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A Song of the Bluff: The Phoenix of Pine Bluff Arkansas - Documentary

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A Song of the Bluff: The Phoenix of Pine Bluff Arkansas – Documentary

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by

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ABSTRACT

Pine Bluff, Arkansas has long grappled with a reputation as a town riddled with crime and violence. Once a thriving agricultural center of the state, Arkansas residents tend to score the town's successes as relics of the past. Economic decline, negative migration systems like white flight and brain drain, and racial disparities ties to the city's roots has continued to take its toll on the city. Nonetheless, the community of Pine Bluff knows excellence has and continues to prosper there. *A Song of the Bluff* is a 15-minute documentary that seeks to flip the negative narrative by confronting these stereotypes and sharing the stories of a thriving, hope-filled community.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to God, who makes all things possible

To my parents, Nathan and Tressie Evans, who nurtured and encouraged me to be my absolute authentic self.

To my little brother, Ru, who makes me so proud.

To my person, Anfernee Hawkins.

To my line sister and Pine Bluff native, Rachel Greig, who supported my thesis idea from the start.

To Dr. Rob Wells, Professor Niketa Reed, and Professor Colleen Thurston for taking a chance on me, guiding me through this grad experience, advocating on my behalf, and making me feel seen in spaces where I could've been overlooked.

To the place and the institution that has shaped me:
The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

State College, we greet thee with love and devotion:
Our hearts and our treasures we bring to thy shrine.
With arms that are strong from all harm, we love and defend the;
Thy name shall we cherish, dear mother of mine

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I. INTRODUCTION

Located near the Arkansas River, deep within the southern Delta, stands the city of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Its name comes from its geographical position: "the first bluff covered with pines" (Merkel, 1936, p. 1), and the city's post on the river made it an efficient location for activity. As years went on, the city of Pine Bluff began to shape itself as a metropolis of the southeast Arkansas region.

By the end of the 19th century, the newly established town had morphed into a bustling city. According to Leslie (1981), the city grew from a small town of 3,203 population in 1880 to 11,496 inhabitants in 1900 (p. 61). It was a large agricultural region with various high yielding crops such as cotton and timber, and was home to multiple industries, like the famous Cotton Belt route of the St. Louis Southwestern Railway and the Pine Bluff Arsenal, a U.S. Army weapons facility, that fueled Pine Bluff's economy (Leslie, 1981). Educational facilities like Branch Normal College, now known as the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, small businesses and publications like the Pine Bluff Commercial newspaper, and many other facets began to form what life was in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

However, the liveliness and success that the city was recognized for are not the same today. By the late twentieth century, the city began to decline. Layoffs began, companies left, and people began to move away. These aspects, coupled with the history of segregation and racial violence, created a steady decrease in wealth.

Now, Pine Bluff is named by some as one of the most "dangerous" cities in the state (Jordan, 2018). The economy and economic wealth has declined, and crime and poverty have soared. "For the past 20 years, most of the news about Pine Bluff seems to focus on the city's

disproportionate crime rate, contributing to a poor reputation across the state" (Nix, 2020). This town was once a location of prestige. Why did the narrative of Pine Bluff change?

This study is a companion to a documentary film that examines the causes behind the undoing of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The film illustrates these broader historical trends as it shares the history of the city and the work that citizens in the community are doing to change the city's tune and transform the town's negative reputation into a positive one. It features in-depth interviews and archival footage to amplify the town's forward progress and, at its root, to investigate why the city diminished.

However, the only way to understand this work's significance is to detail the causes of the city's decay. The decline of any city is caused by the combination of many facets that reach all aspects of society. Although though there is lack of academic research, economic decline, migration, and racial disparity are pronounced and noted characteristics that caused Pine Bluff's decrease and altered its esteem. These three themes and its history will be intertwined within the film and explored in this thesis.

Brief History

Pine Bluff was established on land that belonged to the Quapaw tribe. However, as white settles began moving into the area, the Quapaw were forced off their land through treaties and land cessions. The city's location on the river made it an attractive area for incoming settlers and trade. Its rich and flat topography was ideal for farmland, and agriculture became the mainstay of Pine Bluff, producing cotton, soybeans, cattle, timber, and many more crops. Cotton, specifically, was essential to the town's success. On August 13, 1832, Pine Bluff became the county seat of Jefferson County and solidified its place within the Arkansas territory (Leslie, 1981, p. 21). Its wealth "built on the crop of cotton cultivated on large plantations by enslaved

African American laborers" created an economic boom (Williams, 2020). With one of the largest Black populations in the state in 1860, Pine Bluff became a cotton powerhouse (Williams, 2020).

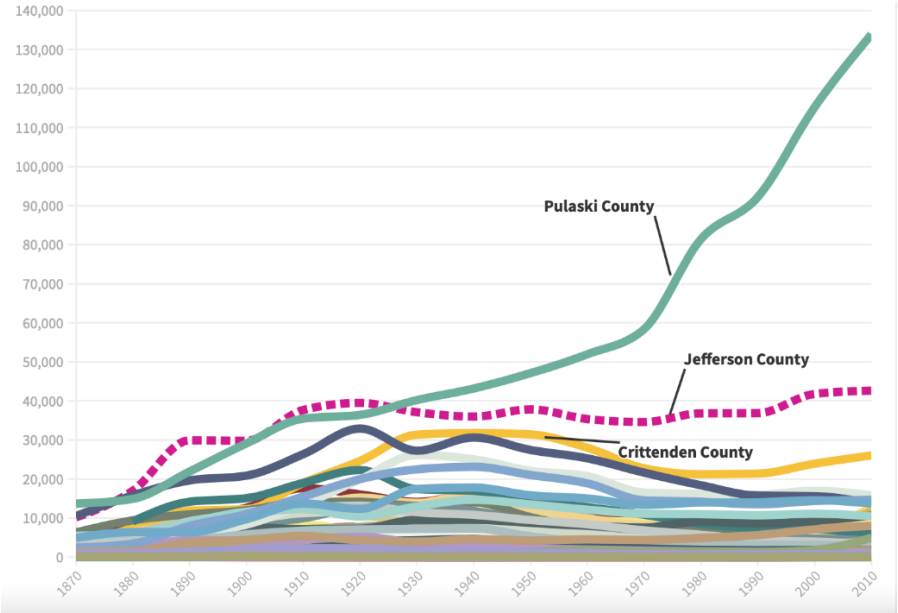

Figure 1: African American Population in Arkansas by County 1870-2010. This figure demonstrates the relationship between Jefferson County (dashed line) with the other counties in the state.

In 1870, there were approximately 10,167 African Americans in Jefferson County, and by the 1930s that population tripled to 36,116 (Past Census Data, 2020). During the Reconstruction era and the Gilded Age, formerly enslaved people were hired and/or forced to work on properties for wages or shares of land. This foreshadowed “the sharecropping system that would spread across the South in the years to come” (Bearden, 2021), which ensured that freed slaves would remain tied to the land. Additionally, the Republican decision to withdraw federal troops from African American territories for southern democratic support of President Rutherford B. Hayes ended black liberation and initiated a renewed African American subjugation (Rothstein, 2017, p. 39). Jim Crow laws, regulations that enforced racial segregation, and brutal violence against Black people reigned again. According to Lancaster (1976), the “civil

and economic loss" of African Americans and "the violent imposition of an occupational caste system preserving the best jobs for whites" created a sharp increase of lynchings in the state during the 1890s, and those who opposed these losses were "beyond the protection of the law" (p. 36). White residents took it on themselves to keep order and avenge others amongst their community and region. Extralegal violence was accepted, supported, and gave "everyday whites in a slave society a way to enforce white supremacy and expedite their version of justice" (Lancaster, 1976, p. 17). And the city of Pine Bluff wasn't excluded. On February 14, 1892, a mob of nearly 1,000 watched the lynching of John Kelly from a telephone pole directly in front of the courthouse. John Kelly allegedly murdered W. T. McAdams, a highly respected Pine Bluff citizen. The police captured him in Rison, Arkansas, and sent him back to Pine Bluff. However, he did not make it to a jail cell. The mob met him at the train station and "marched him up the main street to the courthouse" (Griffith, 2021). After he was hung, countless bullets were fired into his body.

However, segregation and brutality did not stop the advancement of the Black citizens of Pine Bluff. They created a network filled with entrepreneurs selling and working within their community. There were many prominent Black figures and Black advancement. According to Moneyhon (1997), there were 235 black businessmen (p. 46) in a business directory published in 1900, which included barbers, grocers, saloonkeepers, and more. Wiley Jones, who was one of the wealthiest African Americans in Pine Bluff during the late 19th century, was one of those businessmen (Hall, 2016). He was a significant political influence and owned multiple businesses in Pine Bluff, including a mule-drawn streetcar system called Wiley Jones Streetcar Lines. In 1875, Joseph Corbin founded Branch Normal College now known as the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff whose "primary objective was educating Black students to become

teachers for the state's black schools" (Historical Overview, n.d.). Although Jefferson County was still extremely segregated, the city's African American population was advancing.

Overall, Pine Bluff's success waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century. The Arkansas River was a constant threat to the town. The Flood of 1927 was one of the most destructive floods in Arkansas history and the nation (Hendricks, 2017). It affected several states including Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Louisiana. According to Hendricks (2017), “almost twice as much farmland was flooded in Arkansas as in Mississippi and Louisiana combined.” For Pine Bluff, a town on the banks of the Arkansas River, which is a tributary of the Mississippi River, it was devastating.

A few years later, the Drought of 1930 hit the city. This, like the Flood of 1927, impacted several states throughout the nation. It was named the Dust Bowl due to the dust storms that enveloped specific states. Altogether, it caused an agrarian blight that destroyed businesses, livestock, and tens of thousands of acres of crops (Spurgeon, 2010). And as the flood and drought gripped the city and the country, the Great Depression struck. It left a ruinous impact on the economy and the city's residents, and it was not until World War II when the town began to rise again. The war brought an influx of jobs into the area. Grider Field Airport, opened March 22, 1941, housed the Pine Bluff School of Aviation and operated as a pilot training academy. According to the History of Pine Bluff Regional Airport at Grider Field (n.d.), “the airfield increased its fleet to 275 aircraft, admitted around 12,000 pilot trainees, and graduated approximately 9,000 pilots during its only three-and-a-half years of operation.” On November 3, 1941, a federal munitions arsenal was also built in the city. The Pine Bluff Arsenal, producing munition and stockpiling aging chemical weapons, employed more than 10,000 workers, and

became a stable employer for years to come (Military Installations and Military Presence in Arkansas, 2019).

Similar to many cities during the 1960s, civil rights activism was present in Pine Bluff as well. Branch Normal College, also known as Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, students and other citizens in the community began protesting for their rights as fellow citizens. According to Williams (2020), "civil rights demonstrators held sit-ins at the Pines Hotel, Wentworth's, and Walgreens," among other places. These acts for equality were met with violence, yet national figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Dick Gregory, and James Farmer rallied behind Pine Bluff's push for change. Correspondingly, the integration of the Pine Bluff school system was met with resistance as well. After nine Black students successfully attended Little Rock Central High School (The Little Rock Nine) in 1957, there was pressure for other institutions to do the same. In 1959, A federal judge ordered three African American students to attend the all-white Dollarway High School. According to Pickhardt (2009), “leading segregationists rallied in nearby Pine Bluff to fight the court order,” (p. 357) and on August 21st of that same year, approximately 1,000 people gathered to hear well-known segregationists Jim Johnson and Amis Guthridge speak. Although their speech did incite the crowd, integration at Dollarway High School occurred the following year.

While Pine Bluff’s success did fluctuate over the decades prior, a steady decline in the city began in the latter end of the 1970s. White flight, the outward migration of Caucasian residents from racially or ethnocultural diverse areas, became present. Agricultural and manufacturing industries that were important to the town began to consolidate or close, and racial disparities caused by wealth inequality became more prominent within the area.

Description of Project

Once a location of prominence, the agrarian town of Pine Bluff, Arkansas is named by some as one of the most “dangerous” cities in the nation (Jordan, 2018). The documentary aims to educate others on the history of the city, the stereotypes associated with the town, and the progress that the community is making to combat those negative narratives.

Upon completion, the documentary will be submitted to regional film festivals throughout the South, some of which include the Fayetteville Film Festival, the Hot Springs Film Festival, and the American Black Film Festival. An Instagram page, @songofthebluff, was also created to market the film as well. Pieces from the interviews, facts about Pine Bluff, and short videos on the social media platform, Tik Tok, will be posted to build anticipation and knowledge of the city.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the causes that led to the downturn of the city of Pine Bluff. Previous research illustrates the city's historical significance and its current status, and this project aims to amplify the city’s history while stating specific facets that caused its decline. Using in-depth one-on-one interviews, the primary research questions for this study are:

RQ1: How did the narrative for Pine Bluff, once a center for growing black prosperity, change to focus on economic decline and violence?

RQ2: What were the economic factors that led to the deterioration of the city?

RQ3: What is the community doing now to revive the economy?

These questions are essential to this study to uncover and illustrate the causes of Pine Bluff's undoing and solidify why the citizens are doing the work to revitalize the town.

Theory

The historical research done for this study was informed by grounded theory where new material and the overall hypothesis of the project may then undergo refinement or revision. For every interview or observation, new data was collected. Comparing that data to others helped build “conceptual categories” (Glaser & Strauss, 2008, p. 23) that were used to build new concepts. This method helped pull interpretations and solidified themes from every interview. This is valuable because it guided the preliminary research into fixed notions and frameworks, which laid the foundation for my research. I was able to take each commonality, research it specifically, and discover if there were findings that backed up the claims.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Economy

Economic activity is based on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. These facets entwine with the individuals, businesses, governments, and nations that control where these goods and services allot (Staff, 2020). This system impacts cities, and in turn, these bustling centers, with their diverse locations, people, and governments, influence the economy, locally and nationally. Pine Bluff was once an agricultural and manufacturing center, known as the "largest cotton market between Memphis and Dallas" (Merkel, 1936, p. 5) but its economy has since dwindled. Once the agricultural and manufacturing center, Pine Bluff’s thriving economy has dwindled. In the past decade, the population has dropped from 49,083 in 2010 to 42,271 estimated in 2018 (Journal, 2019). The median household income, $32,917, is about one-third less than the state's average of $47,589 (U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts:

Arkansas, n.d.), and the gross domestic product (GDP) is approximately 12 times less than Little Rock, Arkansas, the closest major city, with a GDP of $3,699 to $38,124 (Total Gross Domestic Product for Pine Bluff, AR, n.d.). Prominent companies have closed or abandoned the city, and employment continues to decline, which affects the local financial system.

From the late 19th century and the early 20th century, Pine Bluff was a prominent and vibrant town that was powered by a diverse set of industries. In the 1880s, the St. Louis Southwestern Railroad, also known as the Cotton Belt Railroad, and the Pine Bluff Compress Company were major employers. The cottonseed-oil and timber industry were important to the town as well. Pine Bluff's Emma Oil Company, introduced in the 1870s, was one of the first mills of its kind in the state, and the Bluff City Lumber Yard was a notable mill that produced blinds, windows, and door frames, as well as timber cutting (Moneyhon, p.35). However, the Flood of 1927, the Great Depression, and the Drought of the 1930s negatively impacted these industries. It was not until World War II that the town's economy began to grow. Establishments like the Grider Army Airfield and the Pine Bluff Arsenal which were both established in 1941, became major employers for the city. These firms coupled with the companies that weathered the town's downswing sustained the city.

However, over time those industries minimized as well. Case in point, Pine Bluff was the Cotton Belt Railroad's primary repair shop and construction facility for freight cars, passenger cars, and locomotives (Zbinden, 2015), yet after the Cotton Belt merged with Union Pacific Railroad in 1996, the Cotton Belt facility was shut down. The cotton and cottonseed production remains important in Pine Bluff but the decline of the political and economic strength of the crop, local environmental factors like floods, and negative trend of cotton production in the United State has reduced the number of cotton center companies in the city. In 2020, Pines Mall,

the largest shopping center in Jefferson County, officially closed its edifice. Built in 1986, the plaza contained over 30 stores including a movie theater, JCPenney, Bath & Body Works, and GNC. That year tenants were forced to relocate. Additionally, in 2020, the *Arkansas Democratic Gazette* purchased the town's daily newspaper, *the Pine Bluff Commercial*. Such changes in the economy resulted in numerous layoffs for Pine Bluff residents. A lack of industries equals a lack of jobs. These and prior phenomenon directly affect the employment rate and the labor force of the city. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Data (n.d.), the employment rate from 2010 to 2020 increased by 19%, and the labor force depleted to 23%. In 2018, the jobless rate of the city of Pine Bluff was 6.0%, which is well above the national unemployment rate of 3.9% (Stebbins, 2019).

Such job losses decrease the city's overall wealth, creating a financial strain on the area, adding pressure for city officials to cut costs. According to King (2020), Pine Bluff's local government had to make budget cuts in 2020 to save money, resulting in more layoffs and continuing the cycle of decline.

Migration

According to Southerton (2011), migration "refers to the forced or voluntary movement of people between one place and another" (p. 970). Factors driving people away from a location can include natural disasters, lack of job opportunities, disenfranchisement based on racial discrimination, and inadequate housing. By contrast, pull factors that attract people to a community include better living conditions, job opportunities, and better education (Push and Pull Factors, 2019). As for Pine Bluff, there has been a steady decline in population for years. According to Worthen (2019), the city has "lost more people over the past decade than any other region in the nation." Between 2010-2018, 10,592 residents left Pine Bluff (Stebbins, 2019).

Out-migration, according to Smith et al. (2016), "exacerbates population aging and reduces the number of skilled workers in the economy," contributing to the decay of a city (n.d.). The exodus of skilled workers is termed human capital flight or brain drain. According to Dodani and LaPorte (2005), these people are in search of "better standard of living and quality of life, higher salaries, access to advanced technology and more stable political conditions in different places worldwide."

In addition to brain drain, Pine Bluff also experienced white flight, or departure of white people form an area that is becoming racially diverse (Nelson, 2019). This emigration pattern has adverse effects on a city and produces segregation in a community or region. According to Blakeslee (1978), white flight creates a "white, affluent society located primarily in the suburbs and a black society concentrated within large central cities" (n.d.). Further, it contributes to "historic and ongoing displacement, exclusion, and segregation that continues to prevent people of color" from obtaining wealth-building opportunities and accessing safe, affordable housing. (Solomon et al., 2019).

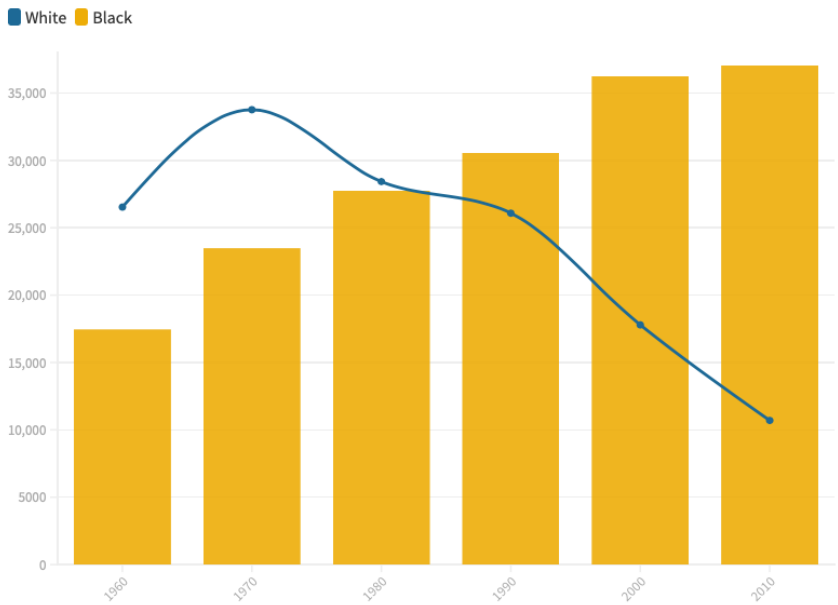

Figure 2: Pine Bluff Population by Race 1960-2010. This figure demonstrates the relationship between the white population of Pine Bluff and the other ethnicities of the city.

The town experienced white flight between the 1970s to the 1980s. During that time, the white population of 33,764 dropped to 28,430 in 2010, a 216% decrease from its height in the 1970s. On the flip side, the Black population of the city increased steadily. From the 1970s to 2010, there was a 57% growth within that specific community (Past Census Data, 2021). The difference between the Black and white residents is drastic, and one of the many factors for the downward trend consisted in the integration of schools within the city. After the Little Rock Nine were enrolled into Little Rock Central High School in 1957, there was resistance to integrate Pine Bluff, one of the largest counties in the state after Little Rock. According to Barth (2019), "many white families moved children into private, all-white "academies" as desegregation was implemented." Moreover, integration within Jefferson County was gradual. On Feb 11, 1971, a little over a decade later, the students at the all-white Watson Chapel High School in Pine Bluff ditched school in protest to the court order integration plan for the school. "Several hundred" students and parents filled the street and marched against this mandate, amplifying the message of exclusion (New York Times, 1971).

Racial Disparities

Racial inequality is intertwined into nearly all aspects of American society, contributing to disparities in wealth, housing patterns, educational opportunities, and poverty rates. These trends make it difficult for minority groups, primarily Black and brown individuals to advance. According to McKernan et al. (2013), "in 2010, whites on average had six times the wealth of blacks and Hispanics." And recent studies prove that they are worse now than in the 1960s (Dam & Long, 2020).

Wealth inequality in the United States "exhibits wider disparities of wealth between rich and poor than any other major developed nation" (Wealth Inequality, 2021). And racially

motivated laws and policies kept and continue to keep minorities, specifically Black and brown people from gaining economic prosperity. One example involves the Pine Bluff Arsenal: a military installation charged to manufacture and store chemical weapons during World War II. Established in Nov 1941, the Pine Bluff Arsenal was a major employer within the city; its facility operated differently compared to other factories at the time: it was a fully integrated base. And since most of the men were in the war, women, Black and white, accounted for most of the arsenal's employees. Although the Black women were allowed to work in the facility, around 90% of them worked on the manufacturing line which was menial positions compared to their white counterparts. Moreover, the placement of a munitions and chemical weapons facility in a massive Black population and the large pay gap between races can be considered industrial exploitation. Companies benefit from paying their African American employees less, and when plants close outsourcing and housing discrimination "trap Black communities in concentrated poverty" (San Bernardino American, 2016). Joblessness, crime, educational inequity, and fractured neighborhoods are outcomes of deindustrialization (San Bernardino American, 2016).

Housing patterns due to segregation created imaginary lines that separated the Black and white communities throughout the nation and in the city of Pine Bluff. It is well known, especially for native Pine Bluff citizens, that the Northside of the city was the Black side, and the Southside was the white side. These unofficial lines are visually and economically evident. On the south side, there are large homes with long lawns. There are no dilapidated homes or potholes like the Northside of the city which the city is most recognized for.

There is a significant contrast between a typical Pine Bluff household to one in Whitehall, Pine Bluff's neighboring city. Whitehall, incorporated in 1964, is 68% white and 19% Black, a demographic opposite that of Pine Bluff (Whitehall, n.d.). According to Nelson (2019),

many Whitehall citizens used to live in Pine Bluff but left due to whiteflight. The growth of the white population in Whitehall rose as it fell in Pine Bluff.

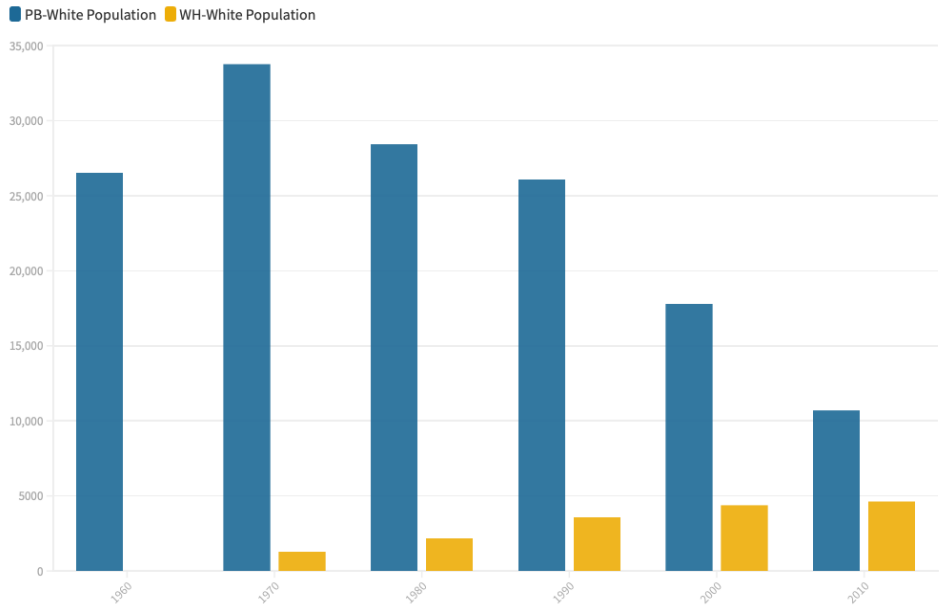

Figure 3: Pine Bluff and Whitehall's White Population 1960-2010. This figure demonstrates the relationship between the white population of Pine Bluff and Whitehall.

Moreover, according to the United States Census Bureau, from 2019-2015, Pine Bluff's median household income was $32,917, 49% below Whitehall's median income of $67,148. According to Solomon et al. (2018), "less wealth translates into fewer opportunities for upward mobility and is compounded by lower income levels and fewer chances to build wealth or pass accumulated wealth down to future generations." This is important because it continues the cycle of poverty and opportunities for advancement.

The media's coverage of the city of Pine Bluff has harmed the town as well. For nearly two decades, any coverage of the city focused on its disproportionate crime rate, contributing to a poor reputation across the state (Nix, 2020). These consistent messages shape the reputation of Pine Bluff. According to the Representation: Culture & Perception (2016), "Both entertainment and news media are powerful forces in creating and perpetuating negative cultural stereotypes,

especially about racial and ethnic groups." Additionally, other Arkansas towns which have a similar crime rate yet a different reputation to Pine Bluff have not received as much exposure. For example, the city of Hot Springs, known best for its bathhouses and luxury spas, has a crime rate of 75% per 1,000 residents, which is similar to Pine Bluff's 73% (Hot Springs, n.d.), but its demographic is flipped. It has a white population of 74% and a Black population of 17% (U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Hot Springs City, Arkansas, n.d.)

Conclusion

Pine Bluff has a vibrant history that stands in contrast to its current reputation. Economic decline, white flight, brain drain, and racial disparities are among the major contributors to its negative reputation. However, change is happening within the city. New community advancements like the Pine Bluff Streetscape Project aim to renovate Main Street. With collaboration from the Pine Bluff Downtown Development Incorporation, the City of Pine Bluff, and McClelland Consulting Engineers Incorporation, street upgrades like wider sidewalks, new street lamps, added greenery, and a center median have been implemented from the Jefferson County Courthouse to Fourth Avenue. And with a price tag of approximately $2.3 million, the plan is to continue improvements until Eighth Avenue. Go Forward Pine Bluff, an organization that aims to increase the city's revenue to provide a greater level of service to the citizens created a 58-page strategic plan in January 2017. The plan detailed recommendations offering future direction for the city, and one of those suggestions was the Generator. In 2020, The Generator is a business that was established as a hub for entrepreneurship and tech learning. The company created a 13- week program named *Gentrepreneurship* to help residents create their own business. Other additions include the new Pine Bluff Public Library, Aquatic Center, and Saracen Casino that has become the largest employer in the area. This documentary uses aspects

of the decline as ways to bring a deeper understanding to the decline of Pine Bluff and to expand the narrative of what Pine Bluff can offer to its immediate community and to the state of Arkansas.

IV. PRODUCTION NARRATIVE

Pre-production & Production | Spring 2021

Due to the pandemic and other unforeseen circumstances, in-person production for A Song of the Bluff began in March 2021. Each character was selected because they represented an aspect of Pine Bluff that would help share a more holistic perspective of the city. Conversing with the mayor, small business owners, young and old Pine Bluff natives, and current change makers helped me lay the foundation of my research via grounded theory and add another layer to the documentary. The city is also 76% Black and 20% white, so I wanted to make sure that the film was representative of the demographic, sharing voices from both races. Before I began filming, I had a preliminary interview with every character via Zoom. This was important because it provided a foundation for my research. Based on their responses to the research questions, I was able to explore those areas and find information that either did or did not support their claim. After each initial discussion, I traveled from Fayetteville to Pine Bluff to obtain interviews for the film. I asked each individual my specific research questions relating to the city's decline, as well as their personal experiences and perspectives. The interviewees were:

Jimmy Cunningham

Jimmy Cunningham is a native of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He is now the executive director of the Delta Rhythm and Bayous Alliance, a cultural heritage tourism initiative highlighting music, arts, and bayou history on U.S. Highway 65 and U.S. Highway 82 from Pine Bluff, AR to

Greenville/Leland, MS. He is also the creative coordinator of the Pine Bluff A & P Commission. He is working on bringing historical tourist attractions to the area.

Blair Hollender

Blair Hollender works as the research and exhibition specialist in the Special Collections unit of the David W. Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas. Although she lives in Fayetteville now, she is a native of Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Dr. Henry Linton

Dr. Henri Linton is a renowned artist, curator, and retired educator. He was a professor at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and then became the chairman of the Art Department. Dr. Linton is known for his landscape paintings. He also created the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Museum and has extensive knowledge and a massive collection of Black finds.

Rachel Greig

Rachel Greig is a native of Pine Bluff resident and current resident within the area. She is an employee of the Pine Bluff Arsenal, a major company within the city. As the youngest interviewee, she offers a different layer to this research.

Ulanda Arnett

Ulanda Arnett is the director of the Chamber of Commerce in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. As a Pine Bluff native, she works with businesses throughout the community to advocate and allocate resources on their behalf as well as to stimulate the local economy.

Mildred Franco

Mildred Franco is the executive director of the Generator, an innovation hub powered by Go Forward Pine Bluff. The Generator “seeks to drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment by creating an inclusive and diverse” environment.

Mayor Shirley Washington

Mayor Shirley Washington is a native of Jefferson County, Arkansas. She was an educator for decades, holding roles as a teacher and a principal. After retiring from the school district, she entered the public office. She became the first woman and the first African American to become mayor of Pine Bluff.

Sheri Storie

Sheri Storie is an executive director of the Pine Bluff Advertising and Promotion Commission, a destination marketing agency that helps amplify the local community. She has loved in Pine Bluff for nearly 2 decades. She desires to make an impact on the community by changing the negative narrative of the city.

Stephanie Sims

Stephanie Sims is the executive director of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Museum. She is an alumna of the university and uses her current role to educate students about the school's extensive history.

I was assisted by several cinematographers who captured some background footage and helped with production. Angelica and Ty Walton, fellow University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff alumni, helped shoot Broll of the city. I informed them of the tone and mood of the documentary and provided them with a list of the locations and scenes that I needed for the film. Michael Ferrara and Iaja Rogers, former co-workers at Arkansas PBS, aided me in the creation of a staged scene. The scene called for a bare wall filled with framed photos of the interviewees and of Pine Bluff. I provided all the props used on the set, Iaja Rogers provided the space and helped with set up, and under my direction, Michael Ferrara shot the scene.

Post-production | Fall 2021

The post-production process began in early September. With all my major interviews filmed, I undertook the task of transcribing all of those exchanges to understand and piece the footage into a script for the documentary. Transcribing over 10 hours of footage was a tedious two-week process yet was ultimately valuable. It made it easier to pull and place sound bites, and the story began to develop. The difficulty for me was the expansive history of the city. There were so many directions that the documentary could go. I felt overwhelmed and was unsure on how I wanted to present this story. The script went through multiple revisions in the latter half of the month. Some segments were removed such as the incorporation of all of the interviewees, and some were introduced, like the voice of a narrator. For me, it made the film feel more authentic. These ideas, at the end of September, proved to be the beneficial in shaping my story. In the script, the narrator was able to piece broader themes and historical facts together that either weren't said in the interviews or can't be inferred by the audience. Moreover, limiting the interviewees reduced repetitive notions and phrases. This feature aided in the flow of the documentary. After the script was finished, I sent it to Ringo Jones, assistant professor at the University of Arkansas, and Colleen Thurston, at the University of Oklahoma, both documentary filmmakers.

I edited my film for the entire month of October. While assembling the interviews and the Broll in Premiere Pro, I needed additional archival footage and voice actors. A lot of my still images came from the Butler Center of Arkansas Studies in the Bobby L. Roberts Library of Arkansas and Arts and the Pine Bluff Public Library. I needed pictures of early maps, the cotton industry in the city, the impact of the flood of 1927, and the community in the late 1800s into the late twentieth century. I also gathered and credited stills for the Pine Bluff Arsenal Facebook

Page as well. Additionally, Jimmy Cunningham Jr., the co-author of two books regarding Pine Bluff *(African Americans of Pine Bluff and Jefferson County and Delta Music and Film Jefferson County and the Lowlands)*, gave me permission to use the images within his books. I relied on both books for photos of prominent individuals within the Pine Bluff community. Moreover, I needed voice actors for the narration and for the "stereotype" section within the film. I chose Airic Hughes, an African and African American professor at the University of Arkansas, was the narrator of my film. I felt that it was important to have a Black lead voice for town with a large Black population. He has three voiceovers within the film at the beginning, middle, and end. Music was significant for my film because it set the mood for every section of the documentary. Most songs came from YouTube Music Library and Artlist; however, one song "Change The Narrative" was created by a group Pine Bluff natives. The song was uplifting and upbeat, and I felt like it was significant to have a song with natives rapping positively about their city within the film. It connected with the overall theme of the documentary: hopeful. The "stereotype" section involves many different voices talking simultaneously. I reached out to previous classmates at the University of Arkansas and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff to help me build this section. Each individual was sent a release form, directions to provide a quality recording, and lines to read. Those lines were then chopped and placed to give the film the illusion that I was looking for.

The last week in October I handed my documentary to my assistant editor and previous classmate, Ethan Sam. He helped me polish the documentary; some of those actions included checking for clipped audio, balancing audio levels, adding in movement over specific pictures, and placing transitional effects between sections. After he finished, I went back in and added a few more pieces of Broll, the subtitles, and the credit roll.

Final Thoughts

This project was an enormous undertaking, and the process was both enlightening and complex. I felt comfortable in my role as a producer, yet this thesis required me to wear many different hats: historian, line producer, executive producer, director of photography, production designer, prop master, editor, and film marketer. I made plenty of mistakes. The audio on the first interview I conducted was not the best. The placement of Ulanda Arnett's lavalier mic rubbed her shirt the entire time, and for some of the earlier interviews, the mic captured no audio at all. Moreover, those early interviews only focused on asking my research questions. Although I continued the interview by diving deeper into their responses, I could have expanded the research by inquiring about prominent moments in Pine Bluff history. However, with every mistake, I progressed. The biggest lesson that I learned was to ask for help. I could not do it all. I relied on my University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and my University of Arkansas connections to help me create a quality film, and for a documentary, whose theme is about community, I felt a positive link to my real life and the motif of this film. My hope for a Song of the Bluff is that it is seen as quality, it teaches others about the history of the town, and it starts a conversation about the city and the residents within.

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