

“Not welcome to stop for gas or food”: Decades later, Colorado’s history of sundown towns still lingers

Not that long ago, some communities in the state were intentionally all white and didn’t welcome people of color, either as travelers or residents



Gary Jackson, 77, stands with a 1948 family picture at his Denver home on Sept. 13, 2023. Jackson’s parents Floyd and Nancelia are pictured, as well as his younger brother Larry. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)



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Gary Jackson, a 77-year-old Denver native, remembers when traveling to certain parts of the U.S. as a Black man meant inhospitality — and, sometimes, danger.

“Since the time of Jim Crow, (Black) travelers have always dealt with racial discrimination and incidents of violence,” he said.

On their journeys, people of color remained especially wary of “sundown towns,” or enclaves of entirely white populations that wouldn’t accept their business or company, which existed in Colorado and beyond. Instead, they’d plan their trips to not only avoid these indignities, but to also guarantee their physical safety.

Jackson recalls an instance from his junior year at the University of Colorado Boulder in 1966 when he and his college roommate, W. Harold “Sonny” Flowers Jr., embarked on a road trip from Denver to Oakland, Calif., for spring break. Flowers drove his Oldsmobile, which broke down in Rawlins, Wyoming.

A repairman informed the friends that the fix would take a couple of days.

The students — both young Black men — “went to one of the local hotels in Rawlins, and we were turned down,” Jackson said. Instead, “the mechanic that was repairing our car allowed Sonny and I to sleep in his trailer overnight until the car was repaired.”

The U.S. — Colorado included — is dotted with former sundown towns where people of color suffered myriad degradations: from restaurants, hotels and gas stations declining to serve travelers to neighborhoods rallying against potential homeowners with melanin.

And the possible threat of physical harm always loomed for those who dared to linger after sunset.

While Jackson, a retired senior Denver County Court judge, doesn't consider Rawlins a sundown town because of its small Black population, his experience as a young man echoes stories passed down to him by his relatives detailing their own struggles with sundown towns.

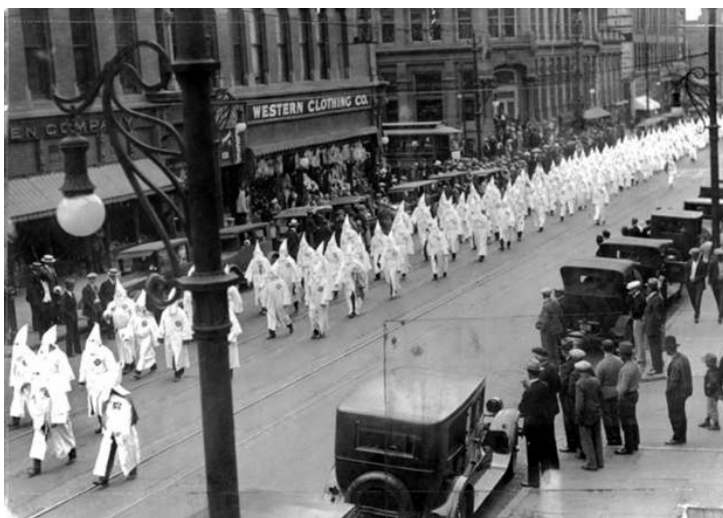
The reach of sundown towns — established as “all-white on purpose” — could also apply to cities, counties and subregions, according to Tougaloo College in Jackson, Miss. The late sociologist James Loewen and his students developed a historical database of suspected former sundown towns by crowdsourcing information based on U.S. Census data on racial composition, local newspapers, oral histories and more.

Called “the world’s only registry of sundown towns,” the database “is and will always be incomplete,” according to its [website](#). “There are too many sundown towns for us to have found them all.”

Tougaloo College’s database of [possible former sundown towns](#) for Colorado includes 11 towns — several of which remain unconfirmed. But some, such as Cherry Hills Village, are recognized by Black Coloradans as communities where they weren’t embraced, along with others that didn’t make the official list like Golden, Estes Park and Loveland.

Today, about 5.8 million people live in Colorado, with around 67% of them identifying as white alone, 23% as Latino and close to 5% as Black, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

As many Black Americans left the South to build new lives in other parts of the country, they often faced the same kind of discrimination they were trying to leave behind.



The Ku Klux Klan marches down Larimer Street in Denver in 1926. (Denver Post file)

In Colorado, 175 instances of lynching, “a form of vigilante punishment involving mob execution,” took place between 1859 and 1919, according to [Colorado Encyclopedia](#). Before statehood, it was often used in mining towns as a type of “frontier justice.”

“Only five recorded lynchings are explicitly tied to race, but many more took place, particularly in the early 20th century,” Colorado Encyclopedia says.

In 1900, hundreds of people in Limon watched as Preston Porter, Jr. — a Black 15-year-old boy working on the railroad with his father — burned alive for the alleged rape and murder of a white preteen girl, Louise Frost, according to [History Colorado](#). Pages of his Bible were distributed as souvenirs.

Two years later, thousands joined in the lynching of Washington Wallace, a Black man accused of knocking a 67-year-old woman unconscious, in La Junta, [The Fort Morgan Times](#) reported in 1902. The news article says the mayor protested as “the mob was not sure that they had the right man,” but the crowd still proceeded to hang Wallace.

The Ku Klux Klan – a white supremacist hate group founded in Tennessee in 1865 – also [made its way to Colorado](#), with a “[strong membership](#)” in the state at the turn of the 20th century. Klan member Clarence Morley served as a Republican governor from 1925 to 1927.

“In Denver, if you threw a rock in the early '20s, chances are you'd hit a Klansman because there were so many,” said historian Tom Simmons.

Black residents also faced prejudice in the housing market, with white property owners and landlords not only refusing to rent to Black tenants, but also establishing “restrictive racial covenants that prevented purchase of property in many neighborhoods” through the 1960s, according to a portion of the [city of Fort Collins website](#) dedicated to the history of the northern Colorado community. Black students at Colorado State University continued to struggle with these issues into the 1970s, as at least two subdivisions – Circle Drive and Slade Acres – illegally continued to ban “non-whites from owning or occupying property within their boundaries.”

Even outside of these neighborhoods, a practice called [redlining](#) hamstrung Black Americans who tried to buy their own homes.



Branch supervisor Jameka Lewis is pictured at the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library in Denver on Wednesday, Sept. 13, 2023.

(Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

“Local banks and the Federal Housing Administration drew red lines around Black neighborhoods, rating them D-Level areas, thus making them ineligible for government-backed mortgage loans,”

author Alvin Hall wrote in his book, “Driving The Green Book.”

As a result, “predatory lenders often offered the only source of funds,” he wrote. “For example, some Blacks had so-called sign-on-contract deals that charged them two or three times what the house was really worth.”

For more than a century, as these events unfolded, The Denver Post and other newspapers encouraged discriminatory behavior by contributing to “the negative stereotypes of Black people,” said Jameka Lewis, branch supervisor of the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library. “The bias is glaring.”

Today, Lewis finds that conversations about historical race issues among Coloradans can be stunted by “this idea that Colorado has always been liberal.”



“Once you dig into the history, you find that there was that fight for civil rights” in the Centennial State, she said. “There was that fight for integration. There was that fight for equal treatment.”

A cabin in the former resort town of Lincoln Hills is pictured on Sept. 11, 2023. The town was established in 1922 as a mountain vacation destination for Black Americans.

(Photo by RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post)

Lincoln Hills

Jackson’s great-grandfather, William Pitts, was born into enslavement in Missouri, but learned to read, write and work as a carpenter.

He encouraged his family to move to Colorado after a visit in 1919 to see his son, who was injured in World War I and hospitalized at Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Aurora. Pitts noted that “the quality of life was better in Colorado than in Missouri.”

Today, Aurora is home to one of the state’s largest Black populations, making up almost 17% of the city’s 393,500 residents. It’s also 44% white, 29% Latino and 7% Asian.

Pitts went on to build several family homes in Cherry Creek North and a cabin in Lincoln Hills, “the country’s only Black-owned resort community west of the Mississippi” from 1922 to 1965, Jackson said.

Coloradans bought up the majority of the development – made up of 1,700 total lots, with more than 1,100 occupied – but others from Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming and more also purchased land in Lincoln Hills, the [Colorado African American Travel and Recreation Resources Survey Plan](#) reports.



Home-made signs mark the direction of different cabins in Lincoln Hills, a resort destination for Black Americans that was established in 1922, as seen on Sept. 11, 2023.

(Photo by RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post)

[Winks Panorama](#), an African American lodge now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, served vacationers in Lincoln Hills from 1925 to 1965, with famous guests like writer

Langston Hughes, musician Duke Ellington and writer Zora Neale Hurston, according to the U.S. National Park Service.

It's likely to become a National Historic Landmark later this year, historian Simmons said.

Today, the winding drive up through the mountains to Lincoln Hills takes drivers past Wondervu, a small community in Gilpin County that Jackson describes as a "town where we were not welcome to stop for gas or food," and Golden, which once served as a [hub for Klan activity](#) in the Denver area.

"Our community, like all others in the United States, has struggled with racial inequality and hatred since its founding," wrote Nathan Richie, director of the [Golden History Museum & Park](#), in a post in 2020. He highlighted instances of "harassment and mistreatment of Chinese business owners at the turn of the 20th century, Klan rallies atop Castle Rock in the 1920s, and threats of violence against a local Islamic center in 2016."

Golden, with more than 20,000 residents, breaks down as 84% white, 10% Latino and 2% Black. Mayor Laura Weinberg didn't respond to a request for comment.

But Jackson's family traveled on until they reached the safety of familiar dirt roads nestled among aspen trees.

The "Welcome to Golden" sign stands on Washington Avenue in downtown Golden on Sept. 19, 2023.

(Photo by Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

The Green Book

Jackson's mother, 98-year-old Nancelia Jackson, has resided in the same Denver home for 97 years. She told him about their family's travels back to Missouri to visit relatives from 1926 until the late 1950s and the precautions they would take to keep themselves safe.

They'd leave Denver at 4 a.m., so, "by the time they got to Kansas to make their first stop, it would be before sundown," Jackson said. They'd bring box lunches to avoid being

turned down at restaurants, and would rest for the night in the parked car in public areas like parks “where they would feel safe.”

Jackson’s relatives followed the same protocol as many other Black travelers. Dexter Nelson II, museum and archives supervisor at the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library, recalled hearing an anecdote about one motorist “having to drive with a chauffeur’s cap in the back of the car.”

“They had to have that, just so, if they did get pulled over, they would then say, ‘Oh, this isn’t my car,’ or ‘I’m just working,’ as a tool for safety,” he said. That account “spoke to how difficult it really was being non-white and traveling back then.”

Black commuters would’ve been wary of Colorado Springs, Limon and Longmont among other towns, Nelson said.

The Colorado Springs Mayor’s Office – representing the city’s first elected Black mayor, Blessing “Yemi” Mobolade – didn’t respond to a request for comment, along with City Council President Randy Helms and President Pro Tem Lynette Crow-Iverson. Limon town manager Greg Tacha and Longmont Mayor Joan Peck didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Jackson’s family would utilize The Green Book, “an annual guidebook for African-American roadtrippers” that the [Library of Congress](#) refers to as “the bible of black travel” during the era of Jim Crow laws.” Produced from 1936 to 1967 by New York City postal carrier Victor Hugo Green, it provided the Black community with recommendations on hotels, gas stations, restaurants and more that would serve them.



From left, editions of The Travelers’ Green Book from 1947, 1963 and 1960 are pictured. Black travelers for decades needed a guide known as the Green

Book to help locate the few motels and restaurants that would serve them.

(Photos provided by the New York Public Library via AP)

[One copy](#) from 1946 lists several friendly businesses, including taverns, drug stores and liquor stores, in Colorado Springs, Denver, La Junta, Pueblo and Trinidad. Ten words of advice printed on the front of the guidebook: “Carry your green-book with you. You may need it.”

The American public largely learned about The Green Book with the release of the 2018 film by the same name, winning three Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Today, “times are changing. There are those that are trying to overcome their legacy of discrimination and trying to do the right thing,” Jackson said.

He credits a lot of this progress to his ancestors. “Because of Williams Pitts and Black people like him, racial barriers have been eradicated,” he added.

“I have stayed at the Brown Palace (in Denver), the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, and I regularly stop for a great meal at the Wondervu Cafe on my way to and from Lincoln Hills,” Jackson said. Representatives for the three hotels didn’t respond to a request for comment.



Visitors with the Horseless Carriage Club of Colorado drive up to the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colo., on July 7, 1952.

(Photo by Glenn Prosser, The Denver Post)

Estes Park

Although Estes Park isn’t included on Tougaloo College’s registry, [History Colorado](#) has recorded several instances in which the town and “much of Colorado’s Rocky

Mountains remained unwelcoming to Black Americans throughout the first half of the 20th century.”

It referred to Estes Park as “less friendly” toward Black travelers, who wouldn’t come across opportunities to eat or lodge there. One example was detailed in an article about the Stanley Hotel published by The Chicago Defender, a Black American newspaper.

“Travel editor Fred W. Avendorph reported that a sales representative had approached the Defender in 1960 about marketing the Stanley to individual Blacks and convention groups,” [History Colorado](#) reports. “An hour after making his sales pitch, the salesman called to say that he had made an error and that ‘the manager of the Stanley Hotel still enforced racial bias against (African Americans) and none would be accepted without protest.’ ”

Travis Machalek, town administrator for Estes Park, started doing research into the town’s archives about a year ago. He points to “disheartening episodes in our community’s past” that have come to light, including an instance when a family of Japanese ancestry was “not received well” during the World War II era.

Ryoji and Yaya Kato shortly after moving to Estes Park.

(Photo courtesy of Lee Kurisu)



The Kato family managed an art shop and a tea garden in Estes Park in the early 20th century, and didn't face any trouble until they were forced into a Japanese internment camp. Once released, the family members tried to return to Estes Park, but the townspeople no longer welcomed them, refusing to give the patriarch Ryoji a business license, the [Estes Park Trail Gazette](#) reports.

Mayor Wendy Koenig acknowledged the Katos with a formal letter of respect at the town's board of trustees meeting earlier this year. She declined to comment for the story.

While Machalek hasn't found much in the local papers yet about other accounts of discrimination, "that's an important part of our history, and something we haven't really known much about." But he recognizes the possibility of the community's awareness that "this may have been an issue."

Since "the pioneer days, yes, it's been a pretty overwhelmingly white community," Machalek said. Still, he notes its demographics are growing more diverse today because of the tourism industry.

Almost 6,000 people now live in Estes Park, with 87% identifying as White, 10% as Latino and 1% as Black.

Machalek wants to utilize the Estes Park Museum "to paint a full picture of what life was like back then" – even its darkest moments.

Museum Director Derek Fortini described his team as in the "very early stages of exploring" accounts of prejudice within the town's history. He has yet to find any laws that contributed to bias, but he's digitizing the museum's photo collection to look for evidence like unwelcoming signs in downtown shop windows and scanning old newspapers for related information.

Referring to the museum as "an institution that's very receptive to hearing these things," he's now seeking input from Coloradans with research or context about any discriminatory incidents in Estes Park.

"They are going to be heard," Fortini said.



Terri Gentry is pictured in Denver on May 26, 2021. Gentry is a descendant of people who organized against the KKK in Denver in the 1920s.

(Photo by Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

Places “we had to be careful of”

Terri Gentry, History Colorado’s engagement manager for Black communities, points to “sundown towns scattered all over the state.” Black drivers leaving Denver to travel north would invest in “a full tank of gas, so you wouldn’t run into any trouble between here and Cheyenne.”

“You could drive north, and see a sign that says, ‘We honor Jim Crow laws,’ ” she said. “There may not be any signs at all. There may be people that will approach you, and let you know what your limitations are in their community.”

And depending on the region, sundown towns impacted other marginalized communities, too.

“They might have laws back in the day that said no Chinese were allowed, or Indigenous people were on a reservation nearby a town, and they weren’t allowed to go in,” Gentry said.

Even communities near urban areas like Denver — and neighborhoods within them — could be dangerous. “You might go into a city, and there’s a neighborhood you better not drive through,” she said.

As of last year, Denver’s population of around 713,000 breaks down as 54% white, 29% Latino and 9% Black.

A native Coloradan, Gentry’s relatives arrived in the Centennial State over a century ago. On her maternal side, her great-great-grandparents moved in 1903 from Nashville, Tenn., with the white family they worked for. On her paternal side, her great-grandfather made a name for himself as the first licensed Black dentist in Colorado.

She recalls the discrimination her great-grandparents faced in the 1920s when Black Denverites tried resettling beyond Five Points, the historically Black neighborhood referred to as the “Harlem of the West.” Gentry’s relatives attempted to move to the nearby Whittier neighborhood.



Denver's Five Points neighborhood on June 10, 1966.

(Denver Post file)

"The neighbors found out that it was a Black man building this house, and so they did everything they could to get him out of there," Gentry said. "They burned a cross on the front lawn, and they threatened him."

He packed up his family and moved west of Downing Street to 32nd Street instead.

And throughout her own childhood,

Gentry felt the effects of prejudice. She would camp in the mountains with her grandparents, and they'd use a camper to feel safe, instead of relying on lodging.

Today, "we still have areas throughout the state where you have to pay attention because they still don't want people of color living in different areas," she said. "That's not as prevalent as it was 50, 60, 70 years ago, but it's still part of our consciousness."

For her part, she pays extra attention when traveling through Cherry Hills Village. Gentry attended an event in the city a few weeks ago, "and we made every effort to be on the road out of the area as the sun was setting," she said.

Cherry Hills Village, with a population of a little over 6,000, is made up of 91% white residents, 6% Latino and 0% Black, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated last year.

"I moved to Colorado in 1995 and to Cherry Hills Village in 2004, so I don't know anything about those assertions nor do I know what may or may not have changed since then," said Mayor Katy Brown in an emailed statement. "I have no information upon which to comment."

As a Black woman, Gentry is often left disheartened by the discrimination that still exists.

"Every day – I get up every day, and have to confront somebody wishing I wasn't here, somebody wishing that I didn't exist," Gentry said. "When do we come to the table, and



understand that equity and freedom should be for everybody, and not just for a select few?"

Flowers bloom and shrubbery grows in the main business section of Loveland on July 20, 1960.

(Denver Post file)

“Don’t let the sun set on your back”

Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders, assistant professor at the University of Colorado

Boulder’s Department of History, pointed to racism as “a national phenomenon.”

“It should not be a surprise that places that were settled in the West and beyond the South – even in the Northeast – had the same kind of exclusionary policies,” said Lawrence-Sanders, a Black academic who grew up near Charleston, S.C.

What she’s often heard from residents of former sundown towns: “Oh, Black people never wanted to move here.” To that, Lawrence-Sanders counters, “Why didn’t they want to move there?”

Although the West claims a smaller population of Black residents, “that’s not accidental in some ways,” she said. “Towns themselves were settled with the explicit intent of keeping out African Americans and, sometimes, Mexican Americans and other people of color.”

Because much of the “collective memory” of Black Americans relies on word of mouth, the true number of sundown towns remains unknown, Lawrence-Sanders added.

In the 21st century, “some of this history has been deliberately buried,” she said. But Lawrence-Sanders pointed to “one of the more well-known” former sundown towns as Loveland.

In Loveland, two signs – unsanctioned by the city – were once put up by townspeople, said historian and artist Olivia Lowe. “One said, ‘We observe the Jim Crow laws here,’ and the other one said, ‘Blacks, don’t let the sun set on your back,’” she said.

At some downtown businesses, other signs warned people of color against entering, with the phrase, “White-trade only.”

Through her research, Lowe [collected stories](#) from Loveland residents, including the late [Ivan Vasquez](#). Born in 1934, he worked on the area’s beet farms before joining the military.

While several neighborhoods outside of Fort Collins were dedicated to Latino farmworkers, like the [Tres Colonias](#) of Andersonville, Alta Vista and Buckingham, “Loveland didn’t have anything like that,” Lowe said. “They all lived on the farms, and that’s where you stayed.”

“Ivan was the first Hispanic, with his family, to buy a house on the west side of the tracks,” she said.

After his daughter faced bullying at Garfield Elementary School, he talked to the principal about her treatment. As a result, “he got fired from his job” at Samsonite-Lego, Lowe said.

Vasquez would go on to march with Latino civil rights leader César Chávez.

“If you are not a melanated person, you don’t know what happens here,” said Lowe, who is white. “Until you have walked in their shoes, you have absolutely no idea what they go through. No idea.”

Loveland Mayor Jacki Marsh acknowledges the city’s history, adding that many longtime residents are likely aware of it, too. “It’s something that I think a lot of us assume we’ve moved past,” she said.

With 78,000 residents, the city’s population breaks down as 83% white, 13% Latino and 0.5% Black.

With six years in office under her belt, Marsh has learned that “areas that I thought we had made progress in as a society – sometimes, I get a wake-up call that, really, we have so far yet to go.”



Speaker Julius Philpot of Loveland, middle, talks with a counter-demonstrator who identified himself as “Elijah,” right, while Mayor Jacki Marsh, left, speaks to other participants in the Loveland Against Racism event on Saturday, Aug. 1, 2020.

(Photo by Max Levy, Loveland Reporter-Herald)

In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Marsh held listening sessions

with her constituents to hear about their experiences as people of color, including prejudices they’ve faced.

“It was shocking to know that that is still going on,” she said. “I recognize that I’m treated different because I’m white.”

One story that stood out to her was told by a young Latino man who wore a hoodie during the summer and received leery reactions. His reason for the outfit choice: “He didn’t want his skin to get darker,” Marsh said. “He knew he would be treated worse.”

That year, she also issued a mayoral proclamation, alongside city council members, in support of Loveland’s people of color.

“Out of nine of us, only three were willing to sign it,” Marsh said. “There was pushback against using the word diversity, claiming that would be divisive.”

When she looks at the diverse student bodies at Loveland schools like Winona Elementary School, she’s “hopeful” for the future. And yet, discrimination faced by people of color in daily life “has gone on, and some continues to go on,” Marsh said.



Demonstrators wave signs at passing cars while standing behind the fence at Dwayne Webster Veterans Park during the Loveland Against Racism event on Saturday, Aug. 1, 2020.

(Photo by Max Levy, Loveland Reporter-Herald)

The Indigenous and Mexican ancestors of Caitlin Wyrick, 34, moved to Loveland more than a century ago, and they all faced obstacles as people of color trying to build lives there.

Her grandmother’s grandfather originally spoke his Indigenous tongue, but “it was frowned upon even to be Native American in this town,” Wyrick said. He stopped doing so in order to better assimilate, and the family lost touch with those roots.

Wyrick described the town’s Latino community as relegated to the “east side of the tracks.”

“There was definitely a very clear line in Loveland,” she said.

Over five decades ago, her great-great aunt wanted to purchase a house in west Loveland, “and the only reason that they could do that was because some of the neighbors that were white had to sign and vouch for them to be able to live on that side of the city,” Wyrick said.

And her grandparents recalled adolescent memories of being unable to dine in restaurants or visit stores downtown.

“It’s not that far off. My grandparents are still alive today,” Wyrick said. “This is very much a part of their experience growing up here.”

She decided to take those past hardships and channel them into a greater cause. Wyrick, born and raised in Loveland, now serves as executive director of nonprofit [Heart and Sol](#) to promote diversity within the community.

“My blood is literally in the land,” she said. “My family fought so hard to survive and thrive here that that means something to me. And I’m not gonna let that go.”