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**BLACK AND WHITE WITH SHADES OF GRAY:
THE GREENVILLE SIGN**

by Paul E. Sturdevant

Landmarks often identify cities or towns: the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty in New York City, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the Space Needle in Seattle. In Texas the Alamo represents San Antonio, and Reunion Tower denotes Dallas. The landmark most identified with the community of Greenville, Texas was a sign that read "GREENVILLE WELCOME: THE BLACKEST LAND THE WHITEST PEOPLE." The original meaning was a friendly greeting to all people, but over time perceptions of the sign changed.

"THE BLACKEST LAND" was clear in meaning, but "THE WHITEST PEOPLE" was ambiguous and allowed multiple interpretations. In one respect, it was a clever turn of words meant to convey friendliness and progress in a small, but growing, community. Over time, the sign both helped and hurt Greenville. Its legacy is still with the community to this day.

The sign was installed in July 1921, but the phrasing originated several years before. Early in the twentieth century, Mr. W. N. Harrison, a land broker and real estate agent, coined the phrase and used it on his business card. The card read, "Will N. Harrison; The Land Man; Greenville, Texas; Blackest Land, Whitest People."

Harrison went to Kansas City, Missouri in February 1916 to lobby for Greenville to be a community through which the Jefferson Memorial Highway (U.S. 69) would pass en route to New Orleans. While there, he learned that President Woodrow Wilson was also at the hotel where he was staying. Harrison paid a bellhop to present his card to the president and

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Wilson, supposedly intrigued by the phrase, asked to meet him. During the meeting, Harrison continued his lobbying efforts for Greenville and the highway. The highway went through Greenville, and the chamber of commerce began using the phrase as a slogan for Greenville to honor Harrison for his contributions to the community.²

In April 1921, the Greenville Chamber of Commerce contracted with the Flexlume Company of Buffalo, New York to have the sign made bearing Harrison's slogan. On July 2, 1921 the sign arrived at the Missouri Kansas and Texas Railroad depot, commonly called the Katy depot.³

The sign was large, measuring twenty-four feet long and four feet high, and was lettered on both sides, enabling people to see it when entering or leaving the community. It was electric and thus visible at night, and weighed approximately half a ton, being constructed of metal and porcelain enamel. It cost between \$300 and \$500. While the cost was mainly borne by the Chamber of Commerce, \$84 of shipping cost was paid by Katy employees.⁴

The ceremony installing the sign took place at 8:30 P. M. on July 7, 1921, and was well attended. W. N. Harrison's oldest son, Hubert, participated in the ceremony, Harrison himself having passed away shortly after returning from Kansas City in 1916. Another son, W. Walworth Harrison, along with his wife, mother, and a cousin, had left earlier for an extended automobile tour of the Southwest and Pacific Coast. The word "the" had been added to the sign by Flexlume above blackest and whitest, changing the slogan slightly from its original wording. No record exists of exactly what the speakers said that night, but they likely spoke of Greenville as a growing and progressive community. Surely there were also statements about the meaning of the words, especially "The Whitest People." A dictionary from that period lists the primary definition of the term white, when referring to people, as meaning honorable, trustworthy, or square. Definitions of "white" related to race were secondary. The primary definition referred to all people having such characteristics without regard to race. July 8, 1921 dawned with the sign in place, beginning its four- decades-plus life and the creation of a legend.⁵

Whatever the intent of the words, Greenville was very much a community of the South. Segregation and "Jim Crow" laws were facts of life. All public facilities were closed to, or allowed only restricted access to, the black citizens of Greenville, who were also restricted to certain neighborhoods and occupations. At the time the sign was installed, the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, establishing separate but equal facilities, had been in effect for twenty-five years. The wording was meant to project a community of pride and progressive ideas populated by friendly, open people of all races; yet, one fifth of the community lived under restrictive conditions and laws.⁶

A few days after the sign was installed, a picture published on the front page of the *Greenville Evening Banner* showed a quiet community street scene centered on the sign. But a few months later an event took place in Greenville that exposed underlying tensions in the community and raised questions about how people interpreted the sign's phrase.⁷

Early in the twentieth century the Ku Klux Klan operated throughout the southern states and in some northern ones as well. Greenville itself may have had as many as five hundred members. Throughout the summer and fall of 1921 local newspapers carried articles on Klan activities in Texas and elsewhere. Several articles covered investigations being conducted in Washington into Klan activities. Locally the Klan's image was that of a benign organization helping the less fortunate through donations to charity and welfare organizations in and around Greenville.⁸

In mid-December of 1921 that image changed significantly. On December 16, the *Greenville Evening Banner* informed the community that the Klan was planning to march in downtown Greenville that evening. The following day the paper reported that about six hundred Klan members had participated in the rally and estimated the number of spectators at thirty thousand. The morning paper estimated the crowd at twenty-five thousand. It was the largest rally in many years, and was the first such event in Northeast Texas. Though the Klan march occurred within a few months of the installation of the sign, nothing directly linked the two events. But the path of the march was from the courthouse to the Katy depot, where the sign was hanging, illuminated.⁹

Most of the participants were from out of town. A great deal of planning would have been required to get this many Klan members and spectators into Greenville. To believe that this was a spontaneous event is just not reasonable. Klan members obviously intended to use the sign as a symbol of white supremacy; their interpretation of the phrase meant "whites only." They made themselves visible in a community that had little previous experience with this type of situation.¹⁰

Many Greenville citizens did not interpret it the way the Klan did. Paul Mathews remembered the sign's wording as meaning all persons regardless of race. Whether the Klan held the rally and march deliberately, to draw attention to the sign, cannot be determined by available information.

Dewey Fitzpatrick, a black businessman in Greenville, stated that when he first saw the sign in the early 1950s, he did not give it much thought. He believed it meant good, friendly people of all races who were trustworthy and helpful to their neighbors. Myrna Gilstrap, a black civic leader of Greenville and associate professor of business at Texas A&M University-Commerce, said that she never thought of the sign much, that it was just there on Lee Street. Her first thoughts about the various meanings of the word came when she was riding the bus from college into Greenville and heard white men comment on seeing the sign, thinking that it likely meant no blacks lived in the town. Jack Finney, a white Greenville businessman, recalled that when he and his parents drove to Dallas from Paris, Texas, they passed through Greenville and saw the sign hanging there. Later, when he moved to Greenville, he understood the meaning of the words to include all people regardless of race. People basically thought little about the sign and saw it as just a landmark downtown. As the sign became more widely known, perceptions changed about the meaning of the words.¹¹

In 1928 Greenville hosted a chamber of commerce convention with delegates from across East Texas and surrounding areas in attendance. Thousands of people came to town, many arriving by train at the Katy depot. One of the first things many of them saw upon leaving the train was the sign and its words "GREENVILLE WELCOME: THE BLACKEST LAND THE WHITEST PEOPLE." People arriving by automobile saw the sign as well. One of the convention hotels was right next to the depot. Both local newspapers carried advertisements welcoming the conventioners, including one by the Harrison Real Estate Company that used the slogan. The city directory for 1928 also had an advertisement from the local chamber of commerce using the wording. The convention made Greenville and its sign more widely known than before. People returned to their communities and talked about what they saw. The sign was likely a topic in some of these conversations and may have led some people to think of clever slogans and signs for their own communities.¹²

National recognition came with the beginning of World War II. The sign had been up for twenty years, and Greenville was growing. The population was 13,995, of which black residents comprised 2,663, or nineteen percent. Troop trains passed through Greenville several times a day. As the trains passed the sign, soldiers from all over the United States saw it and likely wondered about its meaning. According to local stories, the wording was printed on airplanes and other war machines. The members of Greenville High School's class of 1941 used the words on their class rings, and automobile dealers reprinted them on the advertising emblems they placed on the automobiles that they sold. In 1950, as part of the centennial celebration of the community's founding, W. Walworth Harrison incorporated the words into the official song he wrote for Greenville.¹³

Although many in the community continued to see the sign as a symbol of pride and progress throughout the 1950s, others did not. The Civil Rights movement became more active and visible during this time. In 1954, with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court moved toward ending the doctrine of separate but equal that had been law for more than fifty years. This ruling changed the social, cultural, and economic life of America, particularly in southern and border states. It affected all citizens of Greenville, black and white, and the perception of the sign.

Greenville schools, like most others in Texas and the rest of the South, resisted complying with the *Brown* decision. Such resistance reflected the deep hold segregation had at the time and the reluctance among white citizens to change this state of affairs. By 1954 many people, especially blacks, likely saw the sign as a symbol of race, with "THE WHITEST PEOPLE" meaning, literally, "white people." Earlier, residents believed that the wording included people of all races. By the mid to late 1950s this was no longer the case, and many from within and from outside the community had doubts about the sign and about Greenville. When local resident Paul Matthews met with Bob Hope on one occasion, Hope quickly commented on the sign. Jack Finney traveled

to New York City to be on a game show. He printed the slogan on his nametag, but was asked not to use it, as it might start trouble. The words were, by this time, often seen as a slur on Greenville, rather than as a clever slogan for a progressive community.¹⁴

Though feelings were changing, the sign continued to hang quietly in its place at Lee and Wright for all to see. The first indication of any attempt to remove the sign came in 1958. G.C. Harris, an attorney in Greenville, heard rumors that the sign was to be taken down. He appeared before the city council, whose members assured him that no such action was planned.¹⁵

During the 1950s and 1960s as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, the sign became a focal point of racial differences in the community. By 1960 Greenville's population had grown to 19,087, and the black population was 3,698. The overall growth rate was twenty-seven percent in one decade, and the black population growth rate was twenty-one percent. This was a significant jump in population, and it demonstrated that Greenville was still a community of potential. Industries such as LTV (later called E Systems, Raytheon, and L-3 Communications) and others were significant reasons for this growth. The people who came to Greenville during these years brought new ideas and beliefs. As their contributions to the community began to be felt, so did their thoughts about the sign and its meaning. Then in 1965 an incident occurred that forced residents to consider the future of the sign.¹⁶

John Connally was a charismatic individual, a lifelong politician closely associated with Lyndon Johnson. He supported the Democratic ticket in the 1960 presidential election and served as secretary of the Navy under President John F. Kennedy. In 1962 he was elected governor of Texas. Shortly after his election, Connally told Walt W. Rostow, then a policy planner for the State Department, that he wanted to do something big as governor. There were three areas in which this could be done: race, welfare, and education. Connally decided to become an education governor, and even though he focused his agenda on education, he remained concerned about race relations and economic welfare.¹⁷

On November 23, 1963, Connally was wounded when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. He survived, and the spirit he showed during these times rallied Texans everywhere. After recovering from his wounds, Connally was reelected in 1964. One contemporary assessment of the governor summed up Texas well: "John Connally was the personification of Texas, as establishment Texas wanted to see itself."¹⁸

On March 25, 1965 Connally came to Greenville. The occasion was the annual chamber of commerce banquet. His appearance made front-page news in the local paper, and dozens of advertisements, most showing his picture, welcomed him to town. The crowd that gathered at the National Guard Armory, located on Lee Street some distance from downtown, numbered in the hundreds. Every person in it was white except for one black couple, Myrna Gilstrap and her husband. Dan Hern, the head of the LTV plant in Greenville, was master of ceremonies; and Ralph Hall, now a U.S. congressman but then a Texas state

senator, introduced the governor that evening. Connally's speech focused on education and what Texas could do to improve its educational system.¹⁹

At some point during his presentation, Connally allegedly commented on the sign. According to Myrna Gilstrap, "He suggested that the sign's wording had taken on a new and undesired meaning that was not complimentary. He said the sign should come down." Gilstrap also quoted Connally as saying "A city as progressive as Greenville should not be home to a symbol of archaic beliefs or ideas." The crowd seemed stunned by the statement. Connally later recalled that "I might well have said it, but I really don't remember. I can't confirm it. I sure wouldn't deny it."²⁰

Others in attendance that night did not recall Connally making any statement about the sign. Paul Mathews was there, as was Nita Adkisson, a local white businesswoman; neither could remember any such statement being made. Congressman Ralph Hall does not recall being at the event at all. Dan Hern, the master of ceremonies, likewise did not remember any statement. Whatever was said that evening seemed to have been made in an off-hand manner, and most people did not pay much attention to what was being said.²¹

Later events suggest that something was indeed said that evening. The banquet was held on March 25, 1965. On April 13, less than three weeks later, the sign was taken down and put into storage. Whether or not Connally was the reason for the sign being taken down remains unclear, but in all likelihood he was instrumental. Maybe with times changing the community was looking for a way to take the sign down that would allow it to save face, and Connally's statement provided the opportunity. With the terms black and white now being used to identify race and not character, people's views of the sign and its original meaning had changed dramatically. Many members of the community wanted to take the sign down to avoid any future racial trouble. In light of these feelings, and Connally's statement, the city, by taking this action, maintained its image as a progressive community.²²

In 1968 the mayor of Greenville, Sybil Maddux, had the sign reinstalled on Lee Street. The wording had been changed to read "THE GREATEST PEOPLE" in keeping with the times. Maddux said that the sign was "the one thing Greenville is noted for," but the sign came down again after just a few years. People likely wanted to bury the past and hopefully put any problems the sign might cause to rest. This hope was not to be fully realized.²³

The sign had a varied legacy during the nearly forty-four years it was in place on Lee Street. The original interpretation of "THE WHITEST PEOPLE" defining the citizens of Greenville as friendly, trustworthy and helpful was sincere, and it was meant to include all citizens, regardless of race. The citizens of Greenville from that era were proud people. They wanted to make a name for their community and have it recognized. The successful trip of Will N. Harrison to Kansas City to lobby for the Jefferson Memorial Highway was a step in that direction. Placing the sign on a main thoroughfare near the train depot to ensure maximum exposure to travelers was another.

Using the slogan to promote the community to outsiders made Greenville widely known and a place to do business.

Using the sign as a symbol of racism would have been counterproductive to the community's goals of progress and growth. To say that it was meant to exclude or eliminate blacks from the community contradicts the evidence. The black population grew as the city grew. In 1910 it stood at 1,887; by 1970 that figure was 3,949. During the same period, the overall population grew from 8,850 to 22,043. The black population grew by 210 percent and the overall population by 250 percent during the era of the sign. In 1910 blacks comprised twenty-one percent of the total population and in 1970, eighteen percent. The sign cannot be said to have been a symbol that forced blacks from the community.²⁴

The slogan "THE WHITEST PEOPLE" was intended to include all citizens of Greenville, but the wording was open to other interpretations. The laws and practices of the time excluded blacks in many ways. However progressive Greenville may have believed itself, the community was typical of its era and its region. Its schools and other public facilities were segregated, and there was an active KKK presence in the community.

Segregation continued through the 1950s into the early 1960s, despite Supreme Court rulings. Greenville's high school was integrated in 1963. Although this was nine years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, it was a year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was also nearly two years before the sign came down in April, 1965. As late as 1964, fewer than two percent of black children in the Deep South attended integrated schools. Even though Texas might not be considered Deep South, Greenville still was a southern community; and to have integrated by that time was progressive.²⁵

The sign's resurrection three years later by Mayor Sybil Maddux opened wounds. Maddux, the first elected female mayor of Greenville, had new ideas and "involved the Negro citizens in city government—she appointed Negroes to important boards. But she put the sign back up, she undid all she did in that direction. The Negro community remembers that sign from 10 years back." Even with the words changed, some residents remembered the sign for its racial implications and not for its original intent. Greenville needed to bury the past in order to progress.²⁶

The legacy of the sign stayed with Greenville long after it came down. It was a landmark forever identified with Greenville. Whatever the original intent, it was remembered only as a symbol of racism. In 1984, the *Dallas Morning News* reported on a fight between black and white Greenville High School students. The sign was mentioned before anything else about the incident. The article detailed some of the advances the city had made in race relations, while pointing out how much had to be done, such as correcting a shortage of black teachers at the secondary level. The article went on to say, "except for the shortage of black faculty members Greenville High School is a fairly normal school." While the article commented on both the positive and negative aspects of Greenville's racial relationships, it only opened old

wounds by referring to the sign and showing a picture of it. Whatever positive connections to the community the sign had at one time, it was only the negative ones that remained in many people's minds and were remembered.²⁷

References to the sign continued to appear during the 1980s and 1990s. During the summer of 1996 a series of fires occurred at black churches in Greenville. Newspaper articles attempted to connect the sign to the fires and racism in Greenville. The fires were started by two local juveniles with no racial motives or connection to any race-related organization. While all of this was covered locally, it was the outside groups that made the most of the incidents, and linked them to the sign.

Two years later, in October 1998, an article appeared in the Greenville newspaper that suggested restoring the sign to its place on Lee Street as part of the community's sesquicentennial celebration 2000. The proposed restoration never took place, since many residents wanted to leave the past and the sign buried.²⁸

The sign still exists. It is located at the Audie Murphy and American Cotton Museum on the eastern edge of Greenville. It is divided into six sections, each about four feet by four feet in size. It is not on display at the museum, but stored with other artifacts. Occasionally someone asks what to do with it, but there seems to be no good answer. Some people would like to see it reassembled and put on display as part of Greenville's historic past. Others, like Titus Hill, a black citizen of Greenville, are not so sure. He stated that "We cannot deny our history...it is part of our history. As long as it remains part of our history, well and good." If the sign were displayed at all, he thought it should be done carefully. Myrna Gilstrap was even more definitive in her statement: "I know it is part of Greenville's history, but I believe some wounds are better left unopened." Pat Rowell, of Flexlume, thought it should go to the Museum of Advertising Art in Cincinnati, Ohio, a museum set up to record the history of advertising through the years. Maybe someday emotions and feelings will be such that the sign can be displayed without fear, bitterness or concern; but that time has not arrived. Until then it will stay in storage as part of the history and story of Greenville.²⁹

NOTES

¹W. Walworth Harrison, *History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas* (Waco: Texian Press, 1977), p. 330.

²Harrison, *History of Greenville*, p. 329.

³*Greenville (Texas) Evening Banner*, April 28, 1921, p. 1; June 6, 1921, p. 1; July 2, 191, p. 1. Hereafter cited as *GEB*.

⁴Patrick Rowell of Flexlume Corp. Buffalo New York. interview by author, February 25, 2002, telephone; March 21, 2002, email: *GEB*, July 2, 1921.

⁵*GEB*, July 8, 1921, p. 5; *The New Century Dictionary*, II (New York, 1927, 1944), p. 2204.

⁶Many terms have been used to identify persons of African descent. These include Negro, colored, black, Afro-American and African-American. As this paper deals with the terms black and white with regard to the language of the sign, for consistency the races will be referred to by these colors as well.

⁷*GEB*, July 19, 1921, p. 1.

⁸*GEB*, September 27, 1921, p. 1.

⁹*GEB*, December 16, 1921, p. 1; *GEB*, December 17, 1921, p. 1; *Greenville (Texas) Morning Herald*, December 17, 1921. Hereafter cited *GMH*.

¹⁰*GEB*, December 17, 1921, p. 1.

¹¹Paul Mathews of Greenville, interview by author, March 1, 2002, Greenville, Texas; Dewey Fitzpatrick of Greenville, telephone interview by author, March 7, 2002, Greenville, Texas; Myrna Gilstrap of Greenville, interview by author, March 7, 2002, Commerce, Texas; Jack Finney of Greenville, interview by author, March 11, 2002, Greenville, Texas.

¹²*GMH*, May 7, 1928, p. 2; *Greenville City Directory, 1928* (Greenville: C.E. Dingle, 1928), p. 1.

¹³*Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940 Population, vol. 2, part 6* (Washington, D.C., 1943), p. 1008; Brad Kellar, "Sign of the Times Continues to Stir Interest," *Greenville (Texas) Herald Banner*, October 10, 1998, p. 2.

¹⁴Mathews interview; Finney interview.

¹⁵*City of Greenville (Texas) Council Minutes, October 6, 1958, book 28*, p. 119.

¹⁶*Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950, Population, vol. II part 43* (Washington D.C., 1951), pp. 43-122; *Texas Almanac 1961, 1962* (Dallas, 1960), p. 593; *Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Eighteenth Census of the United States, 1960, Population, vol. I, part 45* (Washington D.C., 1963), pp. 45-119.

¹⁷James Reston, Jr., *The Lone Star: The Life of John Connally* (New York, 1989), p. 290.

¹⁸Reston, *Lone Star*, p. 296.

¹⁹*GHB*, March 25, 26, 1965, p. 1.

²⁰Stephen Sharpe, "Sign of the Times," *Dallas (Texas) Morning News*, January 1, 1989, *Dallas Life Magazine*, p. 14; Kellar, "Sign Interest," 1998, p. 2; Stephen Sharpe, telephone interview by author, March 3, 2002.

²¹Mathews interview; Nita Adkisson of Greenville, interview by author, March 16, 2002; Ralph Hall, telephone interview with author, March 4, 2002; Dan Hern, telephone interview with author, March 18, 2002.

²²Fitzpatrick interview.

²³Sharpe, "Sign of the Times," p. 14.

²⁴*Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Nineteenth Census of the United States, 1970, Population, vol. I, part 45, sec. 1* (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 45-196.

²⁵Forrest McDonald, *States Rights and the Union* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2000), p. 230.

²⁶Other women had served as mayor, but they served only to complete their husbands' terms. *Dallas Times Herald*, February 18, 1969, p. 25.

²⁷*Dallas Morning News*, March 18, 1984, pp. 47A, 50A.

²⁸Kellar, "Sign Interest," 1998, p. 1.

²⁹Titus Hill of Greenville, interview by author, March 18, 2002; Kellar, "Sign Interest," 1998; Rowell interview.