⁵⁷ As America pursued expansionism in the 1890s, the *Blade* warned residents of the Philippines that "American rule is no consolation for any human being with a dark colored skin," and advised natives of the Hawaiian Islands that they "will wish for the infernal regions to open and receive them rather than bear the torments, persecutions and abuses they are going to meet at the hands of the people of a Christian country like ours."⁵⁸

55. *Ibid.*, November 2, 1895.

56. Woods, "The Black American Press," 29, 33.

57. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, January 18, 1896.

58. *Ibid.*, December 10, 1896.

When war broke out between the United States and Spain in April 1898, the *Blade* identified itself with the Cubans whom Dorsey called "kinsmen." Although anxious to help bring independence and freedom to the Cubans, Dorsey thought it ironic that blacks might fight on behalf of an America that "doesn't even respect [them] as citizens."⁵⁹ Despite this circumstance, the *Blade* editor assured his readers that black people were "patriotic, full of fire and anxious to fight..." Dorsey applauded the "forty-two stalwart brave boys" from black communities in Parsons and Oswego who enlisted as volunteers in the United States Army.⁶⁰ He encouraged these enlistments because he wanted America to recognize that a black soldier could "stand shoulder to shoulder with any white man."⁶¹

The *Blade* played its role as "spokesman for an oppressed and exploited minority" when it reacted to several of the major domestic and international events of the era.⁶² As an educator of its readers, the *Blade* promoted black political participation and independence, crusaded against lynchings, urged blacks to migrate from the South, prompted debate about emigration to Africa, and demonstrated the connections between race restrictions at home and expansionism abroad. As a "bold and fearless Negro Journal," the *Blade* presented the "live issues of today" as a way of "forming public sentiment" in its black community.⁶³

Battling for the Cause of the Race

Throughout the period 1892 to 1900, the *Blade* played several distinct roles in an effort to help create a better black community. These roles closely overlapped and were not discrete activities unrelated to each other. A careful reading of the paper revealed that the *Blade* assumed the roles of moral educator; exponent of race unity, pride, and black enterprise; patron of education; and defender of the community against racism.

Dorsey stated his intention to crusade for righteous living among his black readers: "We must separate the good from the bad... and [the *Blade*] is the agency by and through which this must be accomplished." Determined to "cut a path through a mighty forest of sin," each editor campaigned against idleness, marital infidelity, and unwed mothers.⁶⁴ Clayton railed against the "many loafing boys and idle girls we have now." He told young black men to "stop crap shooting" and "frequenting the joints" while black girls received advice

to be "honest, upright and virtuous [because they were] the builders of our future."⁶⁵

The *Blade*, concerned with moral decay, actually published instances of marital infidelity as its "duty." For example, the paper criticized a "certain married woman, in fact, a grandmother (but rather a high flyer for her age) [who is] continually parading around the outskirts of the city with another married man not her husband." Clayton warned the philandering couple that "It is definitely known who you are."⁶⁶ Dorsey wondered "why a certain young man was seen crawling away from a certain house on the east side" and why "that frisky married woman on the west side has so many nocturnal callers when her hubby isn't at home?"⁶⁷ Although less confrontational than his predecessors, Morris wanted black people to acquire "true nobility of character.... The Negro must learn to honor chastity and esteem virtue."⁶⁸

Concerned about young black girls "from 12 up" having children out of wedlock, the *Blade* blamed errant mothers who "have trod the same path" for the plight of their daughters. After publicizing the fact that "Julia (Davis) Edwards was made a mother Monday, the fruits of wild and indiscriminate chasing around last spring," Dorsey admonished, "Mothers, keep track of your daughters and KNOW ye where they are."⁶⁹ Nor could black men escape responsibility. The *Blade* suggested that "the better class of our young men should see to it that evil-minded men are forced to the rear."⁷⁰

While the *Blade* paid considerable attention to evidences of moral decay, the paper more frequently publicized the need for racial unity, pride, and black business enterprise. Clayton noted that "the most beneficial and the hardest thing to obtain among our people is unity." He argued that blacks must be their own best allies and that they could not afford "to wrangle and fight as white men do" or indulge in the "trickery and rascality of [their] faulty white brother."⁷¹ Dorsey espoused black unity as essential to progress, noting that "the things which confront us as a race need every colored man's and woman's assistance to move them." Unity among black people meant that "the race problem will be more than half solved."⁷² Morris added his endorsement of racial solidarity when he wrote that

65. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1894; September 23, November 25, 1893; February 24, 1894.

66. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1893; October 13, 1894.

67. *Ibid.*, December 14, 1895; March 21, 1896.

68. *Ibid.*, July 13, 1900.

69. *Ibid.*, January 23, February 13, 1897.

70. *Ibid.*, January 17, 1894.

71. *Ibid.*, October 15, December 17, 1892; June 23, September 8, 1894.

72. *Ibid.*, October 12, April 20, 1895.

59. *Ibid.*, July 9, April 23, 1898.

60. *Ibid.*, June 11, July 9, 1898.

61. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1898.

62. Woods, "The Black American Press," 34.

63. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, September 25, 1898; February 8, 1896.

64. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1896; October 23, 1897.

"unity should be our watch word to teach in the school room, the pulpit and the press.... Let us all be men for the race."⁷³

Unity led to racial pride. In one of his earliest editorials, Clayton maintained that black people had many reasons "to be proud of the blood that courses through [their] veins." He asked his readers to "look at our churches; look at our schools and the brilliant young men and women that are, year after year, emerging from our free schools...[and] look...at our lawyers and doctors all over this broad land...." According to Clayton, "there is nothing so great, so grand, so noble, as a Negro himself."⁷⁴ Race pride for Dorsey included similar sentiments along with an attack on interracial dating and marriage. He lambasted black ministers for presiding over the marriages of interracial couples, and he criticized the attraction that "some of the colored girls of Parsons" held for white men by asking, "What attractions [do] white men have that colored young men do not possess?" When a black man married a white woman in Parsons, the *Blade* cynically commented that

73. Ibid., November 12, 1900.

74. Ibid., October 15, 1892; August 18, 1894.



J. Monroe Dorsey served as editor and publisher of the *Blade* from 1895 to 1899.

the groom "misconstrued Rudyard Kipling's famous poem, 'Take up the White Man's Burden.'"⁷⁵

Pride in the race for the *Blade* also meant praising a number of blacks who had attained national stature, celebrating black history, and promoting cultural activities. The paper lauded Frederick Douglass as "the greatest race-leader we have" because he was "always found working for the upbuilding of his people"; mourned the death of the renowned A. M. E. cleric, Bishop Daniel A. Payne ("A Great Man Gone"); acclaimed the efforts of Ida B. Wells Barnett, a crusading black journalist whose campaign against lynching erected "a lasting monument in the hearts of this [black] people"; and described Booker T. Washington as a "man who is doing a work of untold value for the race."⁷⁶ The *Blade* also heralded certain events in the struggle for freedom. It commemorated the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation each September 22 and Emancipation Day on January 1. It periodically reminded its readers to celebrate June 19 in honor of the abolition of slavery in Texas and August 1 as West Indian Emancipation Day.⁷⁷ Black history became commemoration and celebration in the pages of the *Blade* rather than an arcane study.

As an agent of black culture, the *Blade* encouraged students to read books by Ida B. Wells Barnett and Frederick Douglass, and printed poems by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The paper endorsed a "library reading room" for the Parsons black community as a "commendable project" and also supported the creation of a literary society for all blacks in the county.⁷⁸

The *Blade* never lost an opportunity to encourage the development of black business enterprise. Clayton argued that every black citizen should "strive for his portion of this world's goods.... Get wealth and get it honest." He wanted blacks to show the same zeal and faithfulness "in our business enterprises" as they did in their church duties.⁷⁹ Clayton did not believe in what he called the "'You may have all this world, give me Jesus' policy." Indeed, black ministers had a duty "to teach our people how to live rather than how to die."⁸⁰

75. Ibid., June 27, 1896; June 6, 1897; April 22, 1899.

76. Ibid., November 5, 1892; May 27, December 9, 1893; December 18, 1897. When Ida B. Wells Barnett visited Parsons on a lecture tour, the *Blade* suggested that "Every colored person in the city who is able to be out, ought to attend and hear her lecture." The *Blade* also reprinted her lecture. See *Blade* issues June 1 and 15, 1895.

77. Ibid., January 7, January 28, 1893; June 22, 1895; August 7, 1897.

78. Ibid., February 16, 1895; October 7, 1893; March 21, 1896; December 18, 1897; July 15, 1899.

79. Ibid., April 15, May 20, 1893.

80. Ibid., April 15, 1893; April 21, 1894.

Is Higher Education of the Negro a Failure?

IN VERY MANY INSTANCES IT IS NOT.

But for the Average Colored Pupil, or White,
A Classical or Professional Education
Is Likely to be an Injury.

MANY columns would not contain merely the names and titles of eminent Negroes—Afro-Americans—who despite appalling obstacles have attained distinction in Letters, in Science, in the Fine Arts, in Theology, in Law, in Medicine, in Statesmanship. Two years ago the writer spent several weeks at Wilberforce University, and saw daily President Mitchell and Professor W. S. Scarborough, A. B., A. M., LL. D., author of a Greek Text Book, Scientist, student of Sanscrit, Zend, Gothic and Luthanian Languages, and dozens of others (some of them from Africa) who are living proofs of the fact that neither Talent nor Genius spurns the Black Man. Prof. Richard Theodore Greener, A. B., LL. B., LL. D., Chief Civil Service Examiner, Lawyer, Metaphysician, Orator, Prize Essayist, Dean of the Law Department of Howard University, is one more of the hundreds of instances. Ancient as well as modern history abounds with illustrious examples.

And yet, doubtless, it is true that among colored educators, as among white, relatively too little stress has been placed upon practical studies.

The editors of the Blade did not frown upon advanced education, but they did caution their readers to look first to the "practical studies" which would enable the most, not the few, to succeed.

Race unity required the creation of independent black businesses. Blacks in Parsons needed their own grocery store "receiving the full patronage of the colored citizens of this city," a black-owned "first-class dress-maker establishment," plus a laundry "owned and operated by some of our colored people."⁸¹ Self-help and racial self-respect were interdependent: "If there is one among us who has the capitol [*sic*] to enter into business as a merchant let him do so, backed up by the confidence and financial support of his Afro-American brother." The *Blade* called black business owners the "stalwart standard-bearers of advancement." This quest for economic self-sufficiency reflected the times. According to August Meier, "the leading ideology and orientation of American Negroes" during the 1890s encouraged the patronage of race business enterprises.⁸²

Dorsey recommended to his readers that until they developed a self-sustaining economy, they should support only those white businesses that advertised in the *Blade*. He advised black shoppers to "see who THE BLADE advertisers are" and he suggested this maxim: "I trade with the people who trade with my people." These less than subtle messages suggested the use of selective boycotts.⁸³ Control of its financial resources would enhance a cohesive and strong black community.

The *Blade* recognized that black advancement depended upon education as much as economics. It offered this equation for black progress: "With . . . money in our hands and knowledge in our heads we can march beautifully onward to success."⁸⁴ Clayton cautioned young black students not to neglect their studies and he challenged parents to "educate your children so that they may stand from under the sable shadows of ignorance." Black children could not afford to miss school and families needed "to push their children into school and to keep them there."⁸⁵

The *Blade* regarded education as a prerequisite for black survival in America. "We must educate or we must perish," proclaimed the paper. Serving as an important vehicle for the support of learning, the *Blade* frequently printed the proceedings of the local board of education and supported a school bond issue in 1899.⁸⁶ The *Blade* also addressed the kind of education that would best benefit black people. Dorsey argued that his people needed "industrial, classical or of the common school" instruction. Blacks needed to be

teachers and preachers and also to "learn to be artists, architects [*sic*], mechanics, engineers [*sic*], painters, jewelers, milliners [*sic*] and tailors." Morris carried the banner for industrial education further when he headlined his paper in 1900 with this message: "The Education that Unfits a Man or Woman for Work is the Education that Ruins."⁸⁷

Because the *Blade* encouraged its readers to pursue ardently every educational opportunity, the paper vigorously fought against inadequate schooling for black children. While black and white students attended the same elementary schools in Parsons, they received their lessons in separate rooms by teachers of the same race. When the local school board hired a white teacher "whose condition physically and morally [was] unfitted for such a responsible position" to teach black students in 1896, Dorsey vehemently objected that "the better class of colored people are not willing to have foisted upon them such common characters as some white men see fit to impose."⁸⁸ He also cited the availability of "members of our race [who were] fully competent to teach." The *Blade* editor campaigned for the employment of more black teachers to work in the "colored rooms," and claimed that "there are plenty colored ladies and gentlemen right here in town who are fully qualified to instruct the children of their own race."⁸⁹

While Dorsey refrained from endorsing the concept of separate black schools, Morris editorially supported a separate black school system because he believed that this scheme would raise the aspirations of black students. Totally separate schools would inculcate "a higher standard of race pride and . . . [demonstrate] to our little ones that there is more in life for them after receiving an education than the petty pay of a kitchen maid, a wash woman, a hotel sweeper or a jack legged politician."⁹⁰ The notion of black acceptance of separate schools in Kansas in the 1890s was not unique. As James Carper points out, editors of black newspapers in Topeka and Kansas City supported school segregation. But, the motivations for such advocacy differed significantly from the position taken by the *Blade*. According to Carper, the black Kansans who accepted segregated schools did so not "as an end but rather [as] a means by which blacks hoped to demonstrate to white society that they were industrious, reliable, and worthy of assimilation into the mainstream of American life."⁹¹ Morris argued for separate schools out of a choice for educational self-determination and from the belief that

81. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1893; April 28, 1894.

82. *Ibid.*, March 10, 1894; February 22, 1896; August Meier, "Negro Class Structure and Ideology in the Age of Booker T. Washington," *Phylon* 23 (Fall 1962): 258.

83. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, November 27, 1897; July 15, 1899.

84. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1893.

85. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1893; October 8, 1892; October 5, 1895.

86. *Ibid.*, August 25, 1893; April 1, May 6, May 20, June 10, 1899.

87. *Ibid.*, March 11, 1899; July 6, 1895; June 29, 1900.

88. *Ibid.*, April 18, 1896.

89. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1896; May 8, 1897.

90. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1899; February 16, 1900.

91. Carper, "Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling," 264.

a black school system would help to develop a vital sense of identity, pride, and self-development.

The *Blade* also agitated for full citizenship rights. From its beginning, the paper attacked instances of segregation in Parsons. When Blind Boone, a black pianist, gave a concert at a local white Presbyterian church in 1893, blacks who attended had to sit in the gallery, a section reserved only for them. Clayton told his readers that "It is strange that a christian organization, whose mission is to further the cause of religion, should be so afflicted with such prejudice. . . . When the white churches of Kansas draw the color line so plainly, . . . things are assuming a very serious condition."⁹² He also called for a "first class hotel where there was no discrimination on account of color," and noted bitterly that the community denied former black soldiers of the Union army the chance to participate in Memorial Day ceremonies.⁹³

Dorsey expressed his unflagging opposition to the "vile monster 'colorphobia'" when a black butcher was forced to leave his job with a white-owned butcher shop because some of the customers "threatened to boycott . . . because they employed a Negro as chief butcher." The *Blade* criticized the white driver of the town's fire wagon for deliberately taking "his own sweet time" to arrive at a fire that consumed a black residence; charged that a white policeman used excessive force in quelling a "domestic disturbance" in the black community; and assailed the "unjust and inflammatory" articles of local white-owned newspapers that publicized alleged rapes of white women by black men but which failed to make public the actions of white rapists.⁹⁴

The *Blade* also censored local justice. Disgruntled that no blacks were selected for jury duty in the fall term of the county court in 1897, the paper maintained that

92. *Parsons Weekly Blade*, March 25, 1893. A similar incident occurred at a white Baptist church in 1896 and Dorsey's response was similar to Clayton's. See *Ibid.*, February 1, 1896.

93. *Ibid.*, April 28, May 26, 1894.

94. *Ibid.*, March 7, May 2, November 21, 1896.

"the Negroes . . . have been directly, grossly and unwarrantably insulted and our people should not be slow to resent it." Morris attacked a white justice of the peace who made "certain to have a jury selected that will convict a Negro on any old charge, whether any evidence is introduced or not." When a white man escaped punishment for the murder of an Oswego black man, the *Blade* discerned the reasons: "the jury [was] white, the judge white, and the lawyer white."⁹⁵

The *Parsons Weekly Blade*, in an effort to build a viable black community, touted the virtues of racial solidarity, pride, a group economy, education, and moral development. The paper charted these directions because it wanted a self-sustaining, self-promoting, self-regulating, and self-determining black citizenry. The editors of the *Blade* articulated a set of values and concerns in an effort to inspire blacks in Labette County to exceed their commonly recognized abilities. In an era when equality was an aspiration rather than a fact for black people, the *Blade* sought to make its community congruent and hospitable for blacks. The text of the paper and the context of the times became intertwined. Taking a vanguard position, the *Blade*, along with other black newspapers of its day, served as "important weapons in the ongoing struggle for knowledge and Afro-American self-determination in the United States."⁹⁶ By every means possible, this black Kansas newspaper exemplified what Vincent Harding has called the "Great Tradition of Black Protest," the elements of which included "the proclamation and exposure of wrongs, the assertion of rights, . . . [and] the boldness of advocacy. . . ."⁹⁷ KH

95. *Ibid.*, September 18, 1897; January 21, 1899; February 9, 1900.

96. V. P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination, A Cultural History of the Faith of the Fathers* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1984), 176.

97. Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 147.