

COMMUNITY PRESERVATION FOR THE PATHOLOGICALLY CHALLENGED

Sundown Towns

A Hidden Dimension of American Racism

James W. Loewen

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Reviewed by Robert S. Griffin

A good way to get a handle on what author James W. Loewen is up to in *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* is to see where he ends up and then go back to the beginning of the book and trace how he got there. A few paragraphs from the end of the book, Loewen declares, "America should not have white neighborhoods or black neighborhoods." Note that he doesn't say that America should not have *sundown towns* (defined in a bit); he said no white or black neighborhoods, period. And in this last chapter, Loewen reveals that he is not satisfied with merely suggesting or advocating that people do things his way, at least with regard to whites. He makes it clear that if white communities don't have a requisite percentage of African Americans by his standard he'd have them cut off from new funds for sewage facilities, police training, "and a 1001 other programs," and the whites who live there would lose their tax deduction for their mortgage interest.

Who's Loewen? He is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Vermont, where he taught race relations for twenty years. (Disclosure: I am currently a professor of education at that same university. I have never met Loewen.) Loewen is currently a distinguished lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. His books include *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which according to his web site is a "gripping retelling of American history as it should be told" that has sold 800,000 copies. Loewen's awards include the First Annual Spivak Award of the American Sociological Association for "sociological research applied to the field of intergroup relations," and the

Gustavus Myers Foundation named *Sundown Towns* a “Distinguished Book of 2005.” At the time of this writing (April, 2006), Loewen is teaching a course entitled “Race Relations through Feature films” at the Catholic University of America. And it appears that he is a popular speaker and workshop leader. “Have Jim Loewen Speak at Your Community, School or College,” his web site announces, and lists as one of the workshop possibilities, “How History Keeps Us Racist – And What To Do About It.” The site lists 12 speeches and workshops Loewen has lined up in the next six weeks.

Now let’s go through *Sundown Towns* and see how Loewen builds his case, and that is the way to look at this book, because while it is framed as a scholarly sociological and historical inquiry, this is a polemic.

What are sundown towns? The term comes from signs posted in towns that said something to the effect, “Whites Only Within City Limits After Sundown.” Loewen begins the book with this definition:

Beginning in about 1890 and continuing until 1968, white Americans established thousands of towns across the United States for whites only. Many towns drove out their black populations, then posted sundown signs....Other towns passed ordinances barring African Americans after dark or prohibiting them from owning or renting property; still others established such policies by informal means, harassing and even killing those who violated the rule. Some sundown towns similarly kept out Jews, Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans, or other groups.

Loewen predominantly concerns himself in *Sundown Towns* with whites’ exclusion of blacks from their communities. Early in the book, he asserts that sundown towns are rare in the South but common in the North. In 1970, he tells us, Illinois had 475 towns and cities that were all-white (by “all-white” Loewen means “very few blacks”). Notice his reference here is to “all-white” rather than “sundown” towns. This begins the process of blurring the distinction between a sundown town and any all-white community. This is a pattern in Loewen’s argument in this book: establish a negative or pejorative concept – sundown towns in this case – and then include within it, or associate it with or equate it with, a wider and wider range of phenomena.

Illinois with its large number of all-white (think sundown) towns and cities isn’t exceptional, writes Loewen: “There is reason to believe that more than half of all towns in Oregon, Indiana, Ohio, the Cumberlands, the Ozarks, and diverse other areas were also all-white on purpose. Sundown suburbs are found from Darien, Connecticut, to LaJolla, California, and are even more prevalent; indeed, most suburbs began life as sundown towns.” Note the phrase “all-white on purpose” in the first sentence of the quote. It not only substitutes the broader “all-white” for “sundown town,” it substitutes the more inclusive “on purpose” for the list of exclusionary practices in the definition of sundown towns that led off the book. So now, with “on purpose” as the measure, whites simply choosing to congregate in white areas – which is intentional, purposeful, on their part – is damned. Loewen’s shifts in tenses

from past to present in the quote – from *were* in the first sentence to *are* in the second – is a frequent occurrence in the book and serves to impart the impression without Loewen having to actually make the case that once a sundown town always a sundown town, or at least always bad, regardless of what may have occurred in that community since 1968. I asked myself as I read this, exactly how can Loewen be certain about the genesis and maintenance of the racial residential patterns in so many places? I got to the end of the book and still couldn't figure out why I should accept on Loewen's say-so and the sources he cites that sundown towns – which are, after all, at least nominally, what the book is about--were/are that ubiquitous.

How did whites establish and maintain sundown towns? The picture Loewen paints is one of white perpetrators and black victims. The words he uses to depict whites' conduct include "racial exclusion," "terror," "fraud," "steering," "lying," "stalling," "gentlemen's agreements," and (his quotation marks) "legal means" – evidently there are legal means that aren't really legal means. In the first third of the book, however, Loewen's favorite word to describe whites is "mob." Loewen creates a powerful image: a lawless, violent, beastly, rampaging mob of whites committing brutal acts against innocent and harmless blacks.

As briefly as I can, I will list ten of the "mob stories" Loewen recounts. I want to give a sense of the cumulative affect these depictions are likely to have on the readers of this book, who in most cases will be young white people: a book of this sort is most often read as a required text in a university course taught by someone like, well, James W. Loewen. As you read through these examples, and keep in mind I am summarizing and leaving out a lot of the gory details, think about what view of their ancestors and themselves young whites are likely to form from these accounts. Also, see if you can think of any other race or ethnic group that is depicted as negatively in our schools, and in the public discourse generally. Imagine a group of African American university students being assigned to read comparable accounts of their racial brethren. I can assure you that white students, at both the pre-university and university levels, read and are told these kinds of things all the time about their forebears and contemporaries with nothing to counterbalance it.

- A white mob looted the apartment of a black who tried to move into Cicero, Illinois, threw his furniture and belongings out the window and set them on fire while police stood by and watched.
- A white mob stoned members of the Congress of Racial Equality as they marched in support of open housing.
- A white mob of 20 or 30 men, armed with guns and clubs, tied black men to trees and whipped them, bound black men and women together and threw them in a four-foot hole, burned several homes, and warned all blacks to leave town that night.
- A white mob of 50 men drove out all the blacks living in Decator, Indiana.

- A mob of more than 800 whites marched from Spring Valley, Illinois to a settlement of African Americans two miles west of town, dragged the blacks from their homes, clubbed and trampled them and shot them, insulted and slapped the black women, and shot and killed two of them as they begged for mercy.
- A mob from Cairo and Anna, Illinois hanged accused murderer Will James while women in the mob sang and screamed in delight. (The word mob was used 12 times in the description of this incident. Loewen points out that the police weren't sure they had the right man.)
- A white mob rioted and forced Revena, Kentucky's blacks out of town.
- In Duluth, Minnesota, a mob of whites hanged three workers they suspected of raping a white woman. Loewen says whether she was raped by anyone is doubtful.
- A white mob in Eldorado, Illinois told the Reverend Peter Green of the African American Church to leave town in 24 hours under penalty of death.
- A white mob in Okemah, Oklahoma hanged a black woman and her son from a bridge because they became anxious about a neighboring black town.

Got it? Now, when I say "white," what comes to your mind? What images, what words? What feelings? And I mean feelings in a literal sense: what do you feel in a visceral way, in the pit of your stomach, throughout your body, when I say "white"? Once Loewen roots this image/thought/feeling, this meaning, then he can add, one by one, what he calls "softer" methods employed by whites to live apart from blacks, restrictive covenants and so on and so on, until even whites' desire, expressed or not, acted upon or not, to live among their own people is part of this same negative phenomenon, white or whiteness, being white. Loewen's eventual goal – and he has time to get there, this tome weighs in at two pounds, two-and-a-half ounces – is to drum in the idea that the simple fact of white people living together, regardless of how it came about, sundown town or not, and even if whites in a community are doing nothing to prevent non-whites from living among them, is white people acting white, no good.

And why, according to Loewen, did whites create these terrible sundown towns? Whatever justifications they offer for their conduct – black's behavior triggered it, whatever else – doesn't hold water, that's for sure. Much of the book is given over to Loewen writing off white defenses of sundown towns and, eventually, any community that isn't multiracial. He dismisses whites' attempts to explain themselves variously as "nonsensical," "tautological," "erroneous," "preposterous," and "excuses."

It should be noted that none of the reasons Loewen attributes to whites have to do with white racial consciousness and commitment, pride among whites in their race and their European heritage and the desire to preserve and

enhance their race and way of life. My guess is that Loewen doesn't know the first thing about white nationalism, white racialism, white advocacy, whatever term to use, and sees no need to learn about it. It is outside his leftist ideological frame of reference, and it's that frame and not social science inquiry that propels him. He refers to "white solidarity" briefly in the book, but by that he means, per his worldview, "whites sticking together in order to stick it to minorities." To Loewen, being white is something to feel guilty about and atone for, not the basis for a positive racial identity, dedication, organization, and collective action; that's at the heart of what he is selling.

If the conventional reasons whites use to account for their exclusion of blacks insufficiently explain their attitudes and behavior, what does account for it? You guessed it, the old standby white pathology: racism. Following his pattern, Loewen doesn't define what he means by racism. Staying vague allows him to build on his mob stories and expand the concept of racism so that it includes anti-Semitism, any disapproval of blacks, and any impulse toward white separatism. For that matter, the term "white separatism" — the preference of whites to live among their own people and in alignment with their own culture, their own ways, absent the desire for domination or exploitation of other peoples — is not to be found in this book. There is only white supremacy. And of course white supremacy is associated with that old standby villain: the Nazis. White attitudes, Loewen informs us, are "eerily reminiscent of Germans'," and "it is sobering to realize that many jurisdictions in America had accomplished by 1934-36 what Nazis could only envy."

Loewen knows that whites' thinking is shaped by the words they have available to them, and that thoughts compel and guide behavior. If the concept of white separatism isn't in whites' repertoire, and all that exists is white supremacy, and that's akin to Nazism and another old standby villain Loewen hauls out time and again, the KKK, it is difficult if not impossible for them to think about, and then act on, the idea of living separate lives from other races. Without racial separatism as a concept, possibility, ideal, goal, there is only the false dichotomy: evil white supremacy and segregation versus good racial egalitarianism and integration. Loewen knows that given that choice most white people will choose to go his way. But that's not the only way for whites to conceptualize the choice they confront: another way is white separatism and racial and cultural integrity versus multiracialism and white racial and cultural dissolution. Loewen knows that when presented with that choice, many whites will opt for separatism and self-preservation and self-determination, and they'll be unapologetic about it and guilt free, and he can't have that.

What does Loewen hold to be the cause of malevolent white racism? White ignorance of minorities, especially blacks. And what accounts for this ignorance? Whites' limited experience with non-whites, or, as Loewen calls it, whites' "lack of an experience foundation." This isolation results in negative racial and ethnic stereotypes: "I have found," shares Loewen, "that white

Americans expound about the alleged characteristics of African Americans in inverse proportion to their contact and experiences with them." *Sundown Towns* drives this point home over and over in order to justify the ultimate argument in this book: that whites in America, wherever they congregate, should be denied freedom of association and forced to integrate with non-whites in general and blacks in particular.

My own research contradicts Loewen's "lack of experience foundation" explanation for whites' negative perceptions of blacks. A couple of years ago, I published a book in which seventeen white people recounted their experiences and outlooks regarding race.¹ Time and again, they told me that it wasn't their *lack* of contact with blacks but rather their *close* contact with them that led to their negative view of blacks and desire to get away from them.

Loewen says he believes in the value of oral history: "[W]e must talk to long-time residents." Loewen may have talked to people for this book, but I didn't see any evidence that he listened to them. The times he mentions talking to somebody he grants the person a sentence or two and then patronizingly sets them straight. There was the "pleasant conversation" he had with a 70-year-old woman who is "50 years behind the times." And then there was the friend of his who made the mistake of saying in his presence, "I just don't understand why people [she was referring to blacks] would *want* to live where they aren't wanted." Loewen pronounces that her question "presumes that African Americans can be expected to assess whether whites want them and should comport themselves accordingly" – which it didn't, it just asked the factual question, why do blacks want to live where they aren't wanted? And then Loewen goes on, "When 'we' (nonblacks) buy a house, we do not assess whether our neighbors will like us. . . . We presume we will be accepted or at least tolerated." Wrong again. The parallel circumstance for whites to what his friend was talking about in her question would be when white people contemplate moving into an all-black area. In that circumstance, indeed they *would* assess whether their neighbors would like them, and they *would not* presume they would be accepted or tolerated in that all-black neighborhood. Imagine what it must be like for young white university students to offer something that contradicts Professor Loewen's line.

Here is an excerpt from the oral history of a forty-year old man I talked to from the northeastern part of the United States.² Evidently, Loewen wasn't able to find people like this, or he found them and dismissed them or made sure they didn't get in his book:

People who think of themselves as enlightened and on the moral high ground in matters of race write off people like me as ignorant racists. Unlike them, so it goes, we pre-judge people. If only we were exposed to racial and ethnic diversity we would learn to value different kinds of people – etcetera, etcetera, you've heard the line. You'll notice that most of these people doing the pontificating and finger pointing about racial equality and harmony and the virtues of integration and multi-racialism

do it from the far distance of the leafy suburbs or a university campus somewhere. The fact of the matter is that, unlike practically all of them, I have lived up close with the reality of race in America. And regardless of what they might like to think, I am not stupid or unenlightened or their moral inferior. The people who look down their noses at people like me should come live for a year or two or three where my family and millions of other white families live. Let their children grow up and go to school in this pigsty and be threatened and attacked and robbed and raped. Then they can talk.

In *Sundown Towns*, Loewen refers to whites' "amazing stereotypes" about blacks – and of course he means amazingly off-base. He offers no argumentation or documentation for this characterization of white people, this condemnation. He doesn't back up his contention by referring to data related to black crime rates, illegitimacy levels, welfare dependency, educational record, and work performance to show how amazingly wrong whites are in their negative perceptions of blacks. Loewen doesn't refer to what has happened in America's cities when blacks displaced whites. He doesn't refer to what the quality of life was, or is, like in sundown towns, or to what happened in a sundown town when it integrated to the point that it included a critical mass of blacks, say 30 percent or 40 percent, or compare all-white and all-black communities in America and the world. As a sociologist, or historian, however Loewen defines himself these days, I would have expected him to do this kind of thing. But Loewen isn't really a social scientist. He is an ideologue masquerading as one. If data don't serve the argument, ignore them; finger point, pontificate, sermonize, refer to sources doing the same thing you are, and move on.

Loewen negatively stereotypes whites left and right throughout *Sundown Towns*. One instance that particularly stuck in my craw was his characterization of young whites from elite suburbs. "These young people have grown up with a sense of entitlement," Loewen declares. "The world is their oyster, and they intend to harvest its pearls....Families like these can go to Bali and never meet a Balinese family, because they stay at the Sanur Beach Hyatt." And so on. For many years, I have taught the same young whites from affluent backgrounds that Loewen taught at the University of Vermont. Loewen's portrayal of them is inaccurate and hurtful to these decent, hardworking young people and their families. I wonder if parents know the class resentment among university faculty like Loewen – he is not alone by any means – when, at significant financial sacrifice, they turn their children over to them. I ask the reader to imagine what it must be like to be a nineteen- or twenty-year-old white student from an affluent background – or graduate student, for that matter – and to be in a classroom with a professor, who has the power to grade you, that is palpably antagonistic toward both your race and your social position.

If you believe Loewen, whites are the dumbest race of people on earth – that is, except for him. Here they are, putting all kinds of energy into getting themselves and their families in white communities when the fact of the matter is,

not only doesn't it do them any good, it actually hurts them! Loewen has a section on the "social pathology of the white ghetto" in which he goes on about how it limits white children's horizons, provides "fertile recruiting fields for the KKK," and so on. If you want to know what shoddy scholarship looks like, this is your section of the book. And this author and this book won awards. For shame.

Loewen calls white flight "a pestilence." Whites are uprooting themselves and their families for absolutely no good reason, insists Loewen. Loewen disparages millions of white people – including those now being driven out of southern California by the Hispanic incursion into that state – and completely, and heartlessly, misses the reality of their lives. But then again Loewen's referent is not reality, not life as lived, but rather the anti-white bigotry all too prevalent among university faculty in our time and some books he has read (I don't buy his "oral history is valuable" pitch for a second).

The sundown town concept and this book are vehicles to demonize, domesticate, and splinter white people in our time and rationalize the dictatorial management of their lives within a nation conceived in liberty. Here's someone else of the sort that Loewen didn't talk to, or talked to and didn't hear, or heard but kept us from hearing, a 50-year-old man from the Philadelphia area who described to me what had happened to his childhood neighborhood. He was confronting the same situation in the neighborhood he and his wife and daughter had moved into fifteen years previously.³

Before it became illegal, local realtors would show houses only to white families. Although it has been painted as an unfair arrangement, it really reflected the point of view of the town. The people there wanted to live among their own people. They wanted to live in a white community. Now, I see that as the highest form of self-determination: people defining their own community, people deciding what comes into their collective lives, people determining their own standards. It doesn't matter if their standards are rational or moral by someone else's measure. People have a right to decide whom they are comfortable living next to and not comfortable living next to. This is fundamental and it [is] not a matter of rationality or morality. It is simply human. It is not that they have ill will toward anyone. It is just that they know the atmosphere that they like....

The neighborhood where I grew up has turned into a wasteland. Whites still make up a majority of the community – 55 percent – but nevertheless the neighborhood has gone in the same direction of a typical urban black area. When I was living there, when a tree died an Irish guy named Fred Fagan would plant a new one. Now those saplings are mighty trees. When a tree dies these days, no one plants a new one. There is broken glass all over the place, and things like busted up shopping carts lying on their side blocking the alleys. Many of the old brick houses are covered over with some kind of god-awful siding. When I was a kid, repairs and restorations were done in the mode of the existing

architecture of the town. Now, from one house to the next, they are all different. There is no common thread to the look of the houses now. There used to be hedges and white picket fences that lent a common feel to the area—no more.

My mother still lives there....Recently, a black teenager knocked my mother to the ground, injuring her, and took her purse. This sort of thing was unheard of in my old neighborhood, but it is commonplace now.... The black woman across the street was just arrested for robbing 7-Eleven stores. When I was growing up, kids could go anywhere in town on their bicycles. We could go in the woods and explore down by the creek and there would be no danger at all. Now, there is no way you would allow your child to even take a walk around the neighborhood. Just this year, a young white woman was abducted by two black men and taken to a place where we used to play ball and raped and murdered. These heinous crimes are happening regularly there....My mother's house, when she dies, would have sold for a pretty penny, but it is worth very little on the market now....

The place I live in now, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, was a clean and safe place when my wife and I moved here fifteen years ago. But the pattern of my childhood home has been repeated. Nonwhites have moved in and the neighborhood has deteriorated drastically....More and more, I find that this isn't a suitable place for my family. It doesn't reflect our heritage and values.

As it turned out, this man—Denis is his name—though not his wife and daughter, was “saved” from this circumstance: he died several months after telling me this.

When I was a kid, my hometown, Minneapolis, Minnesota, was just about all white. You could walk anyplace at any time in that beautiful city of lakes. But Minneapolis has gone the way of the other urban centers in this country: an influx of blacks has integrated the city and changed its politics and culture, and it's not so beautiful now and you can't walk just anywhere in “Murderapolis,” as it is now called. A few years ago, my brother moved to Edina, a white suburb of Minneapolis that Loewen rails against repeatedly in *Sundown Towns*. Indeed, Edina is a sundown town, but not in the way Loewen thinks about it. Edina is a sundown town because it is a town where white people and their children feel safe after sundown.

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ENDNOTES

1. Robert S. Griffin, *One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk About Race* (Bloomington, IN: 1stBooks Library, 2004).
2. *One Sheaf, One Vine*, pp. 154-55.
3. Robert S. Griffin, *Living White: Writings on Race, 2000-2005* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006) pp.65-66, 70.