BLACK HISTORY FEATURE:

The Dream: An All Black Oklahoma

By P. Ann Tatum

An all-black Oklahoma with a black governor—it was a dream of a small group of people about 100 years ago. For a time, it seemed the dream could become a reality.

Oklahoma of the 1870s and 1880s was a rich, fertile land called the Oklahoma Indian Territory. It attracted white as well as many black settlers.

According to William Loren Katz, author of "The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History," white "intruders" repeatedly challenged their government's right to withhold this land from them. Black soldiers had to physically eject the settlers from the land on several occasions.

The settlers, called "Boomers," eventually had their way. In 1889, the government decided to open the land to them and the powerful railroads instead of giving the land to area Indian tribes.

Among the hordes of people who rushed to stake a claim on the huge tract of land was an "estimated 10,000 blacks."

The lure of the West was strong for blacks. Most came to seek relief from the South's harsh conditions and oppression. It seemed as if Oklahoma was to be their haven.

During the 1880's Oklahoma was a haven. In the "Encyclopedia of Black America," edited by W. Augustus Low and Virgil A. Clift, the West's lure was detailed:

"The West beckoned as a 'safety valve' for black frustration; it would provide the promise of economic opportunity as it did for other Americans.

"One of the best known promoters of the idea of separate colonies within the United States was Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a native of Tennessee, who organized a successfu movement of settlers to Kansas in 1879.

"Other settlers sought to make Oklahom an all-black state. Edwin P. McCabe, a forme state auditor of Kansas, who came t Oklahoma in 1879 and who was one of th founders of Langston, had ambitions to b governor of Oklahoma.

"He was active in the First Black Indepen dent Brotherhood, which like a kindred group the Oklahoma Immigration Association favored making Oklahoma an all-black state.

From 1890 to 1910, twenty-five black com mittees were born and black people increas ed their presence in the area by more than 50 percent. According to Katz, by 1910, blacks i Oklahoma numbered about 137,000.

The dream of a black and free Oklahom lasted for only a few years. At the same tim blacks were flocking to Oklahoma. They als were fleeing the country in back-to-Afric movements.

One of the movement's leaders, the Bisho Henry, of the American Colonization Society visited Oklahoma and successfully persuade some of the territory's black residents t follow him to Africa.

For others, the dream existed for longe periods. Oklahoma, especially its premie town of Boley, was impressive. Booker T Washington visited Boley in 1905 and proclaim ed it "the most enterprising and in many way the most interesting of the Negro towns in th United States."

Boley boasted the tallest building, at th time, between Oklahoma City and Omulgee Katz wrote:

"More important, it could state that black people ran the government and that half of its high school students went on to college.

"Boley often struck an independent note, as when its 'Union Literary Society' debated the question of whether blacks should 'celebrate George Washington's birthday and decided in the negative."

With the success of Boley and other black towns, the territory's black leaders an ticipated they would have a say in the government as it moved towards statehood. The leaders also thought the newly formed state would send black representatives to Congress

In was not to be. In 1907, Oklahoma was ad mitted to the Union. Three years later, the state enacted a grandfather clause whic denied blacks the vote because their grand fathers, as slaves, did not vote.

Such laws were not enough to stem the tide of black independence, power and othe rights, Katz wrote. To effectively put an enc to that, he said whites resorted to violence and fraud. Thus "the black dream of Oklahoma became another southern nightmare."

Before that dream became a nightmare, Edwin P. McCabe made his mark.

Described as "One of the most enigmatic and shadowy figures in western black history," McCabe was born in Troy, N.Y. in 1850. He spent much of his early childhood in Massachussetts, Rhode Island, and Maine.

His parents were poor, but McCabe was able to obtain an education. It ended with his father's death and McCabe was forced to seek work to support his mother, sister, and brother. For a while, he worked on Wall Street in New York City as a clerk and a promoter. McCabe then moved west to Chicago and found work as a clerk for the Cook County Treasury.

He arrived in Kansas in 1874, where he took up the land business and politics. McCabe benefited from the 1879 influx of blacks to Kansas. Three years later, at the age of 32, he stood for state auditor and was elected to that office and served two terms.

His politicals fortunes turned after his second term. He was not renominated, Katz wrote. McCabe left Kansas for California where he prospected for gold. Apparently successful on the West Coast, McCabe moved to Oklahoma, which at the time, was enjoying an influx of blacks similar to that of Kansas in the late 1870s.

In Guthrie, Oklahoma, McCabe bought 160 acres of land from a white man. The land was about 40 miles northeast of Oklahoma City. he later bought another 160 acres and

(Continued on Page 19)

Edwin P. McCabe, first black man to hold major political office in the West, served for four years as state auditor for Kansas, and ten years as Oklahoma state auditor. He also tried to make Oklahoma a black state.

Oklahoma's law enforcement arms came in many colors. These four deputy U.S. marshals are (from left to right) Amos Maytubby (Indian); Zeke Miller (Caucasian); Neely Factor (Afro-American); and Bob L. Fortune (Afro-American).

Bishop Henry M. Turner, who repeatedly and with some success urged Oklahoma blacks to migrate to Africa.

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