"They Closed the Town Up, Man!": Reflections on the Civic and Political Dimensions of Juneteenth

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Celebration: Ethnicity and Ritual


Juneteenth is an Emancipation celebration which commemorates the freeing of slaves in eastern Texas and western Louisiana. It began on June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger landed at "Galveston Bay" near Galveston, Texas, and "spread the news around" that slavery was over ("Juneteenth ...", 1951:30). As late as the 1940s, Blacks in such neighboring Louisiana towns as Port Allen and Lake Charles chartered excursion trains to Galveston on June 19th:

It was something that they felt very strongly about. Because I know I can remember older people saying 'Well, I'm going this year because it may be my last.' And I went such and such a time before. It was something they really held dear.²

The celebration later became an important item of "cultural baggage" carried by Louisiana and Texas Blacks who migrated north into Arkansas and Oklahoma after Reconstruction and west to California during the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, and World War II.

Juneteenth is classified as a secular celebration because the rituals performed on this day are borrowed from the traditions of July 4th; there are parades with bands and floats, picnics, dances, baseball games, and other types of games and sports (fig. 116)—as opposed to rituals originating from Black church services.

The morning parade is one item borrowed and fashioned to the Afro-American theme of freedom. The line of march has included smart-stepping brass bands, pretty "prancing horses," local orders of Masons, Shriners, Knight Templars, and other fraternal organizations, resplendent in their parade dress. However, the theme of freedom is ever-present. Often the floats depict the historical fight of Afro-Americans for freedom. And there are symbols and slogans in abundance, too (fig. 117). One placard carried the slogan: "Fourteen slaves brought here in 1619." In some parades axes are carried to symbolize death to the slaveowner, and torches are carried in others to symbolize hard-earned freedom. But the most effective symbol used to be the ex-slaves who were

Figure 116 A Juneteenth bull-riding contest.

Figure 117 A Juneteenth parade in Anderson, Texas.
placed at the end of the march. And in Brenham, Texas, the Black citizens called their elected parade queen: "The Goddess of Liberty" (Wiggins, 1975:47).

Juneteenth celebrations come from all political and civic segments of the Black American community. The celebrating throngs have been described as not being

of all one type. They were all types. You had sweet Lucys. You have those, you know, who are fairly intelligent. You have those who are intelligent, and you have... hippies. You have all types of people out there. And the ages from I'd say from one month to ninety years.3

No other celebration comes close to matching Juneteenth's appeal among Black Americans who trace their roots back into Louisiana and Texas slavery.

Juneteenth is a persistent regional metaphor of the Black American experience. Its myriad rituals, beliefs, legends, and symbols center all on the Black American community's long and as yet unresolved struggle to wield meaningful political power and to be accorded civic respectability. The outside social status accorded southwestern Blacks has caused them to look upon Juneteenth as "their" day. One celebrant recalled:

Well, at that time we used to ask why they celebrated that day and our parents would always tell us 'This was the day that the Negroes was supposed to celebrate: the 19th of June.' And I never did know definitely why, but I knew that they would always say that was "our day" and that the 4th of July was for the white folks.4

However, in the final analysis, Juneteenth does not polarize Black and white Americans. Rather it has become an annual cultural observance primarily devoted to civic affairs. For Black citizens it serves as a yearly reminder that their slave heritage is not a badge of shame and inferiority. As one celebrant aptly put it:

I have never felt that we should stop telling our children and letting them know about the 19th of June, and about our people as slaves. I don't think you should be ashamed of it, because it's true. And I think they should know about it because these that are growing up now are not going to know anything of what our people went through.5

This dual theme of the survival and termination of slavery takes numerous symbolic and ritualized forms within the Juneteenth celebration.

Celebrities create and tell legends which explain the origin of Juneteenth:

How Juneteenth got started... is legendary in nature. However, my eighty-six-year-old father swears it is the truth; that an ex-Union soldier (Negro) rode a mule given him by Abraham Lincoln, Yessuh, all the way to that section of the country. And when he got to Oklahoma, he informed the slaves that they were free. From there he went to Arkansas and Texas. It was on the nineteenth of June when he arrived in Oklahoma. My father swears it, and he says if his father was still alive, he would do the same swearing without batting his eye. Many of the old-timers are with him one hundred percent.6

This etiological legend takes the mule out of slavery's cotton fields and tethers him in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital and issuance site of the Emancipation Proclamation. His owner is no longer an oppressive slave master, but President Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator. Both the mule and the slave are socially elevated from their shared roles of servile toil. The mule no longer pulls a plow or wagon; now he proudly carries a Black messenger of freedom. By the same token, the messenger breaks his silent acceptance of slavery by loudly proclaiming the message of freedom. Thus, in this Juneteenth legend, the mule and the slave, twin symbols of American slavery, are recast as symbols of Emancipation.

Personal dress and grooming have long been a popular means of expressing Juneteenth celebrants' social equality with their town's white citizens. One celebrant expressed those sentiments this way:

You know as near as I can remember, the 19th of June was just a second Christmas... everything... is especially set aside for that day. Even bought your new shoes, your new clothes, and dressed up, your hair cut, everything, you know. You went all out, really.7

This Juneteenth dress code has slave origins and is observed by Black emancipation celebrants in other parts of the country. As early as 1651, Massachusetts's legislators passed a law condemning "men and women of meane condition" for wearing the clothing of "persons of greater estates, or more liberal education" (Nash, 1970:6). And after Denmark Vesey's revolt some colonies passed legislation restricting the dress of slaves (Goosene, 1974:559). There are numerous accounts of newly freed slaves celebrating their freedom by shedding their rags and dressing up in the fine attire of their masters. A recently emancipated Virginia coachman marked his change in social status by dressing in his master's clothing (Franklin, 1968:226). One Confederate diary noted that emancipated "Negro women, dressed in their gaudiest array, carried bouquets to the Yankees" (Chesnut, 1949:536). The following interesting statement graphically indicates the ex-slaves' association of dress styles with an elevated social status:

July 4th—Saturday I was ill in bed with one of my worst headaches, but I came down when callers arrived. They talked of Negroes who flocked to the Yankees and showed them where the silver valuables were hid by the white people; ladies' maids were dressing themselves in the mistress's gowns before their very faces and walking out. (Chesnut, 1949:544; italics added)

Today's well-dressed Juneteenth celebrants are in this same tradition. In the second half of this century it has been noted that some southern white communities still exert negative social pressure on Black males who refuse to wear work clothes on weekdays. These brave souls, who, as Jack Schwartz argues, are merely
trying to "raise self-esteem, and status symbolization, and cushion the traumatic
effects of a subordinate position" (1963:224–31), are labeled "smart niggers" by
some of their fellow white citizens (Lewis, 1955:54).

The "Afro" or "natural" hairstyle worn by many contemporary celebrants of
Juneteenth also symbolizes a mass Black rejection of their second-class citizen-
ship status (D. Llorens, 1967:239–44). Several American scholars have discussed
the class and psychological dynamics associated with the texture of Black hair.
For a long time it was desirable to have straight or "good" hair as opposed to
 kinky or "bad" hair (Cleaver, 1973:9–21; see also Lewis, 1955:56–66; and King
the growing acceptance of "natural" hair texture instead of hair that has been
chemically processed and straightened. A former process-wearer put it well:

The process was more or less propaganda and made many men feel that
unless they wore their hair processed they didn't look good; that if they
didn't have straight hair they were inferior. The newer generation doesn't
feel inferior just because its hair isn't straight. (Llorens, 1967:145)

Juneteenth celebrants also demonstrated their rise from slavery to social parity
with their white neighbors in the preparation and ingestion of special foods. On
Juneteenth you

really set aside that day for special cooking. You didn't eat the same thing
you know, like everybody. That day you had special food: barbecue beef,
mutton, pork. Everything that is especially set aside for that day.6

The annual barbecue ritual serves as a reminder of the slavery endured by Afro-
American slaves. The smell of a gutted hog slowly barbecuing over white-hot
hickory ashes links each year's Juneteenth celebrants with their slave ancestors:
they are experiencing the same aroma that slaves and newly emancipated Blacks
did earlier. It can be further noted that the barbecue pit serves as a fitting sym-
bol of the slave's servitude and also of their emancipation from bondage. Junte-
teenth celebrants praise the "pit barbecue." One celebration cook apologized
for not barbecuing "the old way [where] you used to dig a hole and have a
pit." Making this simple hole in the ground is an annual reenactment of the
precise way that slaves and the first celebrants of emancipation barbecued their
meat.8 Is it any wonder that "pit" and not "southern" is the adjective primarily
used by Afro-American barbecue merchants in such northern cities as Indianapo-
lis, Chicago, and Cleveland? And some barbecue merchants would rather go
out of business than alter their slave-originated pit method of cooking to meet

Juneteenth speakers annually reassure their audiences that they are American
citizens. The need for such an annual reminder is clearly evident in this frus-
trated outburst made by a minister after a stirring Juneteenth sermon: "I'm not a
citizen of this country. My home is in glory."11 Liberal doses of patriotism and
racial progress are the cure that Juneteenth speakers have traditionally given
their audiences. As one celebrant remembered:

They would mention that he [the Black American] always obeyed all the
laws. And he fought in all the battles and that nobody can point their finger
at him for being a traitor. I've heard that and...I can recall that in this
note there would be his attainments. And how he hasn't reflected anything
but credit on himself since being free.8

In addition to securing inspiring speakers, the local Juneteenth Committee
would promote civic pride in their communities by: sending out the date to
community members who had moved away; planning, cooking, and serving the
annual meal; and organizing the celebrants into teams to clean up the commu-
nity "cemetery" and "countryside." This group of Black citizens would start
meeting just about, ooooh, let's say the first or second week in May and
we'd run about three or four meetings and you'd have all your money and
everybody would have seen everybody and by the time the 19th of June

Two of the committee's activities, the morning parade and afternoon baseball
game, have been successful means of improving race relations between the
Black and white citizens in the Southwest. The parades through the downtown
area force the white citizens to see the various civic, religious, and social orga-
nizations that exist in their town's Black community. The receiving of a parade
permit keeps alive in the Juneteenth celebrants a sense of citizenship in the
town (fig. 118). And the mingling of Black and white citizens along the parade
route also gives the Black citizens a feeling of civic self-worth.

But it has been the Juneteenth baseball games that have done the most to
improve race relations in the small towns of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and

And that day that we had that 19th of June, they closed the town up, man.
They closed the bank up. They closed the bank up, the stores up, and
come down [to the baseball game].14

And another celebrant remembered integrated baseball games on the 19th of
June:

Now you take out there at Cheek [Oklahoma]. Now every time we had a
picnic, we had a white community out there too. Generally you had a base-
ball game. Now the first integration I saw long years ago, we used to play
white boys out there in Cheek, way back there. Negro boys used to play
the white boys outta Cheek all the time.15

The social significance of these Juneteenth baseball games is underscored by
the fact that baseball is the sports metaphor for American culture. Jacques Bar-
spurned American boy might say "I can't get to first base with her" or "I struck out." Our military brass often refers to the "home base" of operations. An American criminal is often said to have run "afoul" of the law. Unreasonable financial demands are considered to be "out of the ball park," while conversely a reasonable price is "a ball-park figure." A successful person is often described as an individual who has "cleaned up," in the fashion of baseball's "clean-up hitter." An ill-advised project has "three strikes" against it. Americans take "a rain check" on invitations they cannot accept. And a novice in any field of work is often called a "rookie." Perhaps the clearest indication of baseball's influence on American speech is the fact that the simple phrase "ball game" on a Juneteenth program conveys the idea of baseball to black and white celebrants alike.

Juneteenth's exciting baseball games and colorful parades often received positive news coverage in local newspapers. As one celebrant said:

Oh yeah, they used to cover it ... The paper, take for instance The Banner Press here, we used to call it The Brembo Daily Banner Press. It give good coverage on it. 'Bout the only time you seen anything for a Negro that wasn't that he stole something was on the 19th of June.18

But celebrants of Juneteenth have never been totally satisfied with these various unofficial recognitions of their celebrations. There has always been a very strong political side to Juneteenth celebrations. Local candidates for public office are remembered as having helped, sponsored, and spoken at past celebrations:

Yes, they would invite the candidates out to speak like they used to. And the primary now comes off now in August, now. But it used to be in June and they'd have the candidates. All the candidates would come out and speak. And, generally ... the candidates would give beef. The man running for sheriff or judge or something, he'd give them the beef. And another one would give the bread and they'd cook it and have a celebration.19

This political activity often bore fruit. In one east Texas town a mayor who had sponsored post-Juneteenth observances saw it to that electricity, street lights, sewer lines, and indoor toilets were made available to the Black voters before he left office.20 And "black and white" Juneteenth buttons were worn by Atlanta, Georgia, civil-rights marchers during the early 1960s.21

Refusing to work on June 19th is the most political of all Juneteenth rituals. It speaks to the heart of the issue. For if slavery is "forced labor," what better way to register your individual rejection of the system than by simply refusing to work? Stories like the following narrative are still told by some Juneteenth celebrants:

I have a friend—i wish she were here to tell you—her uncle or granddaddy or something was seemingly on his way ... seemingly his boss or master had sent him some place to get a load of flour or something and he was on his way back when he met a white man and he told him "Well,
you're free now." He said "Sure enough. Do you mean that?" He said "Yes. You're free." Said he said "Thank you." Said he got out and left the wagon right there. (Laughter) Said he didn't even complete his journey to carry it back. He said "I'm free. I'm not going any further." She tells that, I don't know if that's true or not, but she was telling that the other day. But I don't know if that's true or not.23

A popular boast is: 'My daddy said he wouldn't ask a mule to move if it was sitting in his lap on the 19th of June.'24

Since emancipation, a wide range of Blacks have adhered to the ritual of not working on June 19th. Sharecroppers were given the day off.

My great-great-grandfather told me stories of the 19th and how they did him. And how sometimes Negroes were supposed to be picking cotton and the boss man was always talking about "Well, tomorrow's your day. So I won't be looking for you tomorrow." They always gave them this day off, regardless of when it came. They always gave them this day off. They never had to worry. They always knew they had this holiday coming.25

But factory workers did not always get the day off. One celebrant noted the differences in agricultural and industrial jobs as far as observing the 19th of June was concerned:

You see most all of them people was farmers, so they could lay their crops aside a couple of days and go. But you can't do that on a job. ... And no kidding, I have seen guys lose their jobs for taking off for the 19th of June. I've actually seen it happen. They lost their job. The man would tell 'em "Well, by God, if you don't work the 19th of June... don't come back... Get your time!"26

And college students at Jarvis Christian College26 and Prairie View A and M College27 were excused from classes on the 19th of June.

This quasi-holiday status of Juneteenth eventually spawned the sentiment to make this day in June a legal holiday. One Juneteenth speaker told his audience:

And may I stop here and say that many of the Black peoples today feel that we should not celebrate or should not work toward a legal holiday for the deliverance of a Black man from slavery. [But] many of us Black folks today feel that this is wrong. That we should set aside and work toward a legal holiday.28

And a celebrant concurred with this sentiment by arguing that Juneteenth "should be a red spot on the calendar and really took aside for."29

In the decade of the 1970s, Juneteenth legislation was introduced into the Texas state legislature. In 1972, two Black congressmen, Zan Holmes of Dallas and Curtis Graves of Houston, introduced a resolution which recognized "Juneteenth as an annual, though unofficial, holiday of significance to all Texans and, particularly, to the blacks of Texas, for whom this date symbolizes freedom from slavery" ("Austin Wire," 1972:10). And in 1979, Black State Representative Al Edwards introduced a bill to make Juneteenth an official Texas holiday and it passed ("Juneteenth Day," 1979:8). Through this political action, Representative Edwards assures the "end of the old traditions when Blacks had to sneak off their jobs to celebrate the day" (ibid.). Representative Edwards also feels that his recently signed legislation will allow "Blacks and other Texans to take pride in Black culture." (ibid.).

This recently passed Juneteenth law will have significant, immediate, and future civic and political implications for southwestern Black Americans. Representative Edwards's Juneteenth legislation elevates this one-hundred-and-twenty-five-year-old informal freedom festival from being primarily a "jollification," "wang dang doodle," "function," "hoe down," "good times," or "nigger day"30 that only had significance for Blacks, to an official Texas holiday which must be recognized by all citizens of the Lone Star State. In short, Juneteenth can no longer be viewed by outsiders as a "nigger day" or its Black celebrants as "niggers." The passage of this bill finally gives official status to the underlying tradition of all the past Juneteenth celebrations, i.e., affirming Blacks' right to first-class citizenship and attempting to improve their sociopolitical condition through the American political process. The Edwards bill gives encouragement for future civic and political struggles, because, beginning on June 19, 1980, while Texans are required by law, not because of some paternal largess, to "close the town down!"

Notes

1. Interview: Mr. Willie Hygh, Karnack, Texas, 16 June 1972.
6. Personal communication from Mr. Haywood Hygh, Jr., Compton, Cal., n.d.
7. Interview: Mr. Paul Darby, Austin, Texas, 15 Nov. 1972.
8. Ibid.
9. Interview: Mr. Lovelady, Rockdale, Texas, 19 June 1972.
10. See Douglass (1963:79). Thirty-five years after Douglass made his statement, sponsors of a September 22nd Emancipation Celebration advertised that "a feature of the day
will be an old-fashioned barbecue of beef, pork, mutton, and chicken" ("City News in Brief" [1898:4]).


15. Interview: Mr. Paul Darby, Austin, Texas, 15 Nov. 1972.


23. Personal communication from Ms. Bess Lomax-Hawes, Washington, D.C., n.d. This image also appears in “Big Bill” Broonzy’s “Plough-hand Blues”:
   “I wouldn’t tell a mule to get up, Lord,
   if he’d sit down in my lap.
   I wouldn’t tell a mule to get up, Lord,
   if he’d set down in my lap
   Now I declare I’m through ploughin’
   Oooh Lord, that’s what killed my ol’ grand pap.”
   See Nicholas (1973:49).


25. Interview: Mr. Paul Darby, Austin, Texas, 15 Nov. 1972.


27. Interview: Dr. Joseph J. Grimes, Tyler, Texas, 13 Nov. 1972.


29. Interview: Mr. Paul Darby, Austin, Texas, 15 Nov. 1972.

30. “Nigger day” is defined as “a loggers’ name for Saturday” (see Adams, 1974:206). Mississippi’s May 8th and Florida’s May 22d Emancipation Day observances were also referred to as “nigger day” by some of the celebrants I interviewed.

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