



Black in Buffalo

The incomplete victory of a people moving forward yet losing ground

BY HENRY LOUIS TAYLOR JR.

Buffalo is rushing toward the millennium. As we approach the year 2000 - speaking from the eyes of a black historian - I can see undeniable progress in Black Buffalo. That progress has come quickly, at least in the historical sense. In 1940 there were still only 18,000 African- Americans in Buffalo, just 3 percent of the population. Fifty years later, that number has exploded to more than 100,000 - 31 percent of the population.

The clear and considerable progress since mid-century is the springboard on which today's achievements are built. In 1996, blacks are finding jobs and opportunities that their forbearers in 1900 would have never dreamed possible.

Over the years, a small but highly talented and influential black middle class has emerged. This nascent group is composed of religious leaders, elected officials, university professors and administrators, entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, school administrators, principals and teachers, nurses, firefighters, police and skilled factory workers.

Yet when I travel through Buffalo's East Side and its Lower West Side, I am reminded of the words of the Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the southern Christian Leadership Conference, on the 25th anniversary of the March on Washington -- "It seems that everything has changed, and nothing has changed."

For Black Buffalo, it appears, the old proverb applies: The harder we run, the farther we fall behind.

I am deeply troubled as I see the dreary and forsaken commercial strips; hundreds of abandoned and boarded-up building; cluttered and unkempt streets; omnipresent vacant lots littered with junk, broken bottles and trash; legions of dilapidated and run-down houses; forlorn and foreboding neighborhoods; racially segregated communities; and idle men and women standing on street corners with nothing to do.

There are neighborhood jewels on the East Side. Residents there demonstrate daily how to build strong, solid neighborhoods. There are well-kept homes, neat lawns on landscaped streets and optimism on many.

But the fact remains that many streets in predominantly African-American neighborhoods are troubled. The decay and neglect of these streets form a backdrop on the achievements blacks have made since mid-century. These images are harsh and harmful stereotypes to assimilate and perpetuate, for people of all colors. But I still cannot forget these images.

The history of Black Buffalo in the last 50 years has been a choreography of triumph and tragedy, progress and regression, moving forward and then losing ground. And each element is connected. They interact and make the portrait of Black Buffalo a complicated story. This story is essentially one of struggle, a struggle of people building a better life.

We have made an awful lot of progress. But that real progress should not blind us to the problems that remain. Nor should we ignore those difficult scenes of neglect and lost potential. These are the images we carry with us. They are markers of where we have to go. No matter where I am in Buffalo, these ugly stereotypes are still part of my mind's eye. Others my color think the same way.

Remember that Black Buffalo, unlike other northern and southern black communities, did not reach maturity until after World War II. When the 20th century started, the black community was very small. There were only about 2,000 African-Americans (.5 percent of the population) living in the city. In those days, blacks mostly lived in Buffalo's industrial heartland -- in the William Street area, between Jefferson and Michigan avenues, in the midst of hundreds of factories, among Italians, Poles, Irish, Russians Germans, English, Canadians and the Jewish community.

The 18,000 blacks living in Buffalo on the eve of America's entry into World War II would be pioneers to the thousands that would soon come. Lured by the promise of industrial jobs, thousands of southern blacks poured into the city. Most of the explosion came between 1940 and 1970 when the population of Black Buffalo grew by 433 percent.

As their numbers grew, blacks greatly strengthened their community and became a force to be reckoned with. In 1950, the election of Leeland Jones, a black City Council member, signaled the dawning of a new era in the history of Black Buffalo. Over the ensuing 45 years, blacks battled to expand their political power, integrate schools, open housing and build organizations and institutions to help them meet the challenge of living in postindustrial society.

The growth of this middle class has led to substantial increases in the incomes of those in the upper levels of this stratum. In 1990, for example, about 8 percent of Black Buffalo had an annual income at or above \$50,000.

Black influence and power is also increasing. Most apparent is the rise in black political power. The president of the Buffalo Common Council is an African-American, and so, too, are three of its 13 members. Likewise, blacks have been elected to the New York State Assembly, the Erie County Legislature, the Buffalo Board of Education and various judgeships.

Blacks have a presence outside of politics, as well. They serve as interim president of Buffalo State College, executive director of the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority, branch manager of the Federal Reserve Bank's Buffalo office, athletic director at the University at Buffalo, general managers at WKBW-TV and WIVB-TV, commissioner of the Erie County Department of Mental Health, chief executive officer of Sheehan Memorial Hospital and superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools.

African-Americans have become an important segment of life on the Niagara Frontier. Race and class divisions are still strong here, but it is no longer possible to ignore the concerns of the black community.

Meanwhile, the black organizational structure is growing increasingly stronger. It is anchored by a network of community-based organizations: block clubs, social clubs, sororities and fraternities, and traditional civil-rights groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League.

There are other types of institutions that make Black Buffalo fairly unique. The Challenger, for example, is a weekly newspaper keeping Black Buffalo informed. The Afro-American Historical Association of the Niagara Frontier preserves the history and traditions of Black Buffalo, while the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies examines economic and community development and policies affecting Black Buffalo.

Also on the economic front, the Office of Urban Initiatives Inc. uses business development as a vehicle for creating jobs, producing community wealth and strengthening neighborhoods. The increasingly influential Grassroots Inc., led by a new generation of young politicians with deep ties to the community, is focusing attention on social and economic concerns. The black church and mosque, however, remain the community's most important institutions. Religious institutions are the social glue holding us together. Scattered throughout Black Buffalo, these institutions form a scaffold and foundation upon which to build. Collectively, these religious institutions have enormous fiscal and human resources, but have yet to realize their community-building potential.

Generally speaking, black religious institutions have not moved from "congregational" development to "community and economic" development, although there are signs this may be changing. St. John Baptist Church, under the leadership of the Rev. Bennett Smith, who was recently named one of Business First's 100 most influential people, has become a major force in Black Buffalo and Western New York. Calvary Baptist Church, one of the region's fastest-growing churches, is also expanding its urban mission to include community and economic development.

However, the premier example of the religious institution as community and economic developer is found in Towne Gardens Ltd. This corporation, led by a group of 10 churches and other community groups, has been working in partnership with elected city officials to become the driving force behind the development of Towne Gardens Plaza and the dramatic transformation of the community surrounding it. Towne Gardens Ltd. symbolizes its latent power.

The current generation of black leaders provides Black Buffalo with a very rare combination of organizations. There could be a synergism not possible in most communities.

When this potential is combined with the presence of a city and county government that, for the first time this century, is genuinely committed to black advancement, the future of Black Buffalo could be optimistic. That

is, if major obstacles can be overcome.

Now the obstacles. Buffalo is nationally recognized as a "tough place" for African-Americans. Studies have consistently ranked the region as one of the worst locations in the United States for blacks to live and work. Joblessness is the main reason. Middle-class advancement notwithstanding, more than half of Buffalo's black working-age population is out of work.

When placed in a social context, the impact of joblessness on Black Buffalo becomes more apparent. In America, a person's occupation determines their "standard of living," their family's "place in society," their "culture" and their sense of "self-worth." In essence, work shapes their perception of the world and dictates their relationship to others. Work generates the quality of life in a society still defined by class.

Where blacks in Buffalo work determines their problems, and dictates how they will fare economically and socially. Simply put, the fate of Black Buffalo is tied to the regional economy and its ability to gain access to good jobs and opportunities.

This is bad news. Buffalo is a "hardship post." For most of the last half of the 20th century, Buffalo and its surrounding region experienced clear patterns of economic decline. Buffalo's regional economy is a frail, dependent and marginally competitive service economy anchored by government and the big non-profit sector, including education, hospitals, retail trade and health, financial and related services.

In 1995, for example, the region's six largest employers were the state, the federal government, Erie County, General Motors, Buffalo Public Schools and UB. This compares to 1950, when more than 50 percent of all new jobs in the region were generated by the manufacturing sector. Replacing the high-paying, high-skill jobs generated by the region's manufacturing base are low-paying, low-skill jobs. These jobs typically pay less than \$20,000 a year and offer little possibility for advancement.

In the near future, all indicators point to slowed job growth in Western New York. Corporate downsizing in large and middle-sized companies, combined with the growing efforts to "reduce" the size of government, will curb job growth. In fact, according to a recent report by the New York State Department of Labor, most job growth in Western New York will be replacement positions for workers who resign, retire or die. This limited job environment means that competition for the available positions, especially the good ones, will greatly intensify. For example, the Labor Department says that only about 25 percent of the jobs in Western New York require a college degree. Many college graduates, unable to find work, eventually lower their expectations and take jobs that would normally go to less-educated workers. Today, it is not unusual to find secretaries and retail salespeople with college degrees or, at least, two or three years of college. This "underemployment" will make it increasingly difficult for less-educated or trained workers to find a decent job.

Race plays a big role in deciding who works and who remains jobless. On the Niagara Frontier, the "race" problem is really a problem about jobs and who gains access to them.

"I cannot imagine a time when black people will be working and white people will be standing in bread lines," a friend once said. Therefore, it is not surprising that in Buffalo's depressed economy, blacks are concentrated in low-paying jobs on the economic margin.

The racialized character of the occupational structure is more conspicuous in Buffalo than in other places such as Washington, Atlanta, or Durham, N.C. For example, on Monday mornings when I look out of the window of my home, I see white men picking up my garbage. At night when I leave the building where I

work, I see white men and women cleaning it up. When I go my banking, primarily I see whites in administrative positions, and when I do see blacks, they are usually tellers. When I go to malls, the people I see working in department stores, shops and restaurants are white.

When I go to downtown law firms, corporate offices or development agencies, the secretaries are usually white and so, too, are most professionals I encounter. When I travel into the suburbs, I rarely see black workers.

Traveling through the black community during the middle of the workday, I get a different view of the local labor market. On Buffalo's East Side and Lower West Side, I see large numbers of idle black workers, standing on street corners and in front of stores, laughing and talking to their friends. When I turn off the main drag and travel down the side streets, I often see young men clustered on corners, selling drugs. The sight of so many men and young people on the streets during the middle of a workday is striking, disturbing and depressing.

Historically, whenever you see large numbers of whites working in highly visible, low- paying positions, such as the ones described above, it means the economy is really bad, and black are being pushed out of jobs to create work for whites. Since whites are not going to vacate these jobs unless new opportunities open up, the economic predicament of blacks is not likely to change.

In 1988, The Buffalo News asked Andrew Rudnick, then president of the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation, about the lack of black advancement on the professional job front. He said, "We've had a ;stagnant economy, which has tended to keep people where they are. There hasn't been a chance for a lot of new opportunity."

Put another way, in a system where blacks are "last hired-first fired," they will not advance in an economy characterized by limited jobs and opportunities. This is why Buffalo is considered a "hardship post" for blacks.

In Erie County, the unemployment rate for blacks is 18 percent , with some black neighborhoods having rates as high as 30 percent. Among whites, the unemployment rate is 5.6 percent. "Full" employment exists in the white community, while depression-like unemployment exists among blacks is five times that of whites, and more than half of black households have incomes below \$15,000, compared to only a fourth of white households. At the polar opposite, less than 10 percent of blacks earn \$50,000 or more annually, compared to a fourth of whites.

Education alone will not explain the economic disparity. The 1990 census reported that 57 percent of whites and 52 percent of blacks had completed high school, obtained an associate's degree or completed one to three years of college. Even more striking is the fact that more blacks (19 percent) than whites (16 percent) had completed one or more years of college without getting their diploma. This should make blacks more competitive in the labor market, but it does not, Only "racism" can explain the economic disparity.

In 1992, The Buffalo News conducted a poll on racial attitudes in Erie County. They found whites viewed blacks as less intelligent, less hard-working, and less trustworthy than whites. Similar results were found in a poll conducted by WKBW-TV.

Last year, I talked with a white owner of a small business who said he was afraid to hire black workers. "If the guy doesn't work out, and I have to fire him, he might call me a racist, " he said, "and then I would have to deal with the NAACP or somebody else." Small businesses, owned mostly by whites, are the engines of job growth in Western New York.

The point is this: white attitudes toward blacks can influence, in subtle ways, black access to jobs and

promotions, and to the education and skills-training required to make them competitive. The economic crisis in Black Buffalo has created a social crisis. People without jobs sometimes lose hope, have trouble holding their families together, abuse their girlfriends and wives, get "high" on drugs and alcohol, cannot afford to get married and raise families, and get pregnant and have kids without getting married. Sometimes, they even rob and kill people. Landlords renting to people with low to moderate incomes often fail to fix their properties, while some homeowners cannot afford to fix theirs. This results in decay and deterioration.

Meanwhile, whites -- to separate themselves from blacks -- practice economic segregation, oppose mass transit to suburbia, fight against programs designed to help blacks out of dire straits and call for "law and Order." In the quietness of their suburban homes, many fan the flames of economic and social crisis.

Reflecting on "tough times" in Harlem during the '40s, poet Langston Hughs captured the two moods in Black Buffalo when he said, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun, or does it explode?" Caught in a tangled web of social and economic calamity, some black Buffalonians lose hope altogether, others turn to a life of crime and violence, while still others walk around seething with anger, frustration and bitterness. They are "time bombs" waiting to explode.

The social crisis in Black Buffalo will persist, becoming increasingly complex and difficult to solve, until a way is found to put African-Americans to work at a living wage.

This is not the "problem" of the black community or the "problem" of the City of Buffalo. Rather, it is a "problem" of Erie County and Western New York. White suburbanites cannot "wall" off themselves from the black community. The compelling reality is that the futures of blacks and whites are tied together. We have a common destiny.

If Black Buffalo is economically weak and in distress, inevitably, White Buffalo and the entire region will suffer. The problems confronting blacks then, must be solved within a metropolitan context. Job creation is the key. Without expanding the job base and simultaneously rebuilding neighborhoods, the economic and social crisis will not be stopped.

Racism -- especially the preferential treatment of whites in the labor market -- will stand in the way. It always has, and it always will. In the past, racial unity has been most difficult to maintain during hard economic times -- when job competition is most intense. Yet, at the same time, the story of black and white Buffalo is not historically structured and determined. We are not trapped in an iron cage of socioeconomic determinism, where future stories are already foretold.

We cannot change the history, but we do not have to be trapped by it, either. We have a chance to write some new history. That's where we are now. And the new histories are limited only by the boldness of our imaginations and our commitment to change. This is the challenge we face in the 21st century, building a new type of community. What we make of this opportunity depends on us -- black and white.

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