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The Republican Party of Texas

“Jaybird-Woodpecker War of 1888-1890”

Imagine a time when black voters who were highly qualified, with numeric voting power, and united for common causes came to agreements to duly elect black and white colleagues to almost every post in a county and control it because of the



Jaybird “Our Heroes” monument outside Richmond City Hall.

black voting power. Imagine if their whites-only counterparts were ingrained with hate, jealousy, envy, and more, so great they choose to disregard the legal election process and have a hostile takeover by force to take over the county! This hostile takeover would be the sheer definition of a mob mentality whereby rules were ignored, bloodshed and death emerged, fair election procedures didn’t matter, and racism truly ruled the day! Well, imagine no more, this happened, in Texas under the watch of Democrat Governor Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross.

In the late 1800s, counties from east Texas, stretched through the deep South and up into eastern Virginia known as the “Black Belt”.¹ In Texas the ‘Black Belt’ stretched along the Brazos and Colorado River Valleys.² These counties had high populations of black people due to slavery. These same black people, upon

being freed, would become voters in these areas and, in some instances like Fort Bend County Texas, take over county politics! These voters were Black Republican

Voters and they made White Democrat Voters furious. White Democrats would eventually revolt, turning to violence and intimidation to remove and replace black officials with white ones!

In 1888, in Fort Bend County Texas, the White Democratic faction of the county were highly resentful they didn't have political control and were fixated on restoring a white government at all costs. The result of this aggression would result in what is known as the "Jaybird-Woodpecker War of 1888-1890". The 'Jaybirds' represented the wealth and about 90 percent of the white population of Democrats wanting to rid the county of the Republican government which emerged during Reconstruction.³ On the contrary was the Black Republican group with their white colleagues known as the 'Woodpeckers'. During this time, blacks outnumbered whites in the county by a four-to-one ratio.⁴ The county had about an 80 percent black majority electorate which dominated elections during this time.⁵

Fort Bend County Texas was one of the last great holdouts of the Republican Party in Texas before the Democrats would wrestle control of the state and keep it for over 120 years. From 1869 through 1899, black men served the county at all levels of government from the sheriff, county commissioners, justice of the peace, and more.⁶ Ultimately, this was too much for White Democrats to bear, and they eventually turned to violence to end the Black Republican stronghold in the county.



On September 5, 1888, four hundred Jaybirds gathered at the county courthouse and drew up a list of the seven most 'odious' Negroes (as they referred to them) and ordered them out of the county. These were prominent Republican politicians who, likely fearing for their lives, promptly left for other parts.⁷ In November 1888, the Republican Woodpeckers would still win the elections, both surprising the White Democrats and infuriating them, which prompted the start of war between the groups.⁸ Governor Sul Ross would send a detachment of Texas Rangers in an attempt to halt the battle, but that effort was to no avail.

The feud between the Jaybirds and Woodpeckers would last a year, reaching a pinnacle on August 16, 1889, in a bloody shootout in front of the county courthouse in Richmond. The Jaybirds would usher in a nominating convention attended by all whites to disenfranchise black voters.⁹ The result was a dismantling of the biracial local government and a takeover by the county's white minority.

Governor Ross would eventually come to Richmond himself, along with additional Rangers to establish law and order.¹⁰ Although law and order appeared to be reestablished, the disenfranchising of Black Republican voters was already well underway. A Democrat Jaybird organization would be formed in Waller County in 1893, likely helping to firmly establish White Democrat rule and further



Richmond, Texas

disenfranchise black voters. This method would, unfortunately, become the example for other black-belt counties to usher in an uncontested method of disenfranchising black voters.

What began as a good example of a successful biracial local government with blacks at the helm, ended with a violent overturning of legitimately elected Black Republican leaders. Although that war was over 130

years ago, the effects of such disenfranchisement by Democrats can still be felt today. Texas will do well to learn from history to ensure such ugly efforts are not repeated in more subtle or even blatant ways. Republicans in Texas must ensure a watchful eye is forever present and that all efforts are made to ensure minority voters are not suppressed while those duly elected are not quelled by political fear or tactics.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Hull, Jonathan Watts (2014). The "Black Belt". Southern Legislative Conference (SLC). Retrieved from <https://www.slcatlanta.org/research/index.php?pub=486>.
- ² Casdorff, Paul (1965). A History of The Republican Party in Texas 1865-1965. p.53
- ³ Yelderman, Pauline. Jaybird-Woodpecker War. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.
- ⁴ Casdorff, Paul (1965). A History of The Republican Party in Texas 1865-1965. p.53
- ⁵ Lovett, Leslie Anne. "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction and redemption in Fort Bend County, Texas, 1869-1889, p.2." (1994) Master's Thesis, Rice University. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/13861>.
- ⁶ Ibid, p.4.
- ⁷ Casdorff, Paul (1965). A History of The Republican Party in Texas 1865-1965. p.54
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Lovett, Leslie Anne. "The Jaybird-Woodpecker War: Reconstruction and redemption in Fort Bend County, Texas, 1869-1889, p.5." (1994) Master's Thesis, Rice University. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/13861>.
- ¹⁰ Casdorff, Paul (1965). A History of The Republican Party in Texas 1865-1965. p.54