

## FAYETTEVILLE 'No Disgrace'

Exhibit illuminates African-American experience

By - SOURCE: SHILOH MUSEUM

Friday, February 4, 2011

FAYETTEVILLE — In TheatreSquared's "Sundown Town," it's fine to be African-American, as long as you know your place.

In the Shiloh Museum's accompanying photo exhibit, "No Disgrace: African Americans in the Arkansas Ozarks, Late 1800s-Early 1900s," viewers can learn about that "place" in Benton and Washington counties.

"The exhibit title is taken from a 1930s interview with Adeline Blakely, a former slave who lived in Fayetteville," says Susan Young, museum outreach coordinator. "To quote Miss Blakely, 'I had always been told that I was a child of African stock. That it was no disgrace to be a Negro.'"

"At the beginning of the Civil War, one out of four people in Arkansas were slaves of African ancestry," the exhibit notes explain. But "most lived on plantations in the eastern Arkansas Delta."

In 1860, about 10 percent of people living in Washington County were enslaved, according to museum research. In Benton County, it was about 4 percent.

"Most slaveholders had one to three slaves, but there were a few wealthy farmers and businessmen in and around the communities of Fayetteville, Cane Hill and Elkins who owned between 20 and 40 slaves," Young says.

Following the Civil War, some slaves remained as freed servants with the white families who had owned them, the exhibit text explains. Others, sometimes taking the last name of their former owners, settled in southeast Fayetteville and in communities near Elkins, Cane Hill, Bentonville, Harrison, Eureka Springs, Huntsville and Kingston.

"Lack of education and lack of jobs led most Ozark African-Americans into subsistence farming," according to the museum.

"Many of their children grew up and left Arkansas for better opportunities.

There were instances of racial cleansing, as some communities drove out African-American residents and took steps to forbid African-Americans from living in them. Today, most of the old African-American communities no longer exist."

But there was good news, too, for African-Americans in Northwest Arkansas.

"The University of Arkansas became the first university in the South after Reconstruction to admit African-American students with the admission of Silas Hunt to the school of law in 1948," Young says. "The Fayetteville School Board was the first school district in the former Confederate states to vote to desegregate their schools in 1954."

Today, though, there are still more African-American faces in the exhibit than in the region. Census estimates from 2009 show the African-American population accounts for 4 percent of people in Washington County and 2 percent in Benton County.

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