



# AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRAVEL AGENTS

## Travails and Survival

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**Abstract:** Social science research on the struggles of early and contemporary independent African-American travel agents represents a void in the literature. These agents experienced serious obstacles to survival during the past half-century, not only during times of racial segregation, but more recently with airlines and government regulations, expensive technological innovations, and significant industry demands. Six agents describe their histories, successes and failures, and the futures of independent Black travel agents; serious difficulties remain, including access to capital. A scenario identifies the start-up costs for an independent Black travel agency in a medium-sized Middle West metropolitan area to illustrate the problems that remain. **Keywords:** race, entrepreneurs, travel agent, African-Americans. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Agents de voyage afro-américains: labeur et survie. La recherche des sciences humaines au sujet de la lutte des agents de voyage afro-américains d'autrefois et d'aujourd'hui représente un vide dans la littérature. Ces agents ont dû surmonter de grands obstacles à la survie dans le dernier demi-siècle, non seulement pendant la période de ségrégation raciale mais plus récemment avec des compagnies aériennes, des règlements gouvernementaux, des innovations technologiques onéreuses et des demandes importantes de leur industrie. Six agents racontent leur histoire, leurs succès et leurs échecs, et parlent de l'avenir des agents de voyage noirs indépendants. Il reste des difficultés importantes, y compris l'accès au capital. Un scénario identifie les frais de lancement pour une agence de voyage noire indépendante dans une agglomération urbaine moyenne du Midwest des États-Unis pour illustrer les problèmes qui subsistent. **Mots-clés:** race, entrepreneurs, agent de voyage, Afro-Américains. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Like I said, it was fate. You call it what you want. I had no travel agent experience. I had travel experience and a load of common sense. I didn't have any money. I bought it with a promise, a handshake, and

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the signing of some papers (Lena, long-time travel agent from the east coast).

I have always had a love of travel, but that started me going a lot. Then a travel agent challenged me. She believed with my knowledge of geography and my people skills that I would like this business (Roberta, successful travel agent in the South).

## INTRODUCTION

Current scholarly literature on African-American tourism is miniscule. Philipp (1994) is one of the few studies that addresses this topic. This research considers two different aspects: the role of African-American travel agents and, in particular, their stories of "survival" as small business owners; and how they confronted social barriers and technological changes. The difficulties these agents confronted, and still do, are illustrated through interviews obtained from a group of them attending a national conference. These narratives illustrate the persistent marketing, financial, regulatory, and technological challenges that Black travel agents face in dealing with a racialized consumer market and in an industry where independents often struggle. The financial problems are presented in hypothetical start-up costs in a medium sized middle west metropolitan area. The conclusion draws out common threads in these histories and suggests several follow-up studies.

## AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There is a severe lack of data, research, and information on Black entrepreneurship and employment (Wainright 2000:47) and in particular tourism businesses. African-Americans constituted 12.8% of the US population in 2000 (US Department of Commerce 2001), yet they comprise only 3.6% of all business owners (621,000) and account for approximately 1% of all sales (\$32.2 billion) (Brimmer 1998). Their self-employment rates are about one-third that of all Americans, 20 per 1,000 population for Blacks versus 68 per 1,000 for the population as a whole. The average American business in 1992 reported \$193,000 in sales, while the average African-American business had only \$52,000 (Mergenhagen 1996). In 1992, 56% reported sales of less than \$10,000 (US Department of Commerce 1996). The sales of Black firms account for only 17.3% of the total income produced by African-Americans (Brimmer 1998).

There are many explanations given for Blacks' limited participation and success in the world of entrepreneurship. They include lack of available credit (Hisrich and Brush 1986; Koretz 1998), racial discrimination (Delaney 1998; Kanter 1977; Massey and Denton 1989; Williams 1988), racially segregated markets (Cummings 1999), and absence of business training and experience (Hisrich and Brush 1986; Mergenhagen 1996). One explanation that is seldom cited in the academic literature is internal racism and accompanying racial disloyalty. African-Americans as a community generate more than \$360 billion in

after tax income every year, yet only about 7% of this amount is used to purchase products and services from Black-owned firms (Davidson 1995:30). Whites fail to patronize Black-owned businesses because they are perceived as being less capable and reliable than White-owned businesses, and ironically many Blacks do not patronize these businesses for the very same reasons. Walker noted in a 1959 op-ed piece in the *Baltimore Afro-American* that “the colored businessman is in a vicious cycle. He cannot compete on equal terms with the White man “because he lacks capital and because his own race does not patronize him; therefore, he cannot compete” (1998:258).

Because of internal racism, many African-American businesses are forced to seek out a non-Black clientele. One example of this is the history of the Black banking industry. With the end of legal segregation and its racial circumscriptions, most banks, which historically served the largely ignored Black community, were forced to diversify their clientele because their former Black patrons started patronizing White-owned banks (Ammons 1996:485). A similar scenario was played out in the hotel industry, but without the successful transition. From the late 1940s to about 1960, Black-owned hotels flourished. Because separate public accommodations based on race were the law of the land, hotels catering to African-Americans possessed a captive market (Walker 1998:254) and in 1949, there were 529 of them. During the late 50s, despite a campaign by Detroit’s Black hotel owners chastising Black consumers for not patronizing Black hotels and motels, most of the city’s Black owned hotels went out of business (Walker 1998:257). This was rapidly followed by other Black owned hotels around the country closing their doors, as their patrons deserted them for White-owned businesses.

This problem of race and business patronage is not unique to the US context. Dyer and Ross found in their study of African-Canadian entrepreneurs that many wished to keep secret that they were Black-owned (2000:57–58). They were concerned how their firms would be perceived by the larger White community, which they hoped to attract. They feared that Whites would think that Black-owned businesses were exclusively for an African-Canadian clientele. Cummings (1999) found that Black businesses located outside of predominately African-American neighborhoods performed significantly better than those located within these communities. Black businesses located in Black neighborhoods and depending largely on Black consumers are severely constrained in terms of a customer base. These examples highlight the little examined fact that independent African-American businesses cannot be dependent only on Black patrons to survive and grow; therefore, many owners are compelled to seek out non-Black patrons.

Ferretting out data on Black businesses in general and travel agents is a troublesome task. The US Census Bureau periodically collects data in the economic census; less frequently are data published on Black owned businesses. Regrettably, the general economic census and the Black owned business data sets are not easily comparable. For example, travel agents are listed as Standard Industrial Classification number 4724. Category 47 is transportation services, a subcategory of transpor-

tation and public utilities. According to the 1997 economic census, there were 52,409 establishments in the category transportation services. According to the 1992 Black-owned business census, there were 4,882 firms in the category 47, which means they would account for approximately 9.3% of all businesses engaged in transportation services (US Department of Commerce 1997).

Under category 47 are four subcategories: 472 passenger transportation, 473 freight-shipping services, 474 railroad car rental, and 478 miscellaneous services. These groups account for 62.5, 30.5, 0.24 and 4.7% respectively. Under subcategory 472 one finds 4,724 travel agents and 4,725 tour operators. Of the 33,825 firms under the 472 category, 97% or 32,383 are covered by these two four-digit subcategories. Because the Black-owned economic census does not collect or report beyond the two digit category 47, these data sets cannot be compared. However, if one assumes that the same percentage of travel agents and tour operators in subcategory 472 (62.5%) exists also in the data on Black-owned businesses, one would expect to find 3,051 Black-owned travel agencies and tour operations. But this assumption is flawed, because it assumes the same level of ownerships in particular sectors for the total population, when in fact the Black-owned business census shows that African-Americans are more likely to be sole proprietors than incorporated, have fewer or no employees, and have far fewer revenues and gross receipts than their White counterparts. Further, if 3.6% of all businesses are considered as African-American owned (Brimmer 1998), there would be 1,182 Black owned travel agencies and tour operators. While this number is more realistic than 3,051, it is also likely too high. During interviews with African-American travel agents, the number most frequently mentioned was about 300. Even Fraser (1998) in his discussion on the most promising employment opportunities for African-Americans fails to mention or list travel agents or agencies.

### *Minority Literature*

There are three distinct bodies of literature on African-American travel agents and tourism: scholarly publications, niche marketing travel guides, and travel surveys. Several textbooks were examined for materials on minority tourism and African-American travel in particular (Davidoff, Davidoff and Eyre 1995; Hall and Page 1999; MacCannell 1999; McIntosh, Goeldner and Ritchie 1995; Tribe 1996; Opperman 1997). Although this sample is not an exhaustive list of all recent university texts, it represents a recent and representative sample of major works published during the past decade. In the combined total of more than 1,600 pages, only Davidoff et al. has any inclusion or mention of the subject. It included two sentences: "Similarly, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other groups within our population usually will visit first those areas of common heritage before venturing into the unknown. Specialized, "ethnic" markets are an important part of the travel industry." (1995:23).

Recent articles by Philipp (1994) and Mellinger (1994) examine the

differences in tourism preferences between Black and White tourists. Philipp suggests that Black tourists prefer more structure and less adventure than their counterparts, a behavior associated with the legacy of racial oppression in the United States. Mellinger analyzes the historical representation of African-Americans on postcards from the American South from 1893–1917; he concludes that they depict Blacks as “the other,” and a superior identity for White viewers. Travel guides are additional sources for information on specific sites, cities, and regions. The single most detailed nationwide travel guide on African-Americans is *The African-American Travel Guide* (Robinson 1998). While not a scholarly treatise, it provides the names, addresses, and phone numbers of 86 travel agencies in 17 US cities. It also lists 201 current events in these cities as well as a number of attractions, including churches, sites and landmarks, museum exhibits, heritage tours, festivals, fairs, and historical colleges and universities (1998:34). City maps show the location of major tourism sites. Two additional travel guides are *The Soul of New Orleans* (Greater New Orleans Black Tourism Network nd) and *Alabama’s Black Heritage* (State of Alabama 1998). The former focuses on the cultural events, art exhibitions, and entertainment, the latter on historic sites, tours, and celebrations.

Finally, there are two surveys with data on this subject. The *American Travel Survey* (1995) is a publication by the US Department of Transportation, while *The Minority Traveler* (1996, 2000) is published by the Travel Industry Association of America. The first analyzes 656 million household trips in 1995 and the second several hundred minority tourists. The *Travel Survey* failed to consider “race and origin” singularly important and thus this category only appears in data enumerating personal leisure trips. *The Minority Traveler* includes data on African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans/Pacific Islanders. These data are unique in terms of describing macro patterns, modes of transportation, trip purpose, money spent, and specific destinations (by region). Thus, the 90scholarly literature on the subject is scarce and there is a dearth on Black travel agents as entrepreneurs. Even though no studies on such firms surfaced, there are articles on Black business owners, but most are empirical and descriptive in nature (Brunchey 2000; Black Enterprise 1997; Mays 1992; Travel Weekly 1993, 1995; Williams 1988). Lacking sufficient literature to construct a theory, the personal stories of African-American travel agents were used to understand their histories and experiences.

### *Study Methods and Biographies*

Six travel agents, all members of the InterAmerican Travel Agent Society (ITAS), were interviewed at their four-day 1999 annual conference in Jacksonville, Florida. This society, founded in 1954, is the largest, oldest, and most successful African-American tourism organization. It was conceived by three men from the New York and Philadelphia areas, one African-American, one Caribbean, and one African-Mexican. They realized early the importance of economies of scale and pooling their resources to achieve success. Most of the 42 current mem-

bers reside in cities with large Black populations, including New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Houston, and San Francisco. ITAS is disproportionately female and, despite its multicultural origins, is predominantly African-American; it meets twice yearly and members exchange information on business ownership, consumer preferences, and emerging markets. Their 1999 program included sessions on opportunities for higher commissions by working with a consortium, aggressive selling techniques, niche marketing, and buying and marketing on the Internet. The program also featured officials from federal agencies and representatives from Jacksonville's tourism bureau.

The six agents were asked how and when they became travel agents, their difficulties in starting a business, markets, customer trends, and the future of minority travel agents. Those interviewed enjoyed their profession and ranged in age from their early 50s to late 70s; five were women, a ratio similar to conference attendees. Five of those surveyed were African-Americans and had been in the business more than 25 years. Brief descriptions of the six agents interviewed follow; their names, ages, and business locations are altered to protect their anonymity.

Lena Neil (in her mid-70s) has been in the travel agent business for 25 years. She owns an agency in the New York City area. At the time of the interview, she was president of ITAS. Before she became a travel agent, she worked for AT&T for almost 20 years. Patricia Warner is a co-owner, with her sister Tina, of one of the oldest African-American travel agencies, Wright's Travel and Tours founded in Pittsburgh in 1949. Sometime in the late 50s, their father bought the business from the founder. Tina runs the headquarters office in Pittsburgh, while Patricia is in charge of the Washington DC branch. Louis Clinton, from San Diego, started working as a travel agent in 1970 and opened his own business in 1980; before entering the business he was employed by the San Diego public school system. Although he retired in 1997, he still works part-time as an advisor for an African-American agency in the San Diego area. In her late 70s and retired, Natalie Stuart's agency is run by her son. Before becoming a travel agent, she worked as a nurse and homemaker. She and her late husband, started the business in 1976 after they vacationed in Ghana West Africa on a trip with many other African-Americans. Their agency is located in upstate New York. Roberta Vaughan, in her early 50s and of Caribbean descent, came to the United States with her husband, a nuclear engineer, who worked in Alabama for the US military. She has lived in several different places; her children were all born in different countries. She became a travel agent after a friend who owned an agency bet her that if she would work for her one week, she would never be able to leave. Her friend was right and eventually she started her own agency.

### *Barriers to Entry*

Prior to the 60s there were few African-American travel agencies. During this time of segregation only Black companies could serve Black clients, almost any of them who needed services found it neces-

sary to patronize a Black-owned travel agency. This situation produced a guaranteed built in clientele. Rapid economic prosperity during the 50s and 60s failed to bring higher incomes and increased business for many agents, since few Blacks had the economic means to travel widely. The 60s for these agencies represented a period of rapid change. It included the passage and adoption of federal civil rights legislation plus the incorporation of new transportation and communication technologies. The decade also marked changes in the tourism industry in terms of customer base, destinations served, distances traveled, barriers to entry, and new modes of transportation and communication.

Because of a long history of White supremacy, many Blacks wanting to travel were indoctrinated to believe that White-owned businesses, including travel agencies, were better. The result following segregation was that Black travel agents lost their guaranteed consumer base as they began patronizing other agencies. Those agents who survived had to work diligently to redevelop their customer base. ITAS represents one successful group of African-American travel agents who survived desegregation.

ITAS was founded in 1954. During that time African-Americans could not travel. They were just getting into the travel market. All of our groups before this time were bus tours and you know everything was segregated (Patricia).

Paralleling the many social changes of the 60s were important technology innovations, the first being jet travel. Prior to the introduction of the first Boeing 707 in 1959, most carriers used slower propeller driven aircraft, which carried fewer passengers and had a limited flying range before refueling. The introduction of the jet opened up flying to more passengers and travel agents became more prominent on the transportation landscape. One agent reflected on these changes:

I have seen that market change though. You know, we used to take bus trips to South Carolina ... and we would end up in Orlando and then come back. Or we went from DC to Niagara Falls. Or we went from DC to New York. Then we started going from DC and stopped in Atlantic City. I stopped going by Atlantic City because I didn't like how they treated us [Black people] in those days. And our church groups they wanted to take a bus everywhere. They didn't want to fly. Then Eastern [airlines] started chartering airplanes. Then we started going to Nassau. Nassau was the primary destination and then Jamaica. We moved from the buses and then to the planes and cruises were kind of late on the scene (Patricia).

A second technological innovation was the computer. Prior to this, airline and travel agents manually wrote tickets, a slow process. Likewise, large bound paper volumes were needed by them to look up specific flights, times, and costs. If several connections were necessary, it could require a significant amount of time looking through the books and making the necessary phone calls. The introduction of the Computer Reservation System (CRS) in the 70s heralded a new era in ticketing. These dedicated terminals connected travel agents' offices to the airlines' mainframe computers. CRSs also became a major time saving device for agents and a lucrative investment for airlines.

The destinations of African-Americans were also changing. Prior to the 60s, most trips were to US cities, and if Blacks traveled at all, it was usually in groups and by land-based transportation. The reasons for group tours were many but included racist acts committed against African-Americans and perceived safety in numbers. Local chartered and church buses were the favored public modes. Popular African-American destinations along the east coast included Orlando and Atlanta in the south (Atlanta because of its historical Black amenities) and New York City and Niagara Falls in the north. There was a clear logic to the regional focus to the destinations in the 40s and 50s. According to two agents, "We would have bus trips to Atlanta. They had the Black hotels and the colleges. And we would stop at the restaurant in Atlanta—Pascal's" (Natalie).

Since the 60s, and with jet aircraft, popular destinations for African-Americans have included Africa (especially after the airing of the popular TV mini-series "Roots"), the Caribbean (in particular Jamaica and the Bahamas), and less frequently, Europe. Today African-Americans also enjoy cruises. Regarding group travel and destinations, these responses from agents:

The reason, Black people like to travel in groups. We don't like, very seldom will you find a Black person traveling alone ... Very seldom will you see a lot of Black people, a lot of Black Americans outside of, you know, safe areas ... Most Black people, just about everybody when asked, when given a choice between three destinations and three modes of travel, everybody wanted to go on a bus tour or a group tour. One of the questions they asked was would you go to a destination, a new destination to you. No, they would only go if somebody recommended it. We travel very differently than those other people ... We like to know, and Black people travel differently than other groups. Since I started, the first year I started a group and every year I do just one group, just Blacks, and it is not open to any other group. It is usually [what] we have done in the past, three years in a row we have done Caribbean cruises and last year we did Greece and this year we are back to the cruises again because they love the cruise experience. They really do. And we are doing seven-day cruises (Roberta).

There is some indication, expressed by these agents, that the generation of African-American tourists raised after the 60s is beginning to travel as individuals or as couples.

Before desegregation and increased federal oversight of the tourism industry, a Black opening his/her own travel agency faced few financial and social barriers entering the market. The benefits for someone opening a business in the 40s and 50s were that because of segregation, Black tourists would frequent a Black travel agent, since White agencies did not serve them. Moreover, few African-Americans had money or time for leisure or business trips. Thus, even if a Black travel agent had a guaranteed customer market, it did not count for much if the base did little traveling. To survive, that is, to be successful, a sizable customer base was required.

We didn't start going [after Whites] until the 60s. We got all of our business from the churches, the sororities, the fraternities, any kind

of African-American group, clubs, that was where our business came from. All of our churches they supported us wholeheartedly (Patricia). I put a listing in the Yellow pages, I started going after the other community (non-Black), I hired one Spanish-speaking employee, I hired a Chinese-speaking employee. Then I open an office in downtown [San Diego], then I went after the secretaries of the big corporations. I went totally all the way. I started going after everybody. My business ended up, maybe for about the first five or six years, about 10% Black, and about 10% Hispanic and Chinese, the rest of it was Caucasian (Louis).

Today, barriers to entry for African-Americans into commercial enterprises are much different, but they exist (Light and Gold 2000; Wainright 2000). To start a travel agency, an entrepreneur must have, or have someone on staff, with at least five years experience in airline ticket distribution. Also travel agents must be bonded and have storefront office space with security measures to protect tickets and financial assets. To assume the volume of bookings necessary to make a living, an agent must have access to a CRS, which may cost many thousands of dollars, not to mention the contracted monthly fee. There remains a very small pool of African-Americans with the minimum five years experience in airline ticket distribution, thus limiting the total number of independent Black travel agencies. The start-up costs can also be prohibitive. Successful agents have had to be both persistent and lucky in overcoming the barriers they faced. "I mean we worked seven days a week. Whenever someone told us there was a group, that was where we were. We worked hard" (Roberta).

Start-up costs and industry rules are among the major impediments. Travel agents are not licensed or accredited by a national governmental organization. Any national standards that exist come from the Airline Reporting Corporation (ARC), which was established in 1984 at a time of deregulation (ARC 2000). It is basically a US airline owned clearinghouse that acts as the "middle person" for airlines and travel agents. This corporation collects a processing fee of \$2.50 from the travel agents for each airline ticket sold, which is its profit from the transaction. Thus, it is the airlines, through this corporation, which are able to accredit or discredit any travel agency. Some of the basic requirements to obtain an ARC number are a bond, costing up to \$20,000, a storefront office which allows walk-in customers, and at least one person in the agency with a minimum number of years experience in the travel agency business (ARC Agent Reporting Agreement). One agent commented: "We found a black woman who had five years of experience and she came in our office as our manager. I learned everything from her. Eventually I went to the airline school down in Texas and I took more courses" (Natalie).

Most independent travel agents are unable to come up with the needed \$20,000 cash up-front; rather they pay approximately \$1,500 a year to a bond insurance company that covers the \$20,000 in return (ARC 2000). While it is possible to operate a travel agency and not have an ARC number, an agent cannot sell airline tickets without it, thus restricting earning potential.

*Start-up Costs*

Since initial costs are a crucial component in opening a travel agency and surviving, information was gathered on the basic requirements and costs to start a travel agency in a medium sized metropolitan area in the middle west in mid-2000. The key items are the ARC number, store location, CRS, payroll, telecommunications and advertising costs, and the expenses for writing tickets. Some owners do not take an income for the first two years; instead, they channel any income back into the company, hoping for higher incomes down the line.

If a business owner chose to serve exclusively an African-American clientele, this segment of the market in most cases would probably not be large enough to sustain the operation. A scenario can suggest the potential problems these agents may face in marketing to a Black clientele. It assumes a metropolitan area of one million residents, 300,000 of which are African-Americans. It is estimated that only 10–12% of African-Americans travel regularly and would visit a travel agent (Louis from San Diego). Assuming that 12% travel, this would be 36,000 potential consumers/travelers and of that 12%, one could expect to serve only 10% of this population annually (Louis). Thus, a travel agent specializing in an African-American market could expect to receive no more than 3,600 clients per year. Such a small number would make surviving, much less profiting, highly unlikely. Two agents commented:

I opened what I decided to be a full service agency. I started out with my church members. With my church members I thought I could survive on minority business. Within a year I discovered that I could not make it. Not enough volume, far too small. Most of our [Black] people are like other people, you are only going to get 10% [as customers]. No matter how much you advertise you will still only get 10%. In my situation in a small city, when I say small city I mean having a small Black population, 10% is not very much. I needed to do at least a million dollars just to break even (Louis). I would say that my business mix is probably about 60/40. Blacks would make about 40% (Roberta).

This scenario is extended by moving from the demographics to the demand side of the industry. Because revenues are in part a function of the commissions they generate through airline ticket sales, it is important to examine the necessity of having a large demographic base of consumers. If the average ticket costs \$500; then the numbers for agencies who focus exclusively on the African-American tourists would be: annual customers 3,600; approximate ticket price \$500 each; commission per ticket \$25.00 (5% of ticket price); ARC fee per ticket \$2.50; revenue per ticket (commission-ARC) \$22.50 (\$25.00 – \$2.50); and annual revenue from airline tickets \$81,000 (3600 × \$22.50). The supply side of the business is also rather bleak. Considering the costs of CRS, rent, bond, and salaries, and other overhead costs, the estimated \$81,000 in revenue generated by this hypothetical agent specializing in the Black market is insufficient profit for the business. One agent stated:

The overhead eats it up very rapidly. You have your computer systems, your employees, your insurance, your taxes, different kinds of fees. It runs, and your employees' expenses are the greatest. The minimum wage in San Diego in our business is \$8.50 an hour. An employee has to do a minimum of a half million dollars just to pay their own salary and the computer they work at. That is the whole secret, that is the reason you don't have that many of us [Black people] in the business. Because you will probably lose, if you are trying to do the business right, you will probably lose between \$25,000 to \$50,000 the first year (Louis).

Two conclusions can be drawn from this model. First, Black agents cannot survive in most cities by catering exclusively to the African-American market. They must try and appeal to White tourists. Second, if agents want to serve primarily the African-American market, then they must be in an urban area with a significant large and affluent Black population. Three agents provided valuable insights into industry dynamics:

I have lots of White clients, but they will not come to my office. They will do business over the phone, but they will not come to my office. I am trying to make my agency look as White as possible. I want to hire a White male because customers feel more confident talking to a White male (Tina). If your goal is not at least \$10 million, then you should not be in the business. You shouldn't even give it a thought. If you are only doing \$1.5 million you can't afford to pay yourself \$20,000 a year and you can't live on that. If you are in the business to make money, you have to earn for yourself at least \$50,000 (Louis). When I first started five years ago, there were no travel agencies in my town. Within two years there were three. Now there are none again. My other two competitors were not travel agents (they had no experience in the business). They were people who thought they knew travel. You have to know the business (Roberta).

## CONCLUSION

In focusing on problems facing African-American travel agents during the past half century, this research contributes to the literature on minority agents and tourism through personal interviews with independent agents who shared their experiences. These accounts reveal significant changes that have occurred, some following segregation, others from changes in transportation and computerization, and still others from regulations from airlines and the federal government. The independent agent's dilemma today is frequently one of obtaining the necessary financial start-up costs, which are often prohibitive and are likely to lessen the likelihood of African-American agencies starting and surviving. Many of these same points, especially about legal, financial, gender, and government obstacles were echoed by those testifying before a 1999 congressional Subcommittee on the Empowerment of the Committee of Small Business on Barriers to Minority Entrepreneurship (US House of Representatives 1999).

Two major findings emerge from the detailed interviews. First, the

Black agents probably cannot survive in most cities by only marketing to the African-American niche market; they require a larger customer base. Second, if they want to serve primarily the Black community, they must be in a city or metropolitan area that is large enough and with a large minority population. Those interviewed, who are also ITAS members, have businesses in cities with large total and minority populations, including Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and San Francisco.

There are a number of related topics that merit research in tourism geography, economics, anthropology, and sociology. First, it would be useful to examine the records of a long-standing African-American agency, and in particular the addresses of customers and their trip origins and destinations. Second, it would be useful to know how recent changes in ticket purchases and trip planning, now done electronically by many individuals from their home or business, have affected travel agencies. The demise of the independent operators may be one of the projected causalities of e-commerce. Third, it would be useful to examine how agencies use the World Wide Web to promote their services to individual customers, groups, organizations, and corporations. A number of African-American firms are using this medium and it bears watching to discern whether this innovation contributes to their success or threatens their survival. Fraser acknowledges the importance of the Internet in cybermarketing (1998:131–139). Fourth, it would be useful to have some “tracking” of minority companies by Standard Industrial Classification code and by state and federal authorities to monitor their success and failure rates. Fifth, one needs to examine generational shifts occurring in African-American tourism behavior, not only in regards to favored destinations, but modes of travel. Agents play key roles in tourist decisions (Klenosky and Gitelson 1998). These studies will contribute to learning about this important component of American society and business and the role that individuals, corporations, and governments play in ethnic economies (Light and Gold 2000) and, in particular, in agency creation and survival. ■

*Acknowledgements*—The authors thank the six travel agents for sharing their histories and experiences, Sue Watts of Ashland Travel, Inc., Lexington, Kentucky for information on start-up costs for medium sized Middle West cities, and Marye Stone Dahlman for providing the abstract into French.

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*Submitted 8 August 2000. Resubmitted 8 January 2001. Accepted 6 March 2001. Final version 22 October 2001. Refereed anonymously. Coordinating Editor: Valene L. Smith*